

# The Name

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# Introduction

Something so holy it cannot be pronounced. YHWH. Hebrew people have for many centuries have simply referred to it as “the Name”. Gayle Erwin writes, “In the days of Moses, a name was significant precisely because of its meaning. Names, somehow, were assigned in accordance with the nature or promise of that person. Thus, to know a person’s name and the meaning of the name was to truly know the person.”

For this reason, as you read the scriptures, oftentimes you can reasonably replace “name” with “nature” and it is upon that journey we will proceed. Herein, we are going to discuss the many facets of our Holy God’s nature. Since the days of Eden, man has terribly misunderstood the character, the nature of our Lord.

When Jesus came, we have in the record of John these words, *“In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.”* The holy nature of Almighty God was plainly portrayed in the life of Christ but with it ‘staring them in the face’, they still did not recognize it.

*“Philip (the Apostle) said to Him, ‘Lord, show us the Father, and it is sufficient for us.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Have I been with you so long, and yet you have not known Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father; so how can you say, ‘Show us the Father’?”*

Standing before them was the exact representation. You see, “Heaven had a choice to make: who can we send who will properly represent compassion, grace, longsuffering, love, faithfulness, forgiveness? He must be [an] exact and true representation; he cannot vary one iota. No course correction can occur in the midst of the representation and no damage control must be necessary after the representation. Heaven’s choice was surely the Son. Only he is the ‘exact representation.’” (G. Erwin)

It is my fervent hope that in reading these devotions, you will take a single step in the direction you were created to journey. To know God.

Jesus, himself, said, *“And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.”*

# As Many As I Love

## Rev 3:7 - 22

*"As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten: be zealous therefore, and repent. Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me."* Rev 3:19, 20 In Christ's address to the seven churches of Revelation chapters two and three, two of them are explicitly described as being loved. Clearly, God loves them all but let's focus on the two last churches, Philadelphia and Laodicea, to glean from this distinction. To preface, let's review a well-known story:

"You are the man!" stated the prophet to which a deafening, awkward silence stormed into the room. Most if not all of you already know the dark episode of David's life involving secret sin and Bathsheba. You recall how he let his sexual lust lead him into adultery, deception and murder.

Nathan continued, *"Thus says the LORD God of Israel: 'I anointed you king over Israel, and I delivered you from the hand of Saul. I gave you your master's house and your master's wives into your keeping and gave you the house of Israel and Judah. And if that had been too little, I also would have given you much more! Why have you despised the commandment of the LORD, to do evil in His sight? You have killed Uriah the Hittite with the sword; you have taken his wife to be your wife and have killed him with the sword of the people of Ammon. Now therefore, the sword shall never depart from your house, because you have despised Me, and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife.'"*

*"Thus says the LORD: 'Behold, I will raise up adversity against you from your own house; and I will take your wives before your eyes and give them to your neighbor, and he shall lie with your wives in the sight of this sun. For you did it secretly, but I will do this thing before all Israel, before the sun.'"*

So, David said to Nathan, *"I have sinned against the LORD."* And Nathan said to David, *"The LORD also has put away your sin; you shall not die. However, because by this deed you have given great occasion to the enemies of the LORD to blaspheme, the child also who is born to you shall surely die."*

Just as God said, David reaped what he had sowed. For taking another man's wife, his own wives were taken by his rebellious son Absalom. For destroying another man's family, his own was thrown into the chaos of incest, murder and revolution. For his subterfuge, his own judgment was placed before all of Israel and via the scripture, before the whole world. For murdering his servant Uriah, a devoted man, three of his own children died including Bathsheba's. In addition, we could point out that as he "despised" the Lord, so he learned what it was like to be despised by his own son. Whew! Very tough discipline.

And it is important to realize that these very difficult events which God determined were not the basis for David being forgiven. God forgave him the moment he acknowledged his sins and repented. The corrective discipline came afterwards, some of it, years later. God said David

despised Him and His commands. Was His response because He in turn despised David? No. No way.

My boys used to say that when they had been unruly or just really blew it, all Mom had to say was, "OK, you won't listen to me... I'm just going to have to tell your father when he gets home." And that was the end – the whole day was shot. For them, the clock ticked visibly slower and slower until about six when I would pull in, and until then it was impossible to have any more fun because judgment was on its way. By the time I got there, Mom had inevitably forgiven them, but correction was still important for lessons to be learned. Like them, I'm one who wishes my Father would let His correction somehow slide cause I'm so sure that 'my bad behavior will never happen again – no Sir.' But to my 'chagrin' He hasn't read Dr. Spock. And though, in my carnality, I sometimes wish he had, I know the truth of the scripture which says, *"...the Lord disciplines those He loves, and He punishes (spanks, if you would) everyone he accepts as a son."* Why? *"...for [our] profit, that [we] might be partakers of his holiness."*

Oh, how I sometimes wish it weren't necessary for *"No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it."*

God doesn't discipline His children arbitrarily or even, I'm convinced, mysteriously. This is one reason Job was so perplexed. He said, *"Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him."* But the harshness of the tragedies that befell him were never stated by the Lord to be in response to some sin in his life or intended as a corrective chastisement. Consequently, Job was befuddled.

Throughout scripture, we find the Lord bringing discipline, that is corrective training, to His children which directly relates to their sin, and at some point, He makes it clear what He's doing. Consider the sons of Jacob standing before their betrayed brother Joseph – they knew God was involved (Gen 42:18-24), or the Jewish nation wandering in the wilderness – the Lord said, *"And you shall remember that the LORD your God led you all the way these forty years in the wilderness, to humble you and test you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not. So He humbled you, allowed you to hunger, and fed you with manna which you did not know nor did your fathers know, that He might make you know that man shall not live by bread alone; but man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the LORD. Your garments did not wear out on you, nor did your foot swell these forty years. You should know in your heart that as a man chastens his son, so the LORD your God chastens you."* (Deut 8:2-5) or in the days of Jeremiah (Jer 30:14) or the periodic afflictions seen in the book of Judges (Jud 2:11-23).

As with David, when God deals with us by chastisement, He wants us to know what's going on and that He's at the helm. Certainly, this is to ensure that the lesson is understood. However, to view all tragedy or crisis as God's discipline would be wrong. The word for chasten in the Greek means to train children or to chastise for the purpose of teaching. It is derived from the word for child or servant.

God's judgment as with the flood of Noah or the destruction of Sodom is not corrective for the individual. Also, sin itself has consequences as may be seen in the life of Samson or as when Jesus admonished the lame man He had healed at the pool of Bethesda.

In addition, we must remember that we are in a fallen world and that just living a godly life will frequently bring affliction as with the three Hebrews thrown into the fiery furnace of King Nebuchadnezzar.

And then there are those who will simply seek to persecute the godly as with Daniel when he was placed in the lion's den. Finally, God's tests can be difficult as with dear father Abraham and his son Isaac. None of these are specifically corrective in nature though.

Of course, for the godly, the Lord uses all things for His good purposes. For example, God specifically used Bathsheba, the wife of murdered Uriah, to bear Solomon and Nathan – the progenitors of both Messianic lines seen in Matthew 1 and Luke 3.

How then, do we know if some experience should be received as the Lord's discipline? Why should we care to know?

Whether for discipline or some other reason, nothing passes into the life of one of God's children apart from His will. Discerning discipline from the Lord is not a matter of trusting whether or not He's in control. Even unto death, nothing will touch you as a believer that is accidental or out of His control. This is one of the most difficult things for contemporary believers to accept. It requires faith that doesn't fit in many modern seminaries or sermons. It is the stuff of martyrs.

Chastisement? Part of the purpose behind it is to get us to seek Him fervently. Just as when I disciplined my own children, I told them why so they would get the point. God does the same.

There are plenty of mysteries in the ways of the Lord, but almost by definition, for corrective discipline to work in us, we must understand its reason. As you seek the Lord in the scriptures, in prayer and in godly counsel – He will let you know if He's dealing with you on something.

Corrective discipline is reserved for God's children, not His enemies. (Heb 12:6) He always disciplines us in love and for our benefit. (Heb 12:10) This is a key in our own dealings with one another as well. It's one thing to help someone 'face the facts'; it's totally another to nest corrective truth in love. So called 'tough love' can be necessary, but it can also be a callous cop out for not sincerely loving someone. It can be a convenient façade for many personal sins.

Consider the scripture, "*when we see Him, we shall be like Him for we shall see Him as He is.*" Talk about corrective change! This describes the ultimate metamorphosis – becoming like Jesus. Do you suppose this is something forced upon us? I submit that this change, just like all changes He wants for our good even now, may be voluntary. It will certainly be welcomed by His children because "*we will see Him as He is.*" When we see Christ, we will want to change to be more like Him. The same is true now. When you recognize a truly loving heart behind the words or deeds of corrective discipline, you are drawn to repentance and change.

OK, now back to the two churches -- I believe that from a prophetic standpoint, the church of Philadelphia represents the group of sincere believers who will be raptured at the Lord's appearing. This is for two reasons. First, He says that He has set before them an open door. Some have said that this is an open door for ministry and missions. Historically, that seems like a good explanation and I personally can support that view. However, from a prophetic

standpoint, this seems to relate more directly to the 'open door' that is presented just 14 verses later at the beginning of Revelation chapter four which many scholars interpret as representing the rapture.

Second, the Lord says specifically that he will keep this group *"from the hour of temptation which shall come upon all the world, to try them that dwell upon the earth."* which seems to be a clear reference to the tribulation period.

Laodicea however is rebuked and chastened. The tribulation described in the book of Revelation is both a time of judgment on a Christ-rejecting sin filled world and a chastisement upon His hard-hearted Jewish children, many of whom will repent. Some say it may be a 'knocking on the door' for the 'left-behind' of Laodicea as well.

During this time, those who overcome in faith will pay with their lives because they are confident of God's love and will know there is joy set before them in heaven (See Rev 7). Jesus had this overcoming faith in the Father and knew that the chastisement He endured was for a gloriously good purpose. He says to this church, *"As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore, be zealous and repent. Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come into him and dine with him, and he with Me. To him who overcomes I will grant to sit with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne."* (Rev 3:19-21)

Both churches are distinctly referred to as being loved. However, the word used pertaining to the Philadelphian church is 'agapao' akin to, as we say, agape love – godly love. 'Agapao' also is used in referring to espousal love and means to welcome, to entertain, to love dearly and to be well pleased which may have particular reference here to the wedding feast of the Lamb.

The word for love used in reference to Laodicea is 'phileo' – the relational love of friendship. You recall that in dealing with Peter on the shore of Galilee after His resurrection, Jesus used both words in his "Do you love me?" inquiries whereas Peter used just 'phileo' in his answers. You might think of it as a love that 'likes' someone as well.

One church is applauded while the other receives chastisement and rebuke. Both are defined as churches. In the Bible this means bodies of believers, not buildings. It is certainly true that many if not most large groups of believers also have those participating in worship who do not know the Lord, but then by scriptural definition they are not part of the church.

Now, I'm personally inclined to believe that Jesus' knocking on the door of the Laodicean church is not necessarily an indication that they are unsaved but rather an encouragement to repent of their tepid relationship and an invitation to renew fellowship with Him. They have cooled to a lukewarm Christianity leaving Him out. Consequently, the Lord tells them to be zealous (i.e. get hot) and repent.

He says they are 'talaiporos' or enduring trial, 'elehinos' or pitiable/miserable, 'ptochos' or a cringing beggar, 'tuphlos' or opaque (by analogy, blind) and 'gumnos' or naked. This is the sad condition of the cooled down Christian, the one whose spiritual life is basically set in cruise control.

When Jesus tells them to obtain gold tried in the fire, He may be talking of faith that endures tribulation; when He says to obtain white robes, He may be talking of His righteousness as opposed to their own – they may be looking to Him for salvation AND to their own righteousness for good standing in the church. Without the right robes they're not ready for the wedding – (See Matt 22:11,12); when He says for them to obtain eye salve it's because they are clearly blind to their condition and to His desire for them.

To Christ, it is nauseating because He cares so much. In fact the word translated “shall” used in “shall spue or vomit” in verse 3:16 of this passage is a strengthened form of the word ‘melo’ meaning ‘to care’. Our English word, shall, is rather definitive implying a foregone conclusion whereas the word here in the original language means “to be on the point of doing or suffering something” so it would appear that the Lord is warning them and expressing His deep, deep concern. Whether or not they are ‘left behind’ as some assert remains to be seen.

In any event, both churches are loved. Both are loved.

Jesus says that Philadelphia is being run down by religious imposters, but He loves them deeply with a holy agape love. They are ‘dissed’ by the religious but doted on by Jesus. They have but a little strength yet the put-downs they endure from the seemingly ‘holy’ although possibly hurtful are only vain words. Holding on to the real Word of God they receive Christ’s encouraging commendation – they are loved.

If religious condescension on the part of other perhaps well-meaning Christians has hurt your heart, hold on to God’s wonderful word. Hold on and know He’s holding on to you. He loves you and will never let you go.

Laodicea is loved as well and is thus disciplined. They think they’ve got it all, health, wealth and hallelujahs so to speak. Maybe they’ve gotten side-tracked on social issues, church programs, spiritual narcissism or living the good life. Though they don’t seem to care about Jesus, He cares so deeply for them, it wrenches His gut if you would.

Is He knocking on your door? If you’re Father God’s child by faith in Jesus Christ, know that He deals correctively with all of us at various times and in various ways. In times of trial, it may seem like the Lord is far away and apathetic. That is simply untrue! The very fact that He loves you so much is why He’s sick over your lack of zeal. Don’t ever doubt God’s immeasurable love for you. Seek Him anew for faith that endures the trials, clean garments of divine righteousness and a new clear vision of your Savior. Remember, He says, *“As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten.”*

# Come!

## See Luke 8:40-56

Who was in that crowd?

Certainly, the disciples were there – at least Peter, James and John. There were probably many curiosity seekers and undoubtedly those who were attracted by the noise and potential entertainment. The seriously religious may have been in the flow or watching from the periphery. And there was undoubtedly many suffering who longed for help as well. Pushing, shoving, shuffling along – an excited throng of people surrounded Jesus.

The same could be said of the contemporary Christian community – that is, the Church in its entirety. The ‘crowd’ around Christ is a mix isn’t it? People gather around Jesus for different reasons.

In this story, they were headed far too slowly toward the home of Jairus. At least, that’s certainly what this desperate father felt for his 12-year-old daughter was at death’s door. A short while ago, he’d fallen at Jesus’ feet and pleaded with Him to come. Now, he probably helped push friends and on-lookers aside to make way for the Lord. Time was of the essence! ‘If they didn’t get there soon, it would be too late.’

Now, Jairus was an important man as well as a desperate man. Neither quality lends itself to patience. Thus, when Jesus stopped in his tracks, it surely perplexed the anxious father to say the least. Jostling one another, the crowd worked to reposition (and to keep their footing!). ‘What’s going on?! What happened?!’ Jairus surely cried within.

*“Who touched Me?”* Jesus said as He looked around. Possibly, His eyes rested upon the startled, elated and yet somewhat frightened face of a woman. She may have been on her knees, but whether standing or no, she was not hidden amidst the mélange of characters. Around her, everyone hastily denied doing anything of the sort.

‘Who touched you??’ Peter probably wondered. *“Master, the multitudes throng and press You, and You say, ‘Who touched Me?’”*, he said. The Greek word used in the text can mean a simple touch, but more literally it means a fastening or attaching to something, and that’s really what happened in the spirit. But Jesus said, *“Somebody touched Me, for I perceived power going out from Me.”*

For twelve years, this dear woman had suffered a deplorable condition – a continual bleeding – which must have at least debilitated her. It was probably something that caused her to be socially ostracized and unmarried as well. Luke made it clear in his gospel that she was also penniless having spent all her savings to enrich the local medical community to no avail.

She may have been somewhat superstitious in seeking to contact Christ for she had touched the hem of His garment. In that day, the blue borders of certain rabbi’s cloaks were supposed to be ‘special’ if you would. Whether that was the case or that it was simply the press of the crowd and her physical weakness which positioned her to grab the bottom of His garment, she

'touched' Jesus. It is the same word used by Jesus when He said to dear Mary Magdalene outside the garden tomb after His resurrection, *"Don't cling to Me."*

Spiritually, in humble faith, she clung to Christ and virtue flowed. It is the only instance recorded in which someone 'came in the back door' so to speak with Jesus. That is probably because Jesus never said, "No" to a sincere person. He even reached into the lives of many who could not ask or didn't know to ask for help. Such is our Lord. This woman had no petition as Jairus had. Neither had she anything to offer Christ.

Just think – a huge crowd all around Jesus and only one person 'touched' Him. Now, many teachings have been made on the mechanics of faith using this passage as a platform. And we know this dear woman had faith for when she *"saw that she was not hidden, she came trembling; and falling down before Him, she declared to Him in the presence of all the people the reason she had touched Him and how she was healed immediately. And He said to her, 'Daughter, be of good cheer; your faith has made you well. Go in peace.'"*

Yes, she had wonderful faith. Nevertheless, let's consider another aspect of the story -- the press. Not the press of the crowd but the press in the spirit. On the one hand there was this woman with 12 years of pain and despondency. On the other was Jairus, a man with 12 years of tender parental love and social privilege. Both were in desperate need and the picture in this passage, pregnant with meaning.

Both individuals came to Jesus. Both were at His feet. Both had a 12-year history that led to their desperate need. Both got Christ's attention and help. Yet they stood in stark contrast one to another – Jairus, a leader of the synagogue was at the top of the social ladder while the woman was most definitely at the bottom; we don't even know her name. And they both needed Jesus 'NOW'. There was nowhere else to turn and time was running out. One broke, one probably rich – both pressed and broken in spirit.

Now, you can't help but notice that the number twelve stands out and that's not by 'coincidence'. For those who put significance upon numbers in the Bible, 12 can point to divine or perfect government. However, I'll suggest that it is perhaps more connected to the concept of heaven for it is mentioned frequently in that context for both the Jewish people and the mostly gentile Church. In Revelation 21, it is written that the heavenly city has twelve foundations bearing the names of the twelve apostles and twelve entry gates displaying the names of the twelve tribes of Israel. Twelve angels stand at its gates; within, the Tree of Life bears twelve types of fruit, and the city's dimensions are described in the original language in multiples of twelve.

So what does heaven have to do with this story? Plenty.

Heaven is an actual tangible place – more real than any place you know. But it's far, far more than a place. John tried to describe it in terms we could relate to – brilliant light, translucent gold, diverse gemstones, and such. Nevertheless, beyond its beauty is its essence or quality. The very atmosphere is filled with intimacy – with He Who is Holy, Holy, Holy and with His family. There is an aroma of love, joy and peaceful security. There is a sense of

unparalleled freedom along with exciting purpose. It all speaks of eternal Life. Heaven is truly an essence or quality of Life which is purely the result of God's presence.

And so, this story is about coming into His presence – about encountering heaven's maker – He Who makes heaven, heaven.

For twelve years, our dear nameless woman experienced a living hell. Apart from the physical pain and anemia, she was thoroughly shamed. No man would have her as a wife. Imagine someone having a highly contagious flu for twelve years and you can get a sense of how many friends she probably had – zippo, none, nada. No one took her to Jesus like the lame man in Mark chapter two. That's because she was unclean. And without two nickels to rub together, she was bottomed out. Her condition would even prevent her from being a prostitute. It was hell on earth, twelve years of it. Religious people who knew her would not even touch her. Isolated, abandoned, broken both physically and emotionally, she could never come to Christ like others did – so she thought.

So, she approached Him from behind.

Her faith was in what He could do – not in Who He is. The previous twelve years had postured her for desperate faith but as yet she did not understand the heart of God.

'He would never touch me,' she must have presumed. 'A great teacher, a great rabbi – surely he must remain clean.' How shocked she must have been, not by the healing – oh, that surely elated her – but when Jesus said, "Who touched Me?" He was saying, "Who attached to Me." It was not at all what she had intended. She'd even tried to hide herself.

That's what life in this world has done to some. There are those of us who are so beaten up by this hellish world that we cannot imagine facing God – we're too filthy, too shamed. We believe in His power but cannot approach Him face to face. 'He must think of us as untouchable.' We'll come to Christ for what we believe He will do, for His power to save, but to have an intimate relationship – unimaginable.

But Jesus stopped. He turned and looked. His eyes met hers and that perfect divine soul gazed into hers with the revelation that she was whole and clean. He stopped everything to let her and everyone else know.

Meanwhile, on the 'other side' of Jesus was Jairus who was a godly man. As a leader of the synagogue, he had to be. His previous twelve years were certainly by comparison, pleasant and perhaps even blissful. Those of you with daughters can understand how sweet their unconditional love is. He was surely quite prominent in the community. He came to Jesus desperate and in humility, falling at His feet.

But he approached Him head on.

Nothing in his background led him to think he couldn't do so. Some of us approach Jesus with this same confidence. John wrote, *"For if our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and knows all things. Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence toward God. And whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do those things that are pleasing in His sight."* (1 John 3:20-22)

Jairus also approached Jesus for what He could do, but his estimation was far too limited. He esteemed Christ capable of curing his daughter -- but as a giver of life? That was a stretch. Some of us approach our Lord the same way. We are pressed. We come in brokenness and humility, even in desperation. We are confident of approaching Him, but we drastically underestimate Him.

Jairus must have feared, 'Too slow. Too late.' You know the story. *"While He was still speaking, someone came from the ruler of the synagogue's house, saying to him, 'Your daughter is dead. Do not trouble the Teacher.' But when Jesus heard it, He answered him, saying, 'Do not be afraid; only believe, and she will be made well.' When He came into the house, He permitted no one to go in except Peter, James, and John, and the father and mother of the girl. Now all wept and mourned for her; but He said, 'Do not weep; she is not dead, but sleeping.' And they ridiculed Him, knowing that she was dead. But He put them all outside, took her by the hand and called, saying, 'Little girl, arise.' Then her spirit returned, and she arose immediately. And He commanded that she be given something to eat. And her parents were astonished, but He charged them to tell no one what had happened."* (Luke 8: 49-56)

Jairus had faith but not resurrection faith – the text says, he was astonished. Jesus astonished he and his wife. Dear friend, regardless of your faith, be it great or small, Life, eternal Life, will astonish you as well. Jesus will astonish you with the resurrection or rapture. Heaven will astonish you. Jairus thought Jesus to be a healer but the true healing is in heaven. Jairus met the Power of heaven amidst the grasp of grief.

The power to transform a hellish life of abandonment, misery and destitution with a divine touch and public approval is the Power of heaven. The power to raise the dead to new life is the astonishing Power of heaven. It is the love of God expressed in Jesus Christ.

Whether you must approach from 'behind' or are confident to face Him – you come. Come to the One Who knows you and loves you, to the One Who is far beyond your considerations. Come to Jesus in humility and He will respond. He will amaze you with redemption and astonish you with resurrection or rapture.

Meet heaven's King.

Discover Who He is.

Forget the crowd.

You come.

# Exceeding Expectations

“Think you got a bad deal?”

“Well, yeah. You know, we worked a long time and man was it hot! I mean, we’ve been at it all day. And so, when we saw those other guys get a whole day’s wages for just one hour, well... well we expected MORE.” (See Matt 20)

“How about you? You look a bit disappointed.”

“Well, of course. Hey, I worked every day, day after day, so faithfully, so doggedly... you could always depend on me. And what’s more, I never even asked for a big reward. But, but, then my brother shows up – he wasted half the family fortune, and then he comes back looking for handouts. And, Dad just throws a party? Disappointed? I expected MORE.” (See Luke 15)

“Hi there. What’s got you down?”

“Huh? Down? Mister, are you the only guy around who doesn’t know what’s happened?? Man, let me tell you, down doesn’t describe it! We thought we were dealing with the real thing – you know, the Big Cheese – the Messiah! We left everything and followed him but now, well ... now we don’t know what to think. I’ll tell you, we sure expected MORE.” (See Luke 24)

Bitterness. The result of shattered expectations.

From the days of Adam until now, the expectations of godly men and women can be summarized in the person of Jesus Christ -- Who He is, what He does, all that He represents. Most of us would agree however, that some of the expectations of the godly aren’t so ‘godly’. Rather, we can nest them in selfishness, impatience, covetousness or misunderstanding and as a consequence be very disappointed with God and with each other.

The big deal, the important lesson for us, is to be aware that shattered expectations are one of Satan’s favorite tools. They can lead to a loose grip on faith and even a turning away from the Lord. One of the great dangers of the whole so-called ‘faith movement’ – the name it and claim it teachings – is this very thing. Many people have been duped into this ‘hyper-faith’ mindset only to run into a ‘brick wall’ spiritually. They fail, they think, in faith. Or worse, they think God has failed. Their expectations, nurtured and trained in the wrong school, are dashed.

Of course, this does NOT make them themselves ungodly, but simply exposes some of their expectations as being something other than ‘heaven-sent’.

But even in the broader scope, so many have turned away from God because they’re angry and/or disappointed. They lost their job, they wanted something deeply, they’re grieving the loss of a loved one – the list is quite long of ways we can mistakenly believe that we or God fail in this whole notion of expectations. There are missionaries that have been ‘burned’, pastors’ children who wander, pastors who ‘drop-out’, believers who just disappear – the church has plenty of ‘aching body parts’ if you would. And then there are those who haven’t even entered in; they’re never born again because something or someone disappointed their

expectation. That then becomes a convenient tool of the enemy in turning them away from salvation.

Most of us can relate – bitterness born from disappointment... I'll give an example -- we were in Greece. In our home, Darlene gave birth to our first little boy John Lance. In our early twenties, we were endeavoring to serve the Lord in a distant land, believing that our efforts were in His will and pleasing to Him. God had done so many wonderful miracles in our rather young spiritual lives that we simply believed... well, believed that despite any impending doom or dire circumstances that He would always step in and 'save the day' so to speak. He always had.

Then our little one got sick...very sick. Denial set in and as he grew weaker denial gave way to confusion. We had no money for a doctor – no money at all. Surely, he would be all right. God would heal him. But the next day, as I held him in my lap, he just stopped breathing and went all blue. I didn't know what to do. Darlene was crying uncontrollably. I tried breathing into his mouth and in a few seconds, he started breathing again. Immediately, we went to the hospital.

The doctors told us that he had septicemia and meningitis. About six weeks later, he died. After a year, we returned to the States having been abroad for six years or so. We still loved the Lord and still wanted to serve Him. Darlene was pregnant again. Officially, we came back just to get better healthcare, but in retrospect, it was also a festering distrust of God's care born out of a shattered expectation. We were thoroughly confused about what to believe. Mixed with the joy of salvation and the memories of His wonderful bona fide miracles were the pain of grief, the image of our son's suffering and our helplessness as well as the terrible sobbings of my precious wife.

There were those who said he died because of our lack of faith. I don't know where people get this garbage. Not from the Bible! That misguided theology portrays our heavenly Father like some sort of referee who times our spiritual race or watches how high we can jump so that when we fail – and we will fail – he can bring devastating judgment upon us. It actually fosters a 'works-trip' mentality and labels it faith. Now, I'm not saying faith isn't important – to the contrary, it's critical. But the scripture says specifically that to each one of the saints is given a measure of faith with which to work. (Romans 12:3) God knows your measure of faith because He gave it to you. He won't test you to a greater degree than you can handle. (1 Cor 10:13)

The greater faith is not that which sees the miracle but that which persists despite contrary circumstances. Just consider the martyrs.

Anyway, we came back to the States and I did a spiritual 'belly-flop' if you would in the cesspool of worldliness. I made a horrible display of myself and got many of those around me 'all wet' too. I still looked to the Lord, but my behavior was incongruent with what I claimed to believe and led to much hurt. However, *"It is of the LORD'S mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not."* (Lam 3:22) and I praise Him that He healed my heart and turned me around. That was 26 years ago.

Now there was nothing 'ungodly' about our hope or expectation that God would heal our son. Bitterness however developed because I took my eyes off the cross. I was shortsighted. Let me explain: In Exodus, the host of Israel were 'riding a wave'. They had seen miracle after miracle after miracle during their liberation from slavery. Pharaoh's army was annihilated under the Red Sea and for a short time the people were buoyant with shallow faith. Then, after just three days of 'roughing it' in the wilderness, exhilaration turned to desperation. Just after praising God in the Song of Moses and the Song of Miriam, the people found poison in the waters of Marah (literally, bitter).

*"So, Moses brought Israel from the Red Sea; then they went out into the Wilderness of Shur. And they went three days in the wilderness and found no water. Now when they came to Marah, they could not drink the waters of Marah, for they were bitter. Therefore, the name of it was called Marah. And the people complained against Moses, saying, 'What shall we drink?'"* The people, to that point, were pampered in a way. Their faith was untested – most everything had gone their way so to speak. Sure, some of the exodus was pretty 'hairy', pretty tense – but until then, the miracle – working power of God had just 'flowed'. Here, in the wilderness, they were seriously dry. The waters of Marah represented a huge and life-threatening disappointment.

But a wonderful picture was being painted – *"So he cried out to the LORD, and the LORD showed him a tree. When he cast it into the waters, the waters were made sweet."* Now, the chemistry here is clear – the Tree, when it was cast into the bitter waters, made them sweet. And the same is true now – as ever – the Tree is the cross of Calvary. Peter wrote of Jesus – *"Who his own self bore our sins in his own body on the tree, that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness: by whose stripes ye were healed."* (1 Pet 2:24) And Luke recorded, *"... when they had fulfilled all that was written of him, they took Him down from the tree, and laid Him in a sepulcher."* (Acts 13:29)

When our expectations are born of true faith and held to by faith, there is no disappointment or shame. (See Romans 5:5) But how is that faith secured? The Tree. We must 'apply' the Tree. That's not a formula for getting what we want but a cure for the bitterness of myopic expectations. We've got to grasp the fundamental truth of what Christ accomplished there – life from death, an entrance into the awesome presence of God Almighty, an eternal mind-boggling inheritance in heaven, the determined end of all evil, universal reconciliation, ... on and on it goes. My small mind needs help to comprehend this – that's why the psalmist sang, *"My soul, wait thou only upon God; for my expectation is from him."* (Psalm 62)

Herein is a key to consider. David spoke to his soul – that part of the believer which is influenced both by the Spirit and by the flesh. He averred to wait only upon God. This waiting was literally a sitting silent before God. He acknowledged that his expectation was from the Almighty. It had to be divine to be realizable. You see, in our carnality or fleshly human nature, we are influenced to entertain all kinds of earthly expectations or godly expectations that are 'fuzzy', incomplete. But the soul must be guided by the Spirit of God here.

It seems that when it comes to Jesus, nearly everyone's expectations are at times askance. How could it be that our Father, Who gave His own Son to satisfy the payment for our sins, could meet with ANYONE's unsatisfied expectation?!

One more story – and you know it well. It was probably a long walk, not because of the length of the road but the long ‘faces’. The two travelers to Emmaus were initially upset with the ‘outsider’ who apparently didn’t know why they were dismayed. But as He toured them through the scripture pointing to one picture after another concerning Christ, their hearts burned. The smoldering embers of faith were rekindled so to speak. And then, when He broke the bread, their vision cleared. Their spiritual myopia was healed, and Christ came into focus.

The broken bread – His broken body. We MUST remember what that means; what it means to us eternally.

You see, “expectation” in Hebrew has an interesting second meaning – a “cord”. And as you consider the principle of first mention in the scripture, that is, the first place a significant prophetic picture or word is presented in scripture often reveals additional insight – thus, this cord speaks of the broken bread and of the Tree. You see, it is the scarlet cord that Rahab had to keep in her window to save her when the Israelites conquered Jericho. That scarlet cord represents the living hope we MUST keep in our ‘window’ -- visible, in focus. We must keep it there especially when the walls are crumbling around us. It’s not just a protection against judgment which we indeed deserve but a reminder of a divine promise of salvation.

Our expectations are usually just too small, too carnal, too myopic. When Christ broke the bread – when the wood was placed in the water – when the scarlet cord was kept in the window – these are illustrations of when we re-establish faith in our Lord and Savior who’s plans far, far out-pace our own, who’s eternal kingdom includes resurrections, restorations, transformations and inspirations way beyond our imaginations!

Give God your shattered expectations, dashed hopes, bitter heart. Tune the ‘dial’ once again to His Holy Spirit’s voice so that your hope may be alive, your expectation from Him, your anticipation joyful, peaceful and confident. Your heart will heal. You will find God worthy of your love and trust.

Keep the cross, the broken body and the precious blood of our Savior before you at all times.

One day soon, our Abba will send His Son and you’ll see that indeed He is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think. He FAR exceed our expectations.

# Grappling with Growth

Apart from Jesus Christ, there is no other biography like it in scripture. As we read, we observe his life literally from pre-cradle to post-grave with a wonderful spotlight on both his highs and lows during the entire length of his pilgrimage. Jacob.

And in his life, we find a treasure trove of insight into spiritual growth.

Thus, we should care intensely about this subject for although much has been written about it, there are many wrong impressions that are rampant in our 'modern' understanding. Eastern mysticism as well as humanism have influenced contemporary thought and perspective on spirituality. Together with the false doctrines of the so-called 'faith' movement and myriad cult twists upon the scripture -- the garden of spiritual growth concepts can use some 'weeding' and 'watering'. So, let's survey the life of our dear brother Jacob.

We first encounter him in Genesis 25 in his mother's womb fighting with his brother! Though as yet unborn, he was chosen and loved by God (see Romans 9:10-13) which points to God's sovereignty, foreknowledge and grace. That is, the heavenly Father's love was not based upon Jacob's history, good deeds or machismo, and stood in stark contrast to his earthly father's favor of his brother Esau. Of course, this is wonderful for God loves you and I in the same way.

In fact, Jacob turned out to be somewhat of a 'home-body' or 'momma's boy' if you would. "Smooth skinned" and a handy guy in the kitchen, he was not the proverbial 'man's man'. (See Gen 25:27,28)

But he was an intense competitor. In fact, it looks like he always had to come out on top. Taking advantage of his brother's hunger one day, he 'bought' the family birthright from him with a bowl of lentil porridge. (Gen 25:29-34) And later, though admittedly spurred on by his mother, he boldly lied and deceived his nearly sightless father in order to obtain the patriarchal blessing. (Gen 27) This ultimately propelled him into estrangement and isolation from the family. But still God loved him and revealed Himself to Jacob in a glorious vision at Bethel. (Gen 28)

Now, I'll suggest that this latter event parallels and typifies the salvation experience of some Christians. You remember, there at Bethel Jacob saw the Lord in heaven with a ladder bridging the gap between heaven and earth, the holy and unholy, the perfect eternal realm of God and the broken, temporal prison of man. Jesus later indicated that that ladder was He Himself (see John 1:51). You could say that at this time Jacob came to a knowledge or an awareness of the Lord. However, though he was awed, he was not yet submitted. His response was like that of many believers when he gave God a conditional allegiance. *"And Jacob vowed a vow, saying, If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat, and raiment to put on, so that I come again to my father's house in peace; then shall the LORD be my God:"* (Gen 28:20,21)

He had a lot of growing to do.

Now eventually, he made his way to the household of his crafty old uncle Laban to reap a little of what he sowed. There he worked for seven years to merit the reward of the 'girl of his dreams' – Rachel. Laban, though, pulled a fast one on him for in the dark he switched the 'goods' so to speak giving instead his older daughter Leah. Now she must have been 'a sight for sore eyes' literally because that's what her name can imply – apparently, she was someone who made your eyes hurt.

So, imagine Jacob's surprise in the morning! But he's got to come out on top, remember. Consequently, he demanded to have his expected reward, Rachel. Laban capitulated -- but only conditionally – kind of like Jacob being conditional with God. Hmm. You see, Laban was most certainly God's instrument in Jacob's life to mirror him.

Part of growing him up spiritually was to afflict him with a carnal replica of himself so to speak. As Jacob had deceived his dad who had been 'in the dark', so he was likewise deceived. Sound familiar? He was reaping what he'd sowed. You might already know this to be true -- as we are learning to walk with the Lord, it is often the case that the characteristics that rub us the wrong way are our very own – in someone else. Generally, they are irritating because they are indeed sinful in nature. Jacob submitted himself to Laban, but it was a rough experience.

I think we all understand that growth doesn't just take place in the peaceful sunny climes when all is going well but in the stormy circumstances of life as well. In nature, adversity of environment drives plants to increase their root systems. Recall, the Bible says that the righteous flourish like the palm tree whose living cells are in its core rather than outside just under the bark as with other trees. In fact, palm trees actually bear more and sweeter fruit with age and prosper when their surface bark is scarred. (See Psa 92:12)

Jacob still had a lot of growing to do.

Though he had relations with his wife Leah, and they had several children as a result, he hated her. How many of us as believers hate the very things God brings into our lives as blessings simply because they 'hurt our eyes'? If they aren't up to our expectation or if we only see the surface value, we often disdain the ordained so to speak. Conversely, because something is 'pleasing to the eye' doesn't make it heaven-sent.

You see, Jacob's carnal attitude influenced his whole family – they competed for his favor and attention, and as always, the competition brought envy and strife. But he never seemed to deal with it – perhaps because he was blind to it or perhaps because he actually got some 'strokes' from it so to speak. It isn't until much later in the story that we find any virtuous qualities observable in his clan. They simply modeled what they saw.

You see, for godly parents, spiritual growth is not just an option -- 'a good thing to do'. It's more important than just you or me for it dramatically impacts our families one way or the other.

Next, having given Laban an offer he couldn't refuse regarding his future wages, Jacob set out to do some 'genetic engineering' of the flock. (See Gen 30) Agreeing to take only the mis-colored animals as his wages, he carved some branches with various markings and placed them in the watering trough before the flock.

His method could perhaps be regarded as a little loony or even superstitious, but the Lord helped him anyway and to clarify the blessing He did speak to Jacob in a dream saying that it was He who caused the brown, the spotted and speckled animals in the flock to multiply, not Jacob's branch carvings.

So, in this setting, Jacob learned that both Laban's past blessings and his own were from the Lord and not due to his ingenuity.

Now, it's not clear that he ever sought the Lord in there in Haran, but graciously God told him that he should leave that area and return to Canaan and to his credit, he obeyed. One of the early lessons many of us as believers learn is that God will indeed take care of us. (See Phi 4:19)

But he still had a lot of growing to do.

He obeyed God and left but he split the scene in fear in the middle of the night and tried to out-run Laban. Meanwhile, his wife Rachel put some sticky fingers on her dad's family idols. So, when Laban discovered they were missing, he headed after them in anger. Seems like Jacob had a habit of leaving angry people behind him. But God directly intervened to protect him telling Laban in a dream not to harm his son-in-law.

Later, after peacefully parting from Laban, Jacob encountered a group of angels and as a result called the place he found them Mahanaim, meaning "two camps" – his and the heavenly host's. However, in typical Jacob fashion, when he learned shortly thereafter that Esau and 400 men were fast approaching, his apparently lost interest in the angels and again started conniving. (Gen 32)

He made his own "two camps" by splitting the family into two groups hoping that if one was plundered, the other might escape. That is, he resorted to his natural tendency to scheme and was still not trusting God. Like many of us, he recognized God's presence but in times of testing leaned upon his own wits anyway. Many of us do the same thing.

Now, to his credit, he also sought the Lord humbly for deliverance. But, then immediately he started a caravan of gifts traveling toward Esau to buy his favor. This is really convicting, isn't it? Was Jacob double-minded or perhaps just thinking that he had to 'cover the bases' with prayer while really trusting in his own scheme? We can't know for sure. However, he was acting like many of us who seek God only in times of turmoil and then act as if God doesn't hear us, like we really believe that it's up to us.

Anyway, by that time, all his fretting and scheming had worn him out, and he needed a good night's sleep, so he retreated away from the camp and bedded down. Wouldn't you know it – just then, the Lord showed up in the form of 'a man', that is, what theologians call a Christophany, and Jacob wrestled with Him throughout the night. You know the story. During the tussle, the Lord touched Jacob's hip and put it out of joint.

In the story, it's not clear that he was 'a chicken', but Jacob did have a habit of running away rather than confronting the source(s) of his adversity. In like fashion, we as believers must learn to trust God such that we can face our fears.

And so, this grappling was a critical point both for Jacob as it can be for us as we seek to grow in the Lord. Jacob had for much of his life encountered difficulty. But it had always been of his own making. He had 'gypped' his brother, deceived his dad, angered his in-laws, but now God Himself crippled him and fixed his 'walk' so that he couldn't escape his adversary. Many of us find it difficult to accept that God would 'lame' us, and we can therefore be tempted to think that it's because He's mad at us as well.

We can, at those times, let go of Him – stop trusting that He loves us. We can interpret his method as mean. But God's not mean. He's not upset or put off by our grappling with Him.

Nevertheless, this was where Jacob prevailed. He hung on to the Lord. Hosea makes it clear that at the end he cried out, not in victory, but in humility. (See Hos 12:3-5) "This is an invaluable place for everyone to come to - the place where we are conquered by God. There is something to be said for every man doing his "wrestling" with God, and then acknowledging God's greatness after having been defeated. We must know we serve a God who is greater than us, and we cannot conquer much at all until we have been conquered by Him" (Guzik) Does God Himself bring difficulty into the life of His child? Yes.

Typically, most of the trials we face are of our own making – the consequences of our sins. But God sometimes demonstrates His compassion and love toward us in 'touching our hip' so to speak – limiting our options because He ultimately knows it will bring us closer to Him.

And this was the pivotal point (or joint, lol). "Jacob thought the real enemy was outside of him - Esau. The real enemy was his own carnal, fleshly nature, which had not been conquered by God" (Guzik)

There, Jacob was renamed Israel – transforming from "heel-snatcher" or "sneaky-conning guy" to "one governed or ruled by God". This wasn't Jacob's salvation – he already believed. It was his submission. His need for character adjustment was being brought to light. It was a point of demarcation, and from that point on he was both a changed AND changing man.

You see, he still had a lot of growing to do.

"From this point on, he will be called Jacob twice as often as he is called Israel; apparently, there was still plenty of "old man" left in Jacob." (Guzik) In fact, he's not referred to directly as Israel again for a couple of chapters. Jacob portrayed the 'old man's nature' and Israel the new. And from here on, we can observe the 'highs and lows' of his spiritual progress associated with his names.

Now, personally, I find this very encouraging. God never gave up on Jacob – in fact, the awesome divine promises were made to him, that is, to Jacob. God didn't wait till his character was godly to make his guarantees. I suggest that's why we nearly always have the record of scripture stating that the promises were made to "Abraham, Isaac and Jacob". It's not at all that God prefers the 'old man' – to the contrary! But the promises are and always will be a matter of God's grace, not our merit.

Anyway, after this bout, he met the day with new courage and went out in front of the family to face Esau. To his surprise, the reunion was wonderfully amiable, but Jacob continued

in some bad habits -- he lied to his brother indicating he would follow him back to Mt. Seir and instead, he headed for a place called Succoth and then Shechem.

So where was the fruit of his submission? I'll suggest that he did show courage but recall, fruit requires patience (see Luke 8:15, James 5:7).

The same is true for us as Christians. "A vine does not produce grapes by Act of Parliament; they are the fruit of the vine's own life; so the conduct which conforms to the standard of the Kingdom is not produced by any demand, not even God's, but is the fruit of that divine nature which God gives as the result of what he has done in and by Christ." (Hooke) In contemporary Christianity, we tend to look for 'McFruit' both our own lives and the lives of our spiritual family. Failures weigh us down because we don't think as God does. "Our weak hearts, prone to legalism and unbelief, receive these words with great difficulty: God is for us. . . They have failed Him; but He is for them. They are ignorant; but He is for them. They have not yet brought forth much fruit; but He is for them." (Newell)

Yes, Jacob still had a lot of growing to do.

You see, contrary to the pilgrim lifestyle of his father Isaac and Papa Abraham, he built a house in Succoth and later bought land near Shechem (Gen 33:17-19). Yes, it looked like the pilgrimage was over and he started settling down. With the fear of fratricide abated, the sky was blue again so to speak. Almost inevitably, we as believers come to the same place. Saved and 'somewhat' submitted (is that possible?), we can be tempted to abandon the 'highway' for the comfort of a 'little piece of Shechem'.

But God is faithful – it's been said that in this life, the most uncomfortable place for a Christian to be is a comfortable place. In some ways, that's true. You see, he'd arrived at Shalem (or Salem) which was then apparently a part of the Shechem domain. Many commentators believe it to be the same Salem visited by his grandpa Abraham – i.e. Jerusalem. Here, Jacob built an altar to the Lord. All this looked good – a place of 'peace' and the arrangement of the altar. He had his own 'Ponderosa' and a place of worship too. But as nice as it seemed, it wasn't where he belonged physically or spiritually.

As a result, his kids were a mess – he'd allowed them to keep idols and apparently been an 'open-minded', tolerant parent – his kids did what felt good at the moment if you would. Here's what I mean – while out and about with her friends, perhaps 'shopping at the Shechem mall', his only daughter, Dinah caught the eye of the pagan prince. We don't know if she went along with it or not, but she was compromised sexually by him.

Now post facto, the prince figured he'd 'do the right thing' so he sought to formalize the affair with a marriage. Very contemporary. But Jacob's bent toward dishonesty had rubbed off on his boys -- though they agreed to the deal, they made the prince promise to circumcise himself and all the males of the city of Shechem. A few days later, while they were in pain and incapacitated, two of Dinah's brothers slaughtered all the men of the city. Then the rest of the brothers spoiled the place taking all the goods, animals and enslaving the women and children. Whoa! Even Jacob was appalled. He told them that they had made his name to stink and feared a huge reprisal from the other inhabitants of the region.

We as believers just cannot allow ourselves to think that all material ‘blessings’ are necessarily good. We can’t think that just because we’ve got our little piece of Shechem and we’ve even ‘built an altar’ that we’re still following the Lord. Jacob had his ranch and his religion, but because he wasn’t in the ‘place’ (spiritually or physically) God wanted him, he wasn’t growing spiritually – bearing good fruit. And not only so, but his family was corrupted. (See Luke 8:14) Fortunately, the shock of the whole business and the concern over potential new enemies seemed to reawaken the desire for a pilgrim’s progress in Jacob. The Lord graciously spoke to him and directed him to Bethel – back to Bethel. It means “the house of God.”

This was where he originally encountered the Lord, remember? This was where he said he’d return, and that God would be his God. This was the place where God delivered him in his hour of distress. In type, it speaks of our need as believers to return to the basics of our faith when we’ve strayed or when we’ve settled down in the wrong ‘place’. We all need to return to our own Bethel. It’s a humbling thing and crucial to our growth. It speaks of humble repentance. He told the family to ‘cough up’ their idols, their pagan ear and nose rings, and to change their clothes. Yes! Way to go, Jacob! He didn’t just allow his kids to ‘find the truth’ on their own. There’s a time for that – when you’ve been truly living it out yourself. But Jacob realized his error and knew that he had to set the record straight. For the first time in a while, he exerted healthy spiritual authority. He was repenting himself and resetting the moral parameters of the family.

Regardless of Walt Disney’s propaganda, friends, believe me, kids cannot make it on their own!! There’s a time for gentleness and a time for sternness, both in love. But Christian parents who are growing in the Lord must not abdicate their responsibility to guide their kids.

At Bethel, God visibly appeared to Jacob and told him, *“Your name is Jacob. Your name shall not be called any more Jacob, but Israel shall be your name.”* And He called his name *Israel*.“ Much lay ahead for Israel – many sorrows and grief, times of dejection and feeling like ‘all things were against him’. (Gen 42:36) He also had times of joy and restored hope. But from this time forward, he actually does get called Israel once in a while. In fact, as you track it, he’s generally referred to as such more and more vis-à-vis Jacob and in fact, the last mention of him in the recounting of his life is indeed as Israel (see Gen 50:2).

You see, the old-man, the Jacob-nature, though it raised its ugly head now and again, ultimately diminished. It never disappeared, but in the end, it was the new man that prevailed. Israel even chose to be buried with Leah, the wife whom he’d hated. Thus, it is with us as believers in Christ. It seems backward but it’s correct. It’s the opposite of our natural inclination but actually it’s right. It’s totally counter-intuitive yet all together perfect. To be born again, you must die to self. To grow, you must diminish. To mature, you must be childlike.

And this is my main point. John the Baptist said it, *“He must increase, but I [must] decrease.”* (John 3:30) I submit to you that as long as Jacob was ‘added to’, be it in people or possessions, family or flock, he remained Jacob. His ‘salvation’ brought him ‘happy feet’ so to speak (see Gen 29:1 in the Hebrew) but the change was to his attitude and awareness, not his character.

From that point on, he undoubtedly learned a lot. But his character didn't start changing until he started decreasing, diminishing. He lost his ability to run. He lost his daughter's purity. He lost his dear nanny, Deborah. He lost his ranch in Shechem. He lost his wife Rachel. He lost his relationship with his concubine Bilhah. He lost his son Joseph, his wife Leah, on and on it goes. God caused Jacob to diminish, but in the process Israel grew. Of course, it was gradual and with stubbornness.

Friends, growing in God is not a matter of how much you can add to yourself. Contrary to popular theology, it's not even a matter of how big your ministry is. It all comes down to self-diminishing. That is, who is going to live in you and through you – you or Jesus? Is Christ increasing in you or are you just learning about God?

Now, the Lord offers no condemnation – only hearty encouragement for the end result for all believers is Christ-likeness! I'll conclude with this -- it was the apostle John, a good Jewish boy, recall, who as such would never worship anyone but his Lord, who fell to worship before the one showing him the heavenly Revelation. His companion quickly forbade him to do so saying, "Worship God" and clarified that he was simply his brother and a fellow servant. Clearly, the old apostle knew to worship only the Lord so why did he fall before his brother? I submit that it was because he thought he was indeed Christ. In fact, this faux pas happened twice! (See Rev 19:10 and 22:8,9)

Yes, in heaven, with our souls restored, we will truly resemble Him for Christ will be "all in all". David wrote, *"I will be satisfied when I awake with Your likeness."* (Psa 17:15) John wrote, *"when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is."* (1John 3:2)

And to give us a wonderful picture or type indicating which character continues on in eternity

– with over 2500 mentions in the scripture

– we read of the land, the nation and the people of Israel, not Jacob. Praise God!

We have a LOT to look forward to but like Jacob, we've got a lot of growing to do. In love and faith and hope -- in heavenly mindedness -- may we each grow in godliness as we 'lose ourselves' in Him!

# Healthy Fear, Holy Love

*"I heard Your voice in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked..."* These are the first words of man recorded after sin came into the world. Fear. Specifically, a fear of God.

The scriptures tell us much about the fear of God, but as you consider the 170+ mentions of it in the Old Testament you quickly come to the conclusion that the fundamental value of this fear is to cause one to avoid sin and to obey God's commands.

It is the 'natural' result of the sense of sin. Adam said that he was afraid because he was naked, but the word he used is different from that presented previously in Chapter Two of Genesis when it says of Adam and Eve that *"...they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed."*

Although both words come from the same root, the latter seems to be an 'innocent' or 'compelled' nakedness as suggested in Job 1:21, Ecc 5:15 or Isa 20:3 whereas the term used when they hid from God reflects a lewd or shameful nakedness as in Deut 28:48 or Eze 16:22. It is interesting that the word used to describe the serpent as 'cunning or crafty' is also derived from this same root. This shameful nakedness springing ultimately from his association with the serpent made Adam afraid of God, however...

I submit that man was not created to fear God. But, as a consequence of sin, that is, his sin nature, he must now fear his Creator for his own good. In this life, in this world, the scripture says that fear of God is:

- The beginning of wisdom – Psa 111:10
- Clean – Psa 19:9
- The beginning of Knowledge – Pro 1:7
- To hate evil – Pro 8:13
- That which prolongs life – Pro 10:27
- Strong confidence – Pro 14:26
- A fountain of life to depart from the snares of death – Pro 14:27
- The instruction of wisdom – Pro 15:33
- Riches, honor and life – Pro 22:4
- Quick understanding – Isa 11:3
- His treasure – Isa 33:6

Fear of God preserved Noah, the patriarchs, the saints of old and for a time, the Jewish nation. In this day and age, we have great need of this fear for sinful rebellion to God's ways has hardened many hearts. But there's a difference -- the alienated sinner fears God because of a sense of coming judgment -- that is, a punishment. This can drive some like John Newton, the author of the hymn, Amazing Grace, to salvation.

The saved fear God not because of pending judgment -- Christ took that for us -- but simply because He is Holy, Almighty, Omniscient and a Father Whom we seek to please. We fear Him because of Who He is and what He can do. Oh, how we need the fear of God! Sinners and saints! Yet there's something we need even more.

There's an interesting transition on this subject going from Old to New Testament. Rather than fear, love becomes far and away the predominant theme. In fact, while the OT has 173 mentions of the fear of God, it only has 25 mentions of the love of God (that is, man loving God) or about a 7:1 ratio. Conversely, the NT has some 36 mentions of man loving of God and only 23 mentions of godly fear or about a 3:2 ratio the other way. Also, the OT speaks of fear or dread some 570 times and of love some 294 times. The NT speaks of love some 289 times and of fear some 156 times. The ratios are nearly exact in opposition.

Regarding relationship, man is by far, instructed to fear God in the OT and by far, instructed to love God in the New. This is fascinating! Of course, it's not all one way or the other in either section of the Bible. However, something important is being communicated by the emphasis of repetition if nothing else.

I will submit that although loving God has always been God's desire for man -- see Deut 6:5 and 10:12 -- mankind has not been truly able to do so until the indwelling of the Holy Spirit came. Even father Abraham was tested with his son Isaac to verify that he feared God. (Gen 22:12) In fact the only saint in the OT to confess his unabashed love for God was David (Psa 18:1, 116:1?) of whom it was recorded that upon being anointed as the coming king the *"...Spirit of the LORD came upon David from that day forward."* (1 Sam 16:13)

Of course, we know that the principle part of the fruit of His Spirit is love (Gal 5:22) and the only way for man to love God with agape love is by the Spirit. Even dear Peter could not confess to loving Christ with agape love (John 21:15-17) before the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

And in heaven, there will be no more sin-based fear -- none like Adam's. Rather, an ever-deepening love. Certainly, in heaven, there shall be no sin. With Satan and his demons cleaned out (who BTW are the only spiritual beings in scripture to reflect fear -- see Luke 8:27-37), sin-fueled fear will be unknown. We will love and reverence God as our Father and Christ as our Husband and Savior.

In Rev 15, we find the tribulation saints in heaven singing, *"Who shall not fear You, O Lord, and glorify Your name?"* but it is quite evident that they are pointing to the effects of the coming seven last plagues upon those living on the earth. They follow with, *"For You alone are holy. For all nations shall come and worship before You, for Your judgments have been manifested."* This will certainly be fulfilled in the millennium!

In Revelation 1, when John was caught up into heaven, beholding the Lord, Jesus said, "*Fear not.*" In Rev 14:7, an angel circles the globe during the tribulation period announcing to the rebellious sinful world, "*Fear God and give glory to Him, for the hour of His judgment has come;*" Note, that for these people there is no command to love God.

In Rev 19, a voice from the throne of God proclaims, "*Praise our God, all you his servants, and you that fear Him, both small and great.*" Here it is probable that the address is to those in heaven (the servants) and as with the Rev 15 scripture above, those on earth (you that fear Him). It could be that all the saved will be, at this point, in heaven for God has just judged the great harlot who corrupted the earth.

John recorded, "*God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God in him. Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness in the day of judgment (i.e. before God); because as He is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment. But he who fears has not been made perfect in love.*" (1 John 4:16-18)

In application to our day and age - in Laodicea and the world around it -- sin is being systematically erased as a concept. Sexual aberrance is termed "gay", murder is called "choice", lying is referred to as "advertising" or "spin", gossip and deception is offered as "news", violence, terror and perversity are dubbed "entertainment" ... on and on it goes. You see, with no more sense of sin – there's no more healthy fear of God. And then with no more fear of God – there's lawlessness and a sickly fear of man, death, discomfort, failure, Satan ...ye-ikes!

The world under control of Satan and the Antichrist will be a world of great deception – complete redefinition. As a consequence, it will be a world without moral restraint. Satan wants a world that's angry at God for His judgments but unresponsive to His warnings. In the Revelation, we read -- "*...men were scorched with great heat, and blasphemed the name of God, which hath power over these plagues: and they repented not to give him glory.*" (Rev 16:9) "*...and they gnawed their tongues for pain and blasphemed the God of heaven because of their pains and their sores and repented not of their deeds.*" (Rev 16:11)

So absolutely, in this life we NEED the fear of God. Jesus said so. In speaking to his disciples, He said, "*...do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.*" (Mat 10:28) You see, it's the only way the 'old man' – the carnal nature – is kept in line. It's the only way we eschew evil.

But get this - in truly fearing God, we have no fear of man or death.

We cannot afford to buy into the devil's redefinitions – he's a master deceiver. Are we to reject sin? Yes. Reject the sense of sin? NO. And by that, I don't mean to accept the enemy's tirades of guilt and condemnation (Romans 8:1). Just go to the Lord with that sense of sin humbly -- in healthy fear and holy love. Give it to Him and be free.

For the glorious day is coming when sin will be no more, and love will fill all. In fact, I'm convinced that heaven worships our Almighty God in reverence fueled primarily by immense and ever-expanding love. And though we who are saved and thus indwelt by God's Spirit still need a healthy fear of God, we need as much if not more a genuine holy agape love for Him –

THAT'S His heart's desire, that's the place of intimate fellowship, that's what He sent His Son to enable, that's what it means to "*become a child of God*" (John 1:12), that's what it means to be a bride and that's the fruit of His Spirit.

To paraphrase the old hymn, "In life, no guilt. In death, no fear." Hallelujah!

# His Desire, Our Delight

It was Jesus who said of Himself, *"I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End, the First and the Last."* And, since He also said that the scriptures, both old and new testaments, were written of Him, I like to compare the opening and concluding parts of the Bible as one way to learn more about Him.

You know, there are several non-trivial words in both the first and last chapters of the Bible – words like beginning, God, Spirit, light, night, morning, water(s), first, fruit and tree. In each of these words, there is a wealth of meaning pertinent to Jesus and some of you could do a whole study on each of them.

However, the one that I find fascinating is the word for "bless" with its various suffixes – there it is in Genesis 1 and Revelation 22. Interestingly enough, in the book of Revelation, it is the last of seven attributes of which Jesus, the Lamb of God is proclaimed worthy by those around the throne in heaven (see Rev 5:12). It is also the first attribute of which Father God is proclaimed worthy by this same group – another 'first and last'.

But significantly, it is the only such attribute to be in this 'bookend' position in scripture – the first and last chapters; and so, potentially, there is something quite special about it. Let's see if we can find out what.

A careful study of the primary words themselves in the original languages (pronounced "eulogia" in the Greek and "barak" in the Hebrew) reveals something curious – they each have two distinct meanings which at first glance seem to be unrelated. As a consequence, the translators' usage of one or the other appears to be somewhat arbitrary and I will suggest, inaccurate, in the eight versions of the Bible I checked.

The two meanings for each are 'blessing' and 'praise'.

The writer of Hebrews tells us, *"Now beyond all contradiction the lesser is blessed by the better."* (i.e. greater, stronger, mightier) (Heb 7:7) But the Bible is filled with sayings like, *"Bless the Lord, O my soul..."* which seems to contradict the previous example. To resolve this, some commentators assert that this latter form of blessing (directed from man to God) is 'watered down' or simply a matter of good intentions. Now, in modern languages, this explanation could fly. But in the original languages, it doesn't even get off the ground. It would seem that the translators missed something.

Perhaps, it is what I would call the 'connection'. That is, God is connected to us who truly believe by His Spirit. You all know that when you are born again, this connection is established. It's not that you are simply "interfaced," so to speak, with Him, but rather that you are indeed a new creation – that is, His life, His being is in you thus making you alive, making you a part of Him. Though you rarely if ever perceive it in this world, when you are born again, you are actually one with Him.

Now, the expression of this connection is the birth of a relational attitude and that, you can perceive. In you, the 'lesser', it is admiration and/or approval of the 'Greater'. While in God the

'Greater', it is the deep desire for goodness toward the 'lesser'. The completely natural utterance then of this attitude on the part of the 'lesser' is praise. Whereas, the utterance of this attitude from the 'Greater' is blessing.

Thus, one word, originating from one wonderful event, means two things – praise or blessing. To understand it properly in its context in scripture is to understand the connection produced by God's Spirit, the resulting relational attitudes and the consequent, natural utterances which are produced. When there is no real connection, whatever praise that may come forth is hollow or feigned.

So why is Jesus worthy of this? First, praise – the utterance of admiration and/or approval from we who are saved. All you have to do is consider His goodness, love, mercy, longsuffering, kindness, faithfulness, grace and truth to appreciate His worthiness of praise. But, add to that the fact that He has never done anything wrong – he is completely innocent of sin. In addition, He glorified Father God in all that He did on earth. He came as a servant and denied Himself all the way to the cross.

And here's a big one, though saving us from sin and bringing us eternal life was His 'mission', He went beyond this when He prayed for our oneness with both Himself and the Father. That is, He desired the fundamental essence of that connection we mentioned. Our sinless or righteous standing before God and immortality weren't enough for Him; He desired the intimacy of the 'connection'. And it is this that apparently separates us from the angelic host. So, of course, we praise Him.

Second, blessing – this is the deep desire for goodness which Father God has in a very special way toward Jesus (and since, as a believer, you are in Him, toward you too!) Now, when the host surrounding the throne declares this worthiness, they are only agreeing with the Father's will, for it is He alone who can bless the Son. We simply echo and agree with what He has done – He has delivered all things into the Son's hands and seated Him at the right hand of His throne.

So, yes, it is easy to join in the acclamation for indeed, Jesus is worthy. Yet, in this particular case, even if we do not intellectually understand His worthiness, we will still respond with praise for it is the natural 'echo' to His blessing. The fountain of our utterance is simply the spontaneous response to His own. Even in this life, as we consider His blessings, His deep desire for goodness towards us, we are inspired to praise. King David put it this way:

*"Bless (Praise) the LORD, O my soul;  
And all that is within me, bless His holy name! Bless the LORD, O my soul,  
And forget not all His benefits:  
Who forgives all your iniquities,  
Who heals all your diseases,  
Who redeems your life from destruction,  
Who crowns you with loving kindness and tender mercies,  
Who satisfies your mouth with good things,  
So that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.  
The LORD executes righteousness*

*And justice for all who are oppressed. He made known His ways to Moses,  
His acts to the children of Israel.  
The LORD is merciful and gracious,  
Slow to anger and abounding in mercy. He will not always strive with us,  
Nor will He keep His anger forever. He has not dealt with us according to our sins,  
Nor punished us according to our iniquities.  
For as the heavens are high above the earth,  
So great is His mercy toward those who fear Him;  
As far as the east is from the west,  
So far has He removed our transgressions from us.  
As a father pities his children,  
So the LORD pities those who fear Him. For He knows our frame;  
He remembers that we are dust.  
As for man, his days are like grass;  
As a flower of the field, so he flourishes.  
For the wind passes over it, and it is gone,  
And its place remembers it no more.  
But the mercy of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting  
On those who fear Him,  
And His righteousness to children's children,  
To such as keep His covenant,  
And to those who remember His commandments to do them.  
The LORD has established His throne in heaven,  
And His kingdom rules over all. Bless the LORD, you His angels,  
Who excel in strength, who do His word,  
Heeding the voice of His word.  
Bless the LORD, all you His hosts,  
You ministers of His, who do His pleasure.  
Bless the LORD, all His works,  
In all places of His dominion.  
Bless the LORD, O my soul! (Psa 103)*

Finally, like most of us, you may be inclined to think at times that you haven't really seen some of these "benefits", but you must recall that although many of us need our eyes opened to perceive the reality of His goodness in the here and now, all of these blessings will be fully and entirely ours -- perceived, embraced and enjoyed forever, in His presence. Heaven is closer than you think, as close as a blink when the time is right. How fantastically worthy is the Lamb of God! Blessing and praise – it's His desire and our delight.

# Jesus-like

A sudden gale-force wind ripped across the water, transforming the small sea within a matter of minutes into a crazy undulating nightmare of waves which broke over their boat like giant hands pushing, lifting, dashing and drowning. Initially, the men on board scrambled in semi orderly fashion to lower the sail, secure equipment and bail with anything that could hold water. Quite quickly though, it was clear that they were losing the battle and that the ship was in grave danger of being overwhelmed by the stormy waters and biting winds.

With the small vessel pitching in every conceivable direction it was a miracle no one was washed overboard, but all were becoming frantic and were in terror of perishing. Chaos and fear now gripped their hearts. The mountainous waves crashed over the boat filling it with water. Yet one man in the stern seemed oblivious to the whole debacle. As though detached from the crisis, He slept gently and apparently peacefully upon a cushion.

Some of those nearby woke Him wailing, "Master, save us!!" and, "Don't you care that we are perishing?!" You all know the story. Perhaps you can relate to their situation.

They knew, somehow, that Jesus could save them but His seeming separation from the fierceness of their dilemma gave rise to their cry, "Don't you care...?!"

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The prisoner in Herod's filthy dungeon had lived arguably the most righteous life of Old Testament times with a devotion to God that impressed even the most dedicated of the religious elite. When he called on people to repent, he did it with genuine authority and the power of a separated life; he was a true Nazarite. In fact, he was so spiritually minded as to be rumored to be the Messiah or 'the Prophet' or Elijah.

So, when he sent his followers to Jesus with the simple question, "Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?" he undoubtedly expected a straightforward answer. Instead, Christ replied, *"Go and tell John the things which you hear and see: the blind see and the lame walk; the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear; the dead are raised up and the poor have the gospel preached to them."*

And knowing the thoughts of every man's heart, even one as righteous as John's, He added, *"And blessed is he who is not offended because of Me."* You all know the story. Perhaps you can relate to his situation.

Earlier, John had specifically pointed out Jesus with the words, *"Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is He of whom I said, 'After me comes a Man who is preferred before me, for He was before me'.... I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and He remained upon Him... I have seen and testified that this is the Son of God."*

He knew Jesus was the Messiah, the One who would save Israel, but His actions were incongruous with those John expected. Thus, the Lord declared that he is blessed, *"who is not offended because of Me."*

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So sick he could not rise from bed, his sisters and friends feared for his life. They bustled about the home hoping to find something to distract him from his illness. 'Perhaps a bit of his favorite food' thought one or 'some encouraging word from the Teacher' thought another. They sent urgent, pleading words to the Master to come.

Hours and then days passed. No medical help, no relief for his pain, no sleep, no more tears and no Jesus. Where was He?? Finally, like the crescendo of a terrible symphony of sorrow, the sisters' wailing announced their dear brother's death. The bustling stopped. Everything stopped.

Amid the numbing shock and dashed hopes which followed, Mary and Martha fumbled with their daily chores. Others assisted with the burial duties and shared in the ceremonial weeping most of which was real for Lazarus was well loved by many. Family and friends laid him in a tomb and rolled a large stone before its opening. The ordeal was ending or was it just beginning? And still no Jesus.

Four days had passed when running excited neighbors announced to all that He was coming – the Teacher and His followers had finally arrived. Martha was outside and found the strength to approach Him. *"Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that whatever You ask of God, God will give You."*

What was she thinking? Perhaps, He would pray for her brother's soul. Perhaps, He could take away their gnawing pain of grief. Perhaps, He could find someone to come and help provide for them as she and her sister were now alone.

Jesus said to her, *"Your brother will rise again."*

Comforting words. Martha said to Him, *"I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day."*

Jesus said to her, *"I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?"*

You know the story. Perhaps, you can relate to the situation.

She said to Him, *"Yes, Lord, I believe that You are the Christ, the Son of God, who is to come into the world."* Then she ran to her sister. Mary was the sensitive one; these words were perhaps too 'heavy' for Martha to handle alone. They had never doubted that Jesus was the Messiah, but their brother's agony and death had put a huge valley of darkness and despair between them and their Lord. Why hadn't He come earlier?? Then, when Mary came to where Jesus was, and saw Him, she fell down at His feet, saying to Him, *"Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died."* She was weeping profusely as she echoed her sister's crushing disappointment. Everyone was weeping. Jesus wept.

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Jesus Christ – Master, Creator, Messiah and Author of the unexpected.

*“For My thoughts are not your thoughts,  
Nor are your ways My ways,’ says the LORD.  
‘For as the heavens are higher than the earth,  
So are My ways higher than your ways,  
And My thoughts than your thoughts.”* Isa 55:8,9

Can you see the common threads in each of these situations? First, these people were followers, fellow servants and friends of Christ. They had good reason to expect His help, His answer and His presence. Second, because of their relationship, they had expectations of Him specifically pertaining to what He would/should do. Third, His behavior was radically different than what they supposed.

Upon the stormy Galilean waters, facing disaster, the disciples perceived that He didn't care. They clearly had confidence that He could do something to help. That's why they asked – perhaps they expected Him to bail water or take charge and calm their chaos. This is the case when we face fearful situations without faith. The natural man within us can look to Jesus if you would for help but it will at the same time frame that anticipated help within 'natural' parameters. The followers of Christ are 'naturally' inclined to underestimate Him. We also misjudge Him as disinterested because He doesn't share our fears.

*“But He said to them, ‘Why are you fearful, O you of little faith?’ Then He arose and rebuked the winds and the sea, and there was a great calm. So the men marveled, saying, ‘Who can this be, that even the winds and the sea obey Him?’”* With open jaws, bulging eyes and perhaps nervous knees, they watched as the natural elements over which the natural man has no control submitted to the Lord of creation.

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Dungeons are dark places – no restrooms, no microwaves and no cable TV. Seriously, they are generally the deepest pit available with an abundance of whatever naturally seeks the lowest hole. Dear John who had lived the 'cleanest' life possible for a sinful man was caged in a very, very dirty place.

To answer his question, Jesus pointed John back to the scripture and required him to base his faith on all that it said about the Messiah, not just the part(s) that he desired or expected. It was an answer, but probably not the one he expected.

In his wonderful book, “The Prisoner in the Third Cell” author Gene Edwards describes what may have been in Christ's mind:

*“Never before in all his thirty-one years, nor in all his preexistence in eternity, had he ever longed so intensely to answer the cry and the question of someone struggling to understand the mysterious ways of his God.”*

*“ If ever there was a time for him to give a clear answer, if ever there was a person to whom he should speak clearly, surely the time was now and the person, John. If any man ever lived who had a right to have an explanation given to him, that man was his own flesh and blood, his only cousin.”*

“John, your pain is great. I feel it. Tonight, you so desperately need to understand me, to fathom my ways, to peer into the riddle of my sovereignty. Your heart is breaking. But, John, you are not the first to have this need. You are but one in a long train of humankind stretching across all the centuries of man who have called out to me with questions and doubts. You are but one voice among so many who wonder, who agonize over my ways.”

“A day like that which awaited John awaits us all. It is unavoidable because every believer imagines his God to be a certain way and is quite sure his Lord will do certain things under certain conditions. But your Lord is never quite what you imagined Him to be.”

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“Take away the stone.” The command came with such authority that He didn’t need to repeat it. Martha, the sister of him who was dead, said to Him, *“Lord, by this time there is a stench, for he has been dead four days.”* Perhaps she thought He wanted to see the body one last time. In any event, she couldn’t conceive of what was about to happen. Grief and disappointment are very strong influences in the life of anyone. It is my own experience that such factors tend to challenge our very trust and faith. The natural man puts the possibility of divine intervention in the past or the future. The ‘now’ can beat upon the soul like a deafening and relentless strobe.

But Jesus understands. He understood Martha – she wasn’t ‘hearing Him’. He said to her, *“Did I not say to you that if you would believe you would see the glory of God?” Then they took away the stone from the place where the dead man was lying. And Jesus lifted up His eyes and said, ‘Father, I thank You that You have heard Me. And I know that You always hear Me, but because of the people who are standing by I said this, that they may believe that You sent Me.’ Now when He had said these things, He cried with a loud voice, ‘Lazarus, come forth!’ And he who had died came out bound hand and foot with grave clothes, and his face was wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, ‘Loose him, and let him go.’”* (emphasis added) Lazarus heard Him.

Oh, how we need to let this sink in. We continually tend to underestimate our Lord because He doesn’t do things our way or according to our desire. Abraham underestimated Him and wound up with a child God never considered his promised son. David underestimated Him and woefully wailed that someday King Saul would kill him. Thomas underestimated Him and doubted His resurrection. You see, even with believers, the natural man – the fallen man, which strives continually to direct our lives, is a chronic failure in estimating God. There simply is no estimating Him. And so, that then leads us to a fundamental question.

Gene Edwards put it this way –

“You have now come face to face with a God whom you do not fully understand. You have met a God who has not lived up to your expectations. Every believer must come to grips with a God who did not do things quite the way it was expected.”

“You are going to get to know your Lord by faith or you will not know Him at all. Faith in Him, trust that is in Him...not in His ways.”

“The question is not, “Why is God doing this? Why is He like this?” The question is not “Why does He not answer me?” The question is not, “I need Him desperately, why does He not come rescue me?” The question is not, “Why did God allow this tragedy to happen to

me, to my children, to my wife, to my husband, to my family?” Nor is it, “Why does God allow injustices?”

“The question before the house is this: “Will you follow a God you do not understand? Will you follow a God who does not live up to your expectations?”

Clearly, His ways are not our natural ways and yet He tells us to follow Him. (See Mat 4:19; 8:22; 9:9; 10:38; 16:24) Our Lord knows that’s not ‘falling off a log’ easy. To the contrary, it can be extremely difficult. Even Jesus petitioned the Father to change the plan of salvation, if possible, in the Garden of Gethsemane (see Mat 26:39; Mk 14:35).

Following ‘the plan’ of God even when you want God to change it is Jesus-like. True peace in the midst of a stormy tumult is Jesus-like.

Trusting God, taking no offense, even when He doesn’t do things the way we thought He would/should is Jesus-like.

Listening, that is hearing God and thus doing what He directs on His timetable as well as knowing, truly knowing He hears us – this is Jesus-like.

The time is short and the world around us is in an exponential decay. Things are ‘stormy’, dark and dungeon-like and there’s plenty of grief to go around. However, regardless of circumstances, God’s glorious plan is coming to pass – nothing can stop it. As with the disciples, with John and with Mary and Martha, His message is still, “have faith”. For as we follow, we absolutely will see far, far greater things than we ever imagined or expected.

Meanwhile, may we, in Jesus-like fashion, burn radically bright in these last days, and knowing that His ways are so much higher than ours, may we trust our Savior – know His word, obey His voice and follow.

# Rags to Riches

*(Ragamuffin-style)*

*“All our righteousnesses are like filthy rags...”* Isaiah 64:6

Some stories in the Bible really sober me. One such story is that of Achan. It takes place in the time shortly after the death of Moses and is found in Chapter seven of the book of Joshua.

Here’s what happened – the host of Israel had just crossed the Jordan River and had defeated Jericho. At this point, they faced a little stronghold known as Ai. It was so small that they decided to send just 3000 men against it. Clearly, they expected to make quick work of this little town but instead, they were trounced and 36 of their men were killed. In fact, Israel ran away that day and the whole camp was traumatized.

Joshua fell before the Lord in desperate prayer thinking everything was lost, that they would soon be surrounded by vengeful Canaanites and be massacred. But the Lord said, “Get up!” and led him through a process of supernatural detective work which ended in the identification of the problem – one guy – Achan.

With the leadership of Israel looking on, he admitted to taking some booty during the Jericho campaign, something which had been strictly forbidden. And as he described, the loot was found hidden in his tent. At this point, with the truth of his sin evident before all, he and his family and his livestock and his possessions are first stoned, then burned and then buried in stones – wow! It’s not the least bit fuzzy, is it? And this sobers me, frankly. It can scare me to pieces because I’ve done much worse than Achan – I make him look like Billy Graham by comparison.

Of course, the devil is always reminding me of it. Hmmm Now, I don’t know about you, but if you’re like me, as you grow older in the Lord, you’re becoming increasingly aware of your own wretchedness – the sin-nature of the ‘old man’ that fights against the redeemed ‘inner man’.

You see, it’s kind of like the prophet Isaiah who in the first chapters of his book is going, “Woe to you,” and “Woe to you!” and so forth until chapter six where he sees the Lord, high and lifted up in His glory. And then he says ruefully, “Woe is ME for I’m ‘un-together’ and my ‘mouth is unclean”” (slight paraphrase). For at this point, he realizes that the standard is our Lord before Whom we are awed and pained by our ‘un-togetherness’.

Yes, I certainly blow it. I don’t want to or sometimes even mean to, but I do – and some of Satan’s most powerful weapons against me is to try to make me believe these lies:

- That I’m uniquely bad
- That I’m beyond the forgiveness of God
- That God regrets His choosing me
- That God’s disappointment with me has limited or diminished His love for me
- That my weaknesses make me useless to Him

- That repentance means I need to get up and prove my worth – to show God that ‘I’m really better now.’

- That I can’t turn to the promises of God because I’ve over-used them.

And you know, I’m stupid enough to believe some or all of them at times! Yes, God hates sin. Our world and our hearts are thoroughly polluted by it. If something were killing my child, I would hate it too – and I have. And I think God, knowing that although His righteousness demanded the expression of His anger, that it demanded justice – and knowing that doing so would consequently obliterate anyone or anything upon which it was vented except Himself – chose to do exactly that. He put his anger upon Himself on the cross – compelled by His love and grace.

When my own son was dying, I begged God to let me take his place, but of course, I couldn’t. This attitude of love is by comparison just a small reflection of the infinite love of our Father who looks on our condition and not only desires to take our place but in fact, He did.

And this brings me to grace. You see, God is truth and I need truth, truth about my weakness, my wretchedness, my utter need of a much higher power. The Old Testament is full of illustrations of God’s truth. But truth in isolation only brings death in this sin filled world. And now, there’s a choice – we can allow ourselves to be confronted with the truth about ourselves here and now or just slip by it time and again. In the latter case, we will ultimately be confronted with it before God’s throne – too late to change. In the former, we will find ourselves in a desperate state – perhaps broken, humiliated, even drowning and overwhelmed – way, way out of our comfort zone. But then, as the truth about ourselves hits hard, destroys our fanciful impressions, fills our personal throne rooms with manure, the truth about our God brings freedom. And we see grace.

Do you know what grace is? It’s totally unmerited favor. You see, God didn’t invent grace for me or anyone else. He just IS gracious – always has been, always will be. It’s not like someone just getting an impulse to buy me a gift cause I’m so nice. It’s not about me or you; it’s about God. Grace is who He is, not some ‘effect’ I’ve ‘caused’. I’m simply the beneficiary, period. And you don’t really begin to comprehend it until you realize how desperately you need it. As long as you think you can “make it right” with God, that you can somehow show Him you are or were worthy of His forgiveness and goodness – you are really still seeking to atone for your own sins, to observe a law of works.

And much Christian life and service is spent in this pursuit of worthiness – when Paul wrote, “*Walk worthy of the calling...*” he wasn’t saying, “Try to prove your worthiness” but simply, “Walk in the light, walk with the Lord, walk the ‘talk’ – be an example of the believer.” You see, that’s totally different inwardly even though outwardly, it can look the same. That is, one leads to spiritual barrenness while the other nurtures a garden.

“The Kingdom belongs to people who aren’t trying to look good or impress anybody, even themselves. They are not plotting how they can call attention to themselves, worrying about how their actions will be interpreted or wondering if they will get gold stars for their behavior.”

“Maybe this is the heart of our hang-up, the root of our dilemma. We fluctuate between castigating ourselves and congratulating ourselves because we are deluded into thinking we save ourselves. We develop a false sense of security from our good works and scrupulous observance of the law. Our halo gets too tight and a carefully disguised attitude of moral superiority results. Or, we are appalled by our inconsistency, devastated that we haven’t lived up to our lofty expectations of ourselves. The roller coaster ride of elation and depression continues.” (Brennan Manning)

As I said, when I sin, I am tempted to believe that I’ve somehow gone beyond the limits of God’s grace but,...

“We must keep in mind also that the grace of God is infinite and eternal. As it had no beginning so it can have no end, and being an attribute of God, it is as boundless as infinitude.”

“We can never know the enormity of our sin, neither is it necessary that we should. What we can know is that “where sin abounded, grace did much more abound.” To “abound” in sin: that is the worst and the most we could or can do. The word abound defines the limit of our finite abilities; and although we feel our iniquities rise over us like a mountain, the mountain, nevertheless, has definable boundaries: it is so large, so high, it weighs only this certain amount and no more. But who shall define the limitless grace of God?” (A. W. Tozer)

Grace is a purifier, a godly fertilizer for the soul, not a license for licentiousness.

“We who feel ourselves alienated from the fellowship of God can now raise our discouraged heads and look up. Through the virtues of Christ’s atoning death, the cause of our banishment has been removed. We may return as the Prodigal returned and be welcome. As we approach the Garden, our home before the Fall, the flaming sword is withdrawn. The keepers of the tree of life stand aside when they see a son of grace approaching.” (AW Tozer)

“If Jesus appeared at your dining room table tonight with knowledge of everything you are and are not, total comprehension of your life story and every skeleton hidden in your closet; if He laid out the real state of your present discipleship with the hidden agenda, the mixed motives, and the dark desires buried in your psyche, you would feel His acceptance and forgiveness. For “experiencing God’s love in Jesus Christ means experiencing that one has been unreservedly accepted, approved and infinitely loved, that one can and should accept oneself and one’s neighbor.”” (Brennan Manning and Walter Kasper)

C. S. Lewis wrote, “Grace substitutes a full, childlike and delighted acceptance of our need, a joy in total dependence. The good man is sorry for the sins which have increased his need. He is not entirely sorry for the fresh need they have produced.”

But Satan wants us to look inwardly in self-deprecation and/or to hang on to our pointless march for merit. That is, to be absorbed in our unworthiness or our drive to attain worthiness. On the other hand, receiving grace takes grace – that is, there is an attitude which is itself an unmerited gift that positions our hearts to receive from God His unmerited favor. John put it, “...of His fullness we have all received, and grace for grace.” Jn 1:16 “...that in the ages to come He might show the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.” Ephesians 2:7

This is heavenly mindedness – you're not bound up in continual self-pity nor enslaved by earning any of God's favor – pro-actively or post-factively. This is the understanding of His goodness that naturally brings forth our repentance; this is the aroma of heaven's sweet breeze, the refreshment of living waters; this is the joyful confidence of grace.

# The Light of Israel

When the Philistines were at war again with Israel, David and his servants with him went down and fought against the Philistines; and David grew faint. (2 Sam 21:15) Oh, he meant well. His mind and heart were up to the challenge, but his body lacked the stamina and strength. Since the days of his youth, David had learned to put his faith in the Lord and when it was necessary to fight, to do so with amazing courage and faith. In fact, this very characteristic gave him acclaim throughout all Israel and amongst the nations that surrounded. They sang songs about his valiant behavior and combat prowess, and his exploits against the giant Goliath are famous even thousands of years later.

It seems that just before this, David had been in the process of 'setting in order' his kingdom. God had shown him an injustice that went uncorrected for a long time and he responded by putting things right. It was harsh justice, nevertheless, it was what was required. But don't you know, when godly people start to recognize their failings and to take steps to make things right, the enemy is aroused and there is war.

And the story of this particular war leads us to a supremely important spiritual truth. Here's the passage:

*"Then Ishbi-Benob, who was one of the sons of the giant, the weight of whose bronze spear was three hundred shekels, who was bearing a new sword, thought he could kill David.*

*But Abishai the son of Zeruiah came to his aid and struck the Philistine and killed him. Then the men of David swore to him, saying, "You shall go out no more with us to battle, lest you quench the lamp of Israel."*

*Now it happened afterward that there was again a battle with the Philistines at Gob. Then Sibbechai the Hushathite killed Saph, who was one of the sons of the giant.*

*Again, there was war at Gob with the Philistines, where Elhanan the son of Jaareoregim the Bethlehemite killed the brother of Goliath the Gittite, the shaft of whose spear was like a weaver's beam.*

*Yet again there was war at Gath, where there was a man of great stature, who had six fingers on each hand and six toes on each foot, twenty-four in number; and he also was born to the giant. So, when he defied Israel, Jonathan the son of Shimea, David's brother, killed him.*

*These four were born to the giant in Gath and fell by the hand of David and by the hand of his servants."*

David became exhausted fighting a giant of a man whose spear or spear tip weighed a hefty ten pounds or so and who was girded with a new weapon, presumably a sword. It didn't look good, but Abishai, one of David's two military commanders came to his aid and killed Ishbi-Benob, the giant. As his men gathered around, recognizing the seriousness of the situation, they

vowed to the king, *“You shall go out no more with us to battle, lest you quench the lamp (or more correctly, the “light”) of Israel.”*

Shortly after this, in other battles, three more of David’s men slew giants. But note that the passage above ends by saying that they *“fell by the hand of David and by the hand of his servants.”* This is more than an honorary tribute to the king; rather, it credits David appropriately. You see, David was a giant slayer and his men had become like him.

The invaluable lesson for us is not simply that his men adopted his passion or courage or forte, but that they became that way for a specific reason – they wanted to be like their king. Why? I submit that it was because they saw him as “the light of Israel”. It is indeed human nature to emulate those whom you esteem highly.

Which begs the question, how do you see Christ? Your life as a Christian directly reflects your perception of Him. If, as a healthy Christian you desire to be like Him, your desire is absolutely affected by how you see or perceive him. Many Christians are tepid, loveless and ineffective because of this perception problem. The more clearly you recognize Him for Who He is, the more you will desire to be like Him. The more distracted your attention or clouded your vision, the less you’ll want to follow Him, or to be like him. And, when that is the case, the giants of this life will indeed overwhelm you.

The apostle John wrote, *“Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He (Christ) is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.”*

So how do we get and keep an accurate and even intimate view of the Lord? One of Jesus’ disciples, Philip said to Him, *“Lord, show us the Father, and it is sufficient for us.”* Jesus said to him, *‘Have I been with you so long, and yet you have not known Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father; so how can you say, “Show us the Father”’?* (John 14:8,9)

Of course, this is the fundamental key and for Jewish people in general, a stumbling point – Christ is the visible embodiment of God. To see Christ is to see the nature, character, power, love, forgiveness, humility and wisdom of God the Father. Just as Philip had been with Jesus for quite some time and didn’t ‘get it’, so many followers today are seeing Christ incorrectly.

The ‘corrective lens’ so to speak comes by way of a humble request from a submitted heart. *“Ask and you will receive.”* Intellectual curiosity is insufficient. Passion or zeal alone won’t cut it either. First of all, God requires sincerity and humility.

One thing Christ is not – He is not the product of your fanciful desires or notions. It is pointless to invent His character to be an embodiment of your wishes. C.S. Lewis addressed this in his Narnia trilogy in the following dialog:

“Aslan is a lion – the Lion, the great Lion.”

“Ooh,” said Susan. “I’d thought he was a man. Is he quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion”...

“Safe?” said Mr. Beaver... “Who said anything about safe? But he’s good. He’s the King, I tell you.”

If you've read the stories, you know that Aslan represents Christ. The point being that to see Him for Who He is, is to acknowledge that He is not necessarily Who you want Him to be – He is Who He is.

The divine path is for you and me to be transformed, by the renewing of our minds, into the image of Christ – not into an imagination of our own. He does not conform to you; you conform to Him. And the great part about this is that when you see Him accurately – as the Light of Israel, as the Light of the World, the dragon slayer, the Savior and Liberator of mankind, the Creator and Keeper of the cosmos... on and on... you very naturally desire to be like Him.

When Jesus rode into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey, His followers proclaimed Him as King. In fact, King of the Jews was the title Pilate hung above His head on the cross. But the acclamation was shallow and off the mark anyway. The key for Israel was and is to see Jesus Christ as the true Messiah.

Jesus told the religious elite, "You shall see Me no more till you say, 'Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD!'" Jesus here revealed something of the conditions surrounding His Second Coming. When Jesus comes again, the Jewish people will welcome Him as the Messiah saying, "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD!" – David Guzik

Now to keep this vision 20/20 spiritually, you must clear the line of sight. Remove all things that obstruct or cloud the picture. John the Baptist recognized Jesus clearly when he saw the sign that was given to him of the dove descending from heaven and resting upon Jesus at His baptism. Later, however, John was imprisoned and became unsure. He sent some of his followers to ask Jesus if indeed He was the One. After many miracles, Christ told them to return to John saying, "*Go and show John again those things which you hear and see – the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up and the poor have the gospel preached to them. And blessed is he who shall not be offended in me.*"

Simply put, Christ reminded John of the Scriptures. That may have been because the Baptist could have come in prison to think incorrectly about the Messiah, thinking about what he desired rather than what the Scriptures said; but whatever the case, Jesus just pointed him back to the Word. That's where you maintain the clear view, the accurate impression.

Difficulties and disappointments DO NOT define or change Who Christ is. Your prayer life and worship will reinforce to you the truth of His nature but will never substitute for the scripture. C.S. Lewis might say, "The Lion is Who He is, and He is revealed in His own Word."

So, like David's mighty men, can you look to Jesus your King and see Him as the Light? If so, you'll start facing and conquering your own giants.

# We Cry, “Abba”

Of all the attributes of God that have potential for misunderstanding in today’s ‘dictionary’, perhaps “Father” heads the list. If not so already, fatherhood is quickly becoming a grotesquely deviated concept (generally speaking) compared to what it truly means and especially as it pertains to God. Men have perverted the picture of fatherhood.

I need to be somewhat blunt here to make a point. In the desperately wicked societies of the ancient land of Canaan, it was common for children to be burned alive upon the incandescent arms of the idol Moloch or to be buried alive in the foundation of a new building – all for the attainment on the part of the parents of greater pleasure. Today, as you know, children are tortured and then murdered while still in the womb or in the birth canal, and it too is promoted by an insanely pleasure-oriented society. In many places, children are sold into prostitution or slavery. Meanwhile, in utter cowardice, some fathers are even sending their little children into battle (eight, ten and twelve-year-olds) – urging them to throw rocks at tanks and teaching them to wear explosive vests.

In our own backyard, to a greater and greater extent, fathers and guardians are abandoning their children. Just yesterday, a two-year old was left alone to wander the streets of Bakersfield. He couldn’t even say much more than his name! His father and mother are nowhere to be found. A few days earlier, another man just walked into a convenience store in Sacramento with his little child and then (caught on tape) left without him, abandoning him in the store.

And this is not worst of it; it’s only the tip of the iceberg. What’s happening in many homes is frankly too disgusting to describe. Children are morally abandoned – left to decide under the mentoring of our ‘family-friendly’ media what’s right and what (if anything) is wrong.

A decade ago, the number of murders committed by teens was approximately 1000 a year, whereas today it is 4000 a year. More than 70% of all juveniles in state reform institutions come from fatherless homes. In fact, because of a lack of father figures in the home -- in the past 30 years there have been:

- 550% increase in violent crime
- 400% increase in illegitimate births
- 200% increase in teen pregnancies
- 300% increase in teen suicide

It’s no wonder people have difficulty sometimes in relating to a heavenly Father! To more and more folks, children are a pleasure handicap, a burden, even a plague. With the advent of myriad birth control measures, sex has become increasingly an inconsequential pastime rather than a marital privilege. Sadly, men and women are playing God in determining whether and when to have children. Do I sound radical? I haven’t even started.

This is absolutely NO accident, friends. One of the prime reasons people don’t come to God is because the concept of a loving Father is under assault continuously. Just as marriage is supposed to be a picture of Christ’s relationship to the Church so parenting is supposed to

picture Father God's relationship to His children. When people don't see and understand that picture they behave as spiritual orphans. Anger, hopelessness, carnality, denial of the truth and hardness of heart become their means of dealing with it. The Bible says, "*Taste and see that the Lord is good.*" But many won't do that simply because it never comes across as a reasonable option – the concept of a good Father is unimaginable.

Let me suggest that when the scripture says, "*But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God...*" (John 1:12) it speaks not only of the born-again experience but of becoming SONS of God – that is, seeing God more and more clearly as He is – your Father – your ever loving, forgiving, compassionate, helping, protecting, totally holy and awesome Father. It is in that understanding that the relationship is formed, and it is in that relationship that the understanding grows.

As believers, we seem to more clearly comprehend that Jesus, who lived among us, knows us – our hopes, our travails, our pains, and our grief. "*He was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.*" (Isa 53:3) But I'll not forget one thing I learned not too long ago – I had recently experienced God taking my dear young son to His side. My faith was weak, and I was convulsing in grief over it. One morning, as I tried to pray and stared blankly into the nothingness, I was reminded of how deeply I had wanted to help my boy – that if they would have been able to take my own heart and lungs, I would instantly have given them to him. If I could only have taken his place in that sterile hospital room, I gladly would have. It destroyed me and my wife that we couldn't help him.

Then, as pain and anger beat upon my soul, I 'heard' a still soft voice within saying something like, 'You wanted to save him (your son) but you couldn't – I wanted to save Him (my Son) but I couldn't. Now, in this fellowship of suffering, you begin to know Me and the pain I've felt.' That realization changed my perspective. Father God wasn't simply turning His back on Jesus while He hung on the cross. I suggest He may have felt like I did – powerless. Now, don't misunderstand me – God is all powerful! But in order to save us, He had to surrender His beloved Son to the incomprehensibly hellish role of the slaughtered Lamb. His infinite love over-ruled His infinite power, indescribable grief and justified wrath.

If you've believed that somehow God just stood back or turned His back or in any way simply detached Himself from Jesus until it was over, that He perhaps occupied Himself with other things or that He simply rested upon His throne because He knew the final outcome – you've missed it.

Jesus is God made man – fully God and fully man. He and the Father are one. He was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief – what then does that tell us about our Father? God's omniscience and omnipotence does not make Him the least bit stoic – that's ancient Greek nonsense. I'm convinced God's heart ached in infinite sadness and grief over the crushing and bruising of His only begotten Son. That's part of the heart of a Father.

God's Father-heart is pure and perfect. We truly have nothing to compare to it in our humanity because we're a fallen humanity. Many of us have had great parents and many have not. But regardless, none of us I dare say, have seen and understood the parental picture of

Father God – “we see through a glass darkly” (1Cor 13:12) “Give me a worm that can understand a man, and I will give you a man who can understand God.”— John Wesley

So let’s attempt to understand more - let’s consider God’s name or attributes as He declared in Ex 34:6, 7 – “*And the LORD passed before him (Moses) and proclaimed, ‘The LORD, the LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, by no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children’s children to the third and the fourth generation.’*”

God’s Father-heart toward you is revealed in His Name:

The LORD – The eternally existent one – unchanging and perfect. Absolutely worthy of the ultimate in ‘parental respect’. You can look up to Him in total confidence.

The LORD God – Infinitely powerful and thus able to handle ANY problem, ANYTHING that would come against you.

Merciful – From everlasting to everlasting is His mercy upon His children. Though there are surely consequences to sin, HE has not dealt with us according to our iniquities. He doesn’t give us what we deserve.

Gracious – He gives us what we don’t deserve! Along with Father God’s totally unbalanced good nature is His desire to bless His children. None of us deserve it and that’s the point. This is grace.

Longsuffering – This King James word here is great because it speaks of our Father’s understanding as well as His patience. He is never moody – He never disciplines because of anger though angry He may get. His discipline is always for our good, never because He’s ‘having a bad day’.

Goodness – You can just keep going and going and going on the goodness graph and never stops. The Bible says repeatedly, He is good. There’s no darkness in Him, nothing bad. It is surely beyond our human experience to fathom that, but it’s true. He’s completely good.

Truth – Did you know that God has limited Himself? Yes, He cannot lie. And not only that, but He is ‘all truth’ – His understanding and application of what is true is pure and without any malicious intent. He is abounding in truth and we have so very little appreciation for it. We dwell in a world of deception – I’m convinced that in heaven we will be utterly astounded by the beauty of this God of Truth.

Keeping Mercy and Forgiving – He does not think like a man – He absolutely loves to forgive. It’s not difficult for Him. You may return time after time after time to His embrace and never hear Him say, “That’s it. You’ve just blown it one time too many. I just can’t take it anymore.” No, He keeps on keeping on. Jesus even told his disciples in Luke 17:4 concerning a brother who needs forgiveness, “*And if he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times in a day returns to you saying, ‘I repent,’ you shall forgive him.*”

Visiting Iniquity – I think the translators did a poor job here and it has led to much error. The translations can leave you thinking that there's no way God clears the sinner of guilt and in fact He makes the sinner's children and grandchildren and even great grandchildren pay the price for inherited sin. Some people even get generational curses out of this. Whoa!

Let's go to the original language and see what it is really saying – Father God does not permissively pretend that sin didn't happen or that it isn't that bad. Unlike man, he doesn't give it a new name to clean it up. Lust is not love, homosexuality is not gay, murder in the womb is not freedom of choice. He chastises, yet the chastisements of God are because He loves us.

Our sin, though, is indeed cleared – completely cleared by the blood of Christ. Now, sin can have its effects upon offspring – that's true. However, Ez 18:20-22 makes it absolutely simple and plain that no one is responsible for the sin of their parents. It says, *"The soul who sins shall die. The son shall not bear the guilt of the father, nor the father bear the guilt of the son. The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself. But if a wicked man turns from all his sins which he has committed, keeps all My statutes, and does what is lawful and right, he shall surely live; he shall not die. None of the transgressions which he has committed shall be remembered against him; because of the righteousness which he has done, he shall live."*

You see, what is being said here is that God is so faithful and so loving that He will never wash His hands of His children. He'll never say, "Oh, they just keep on sinning. I'm fed up with it and so I'm just going to let them go. I'm not going to attend to it." That word "visit" means in the original language to attend, to care for it. God's going to deal with our sin, even though it persists generation after generation. You see, He's our Father.

And there is another name we must consider as well.

It is used once by Christ in the garden of Gethsemane (Mark 14:36), once by Paul to describe the relationship with God we sense in the Spirit (Rom 8:15) and once to describe how the Spirit cries out within us to God (Gal 4:6). It is each time used in conjunction with "Father". This is the name "Abba".

Vine's Dictionary says, "In the Gemara (a Rabbinical commentary on the Mishna, the traditional teaching of the Jews) it is stated that slaves were forbidden to address the head of the family by this title. It approximates to a personal name, in contrast to "Father," with which it is always joined in the NT. Abba is the word framed by the lips of infants and betokens unreasoning trust; "father" expresses an intelligent apprehension of the relationship. The two together express the love and intelligent confidence of the child."

Easton's says, "It is a term expressing warm affection and filial confidence. It has no perfect equivalent in our language."

In His deepest trial, Christ cried out, "Abba, Father." The Holy Spirit instructs that this is the appropriate name for us to use as well. You might think of it as "Papa" or "Daddy" – a term of endearment rather than a title. In the final analysis – God doesn't expect you to truly fathom His Fatherhood or even to fully appreciate His awesome attributes, but He does want you to understand deep within your heart that He's your real "Dad", your tender-loving "Papa" – your

“Abba, Father.” If you let Him, He will bring this to fuller and fuller realization especially as you face difficult trials. Abba truly knows far more than you realize, your joy, your grief, your emptiness, your fullness. He’s not the image of father you’ve always held – He’s much more. He’s Abba, Father.

# When Thrones Are Thrown Away

King Saul. He couldn't believe it. King Saul. KING Saul. That 'king' thing had a ring to it though. Why only a short time ago, he was searching for lost donkeys. Now, the most important people in Israel were searching for him, and here among the equipment he hid. Though he stood a good eight to ten inches taller than everyone else, he never imagined he'd stand in royal attire. One day a good-looking rich kid, the next a king. He'd never expected to wear a crown.

We can't really know all that Saul mused while this new position as king over Israel was thrust upon him, but we can learn some extremely powerful lessons in observing him. These points become especially sharp in comparing Saul with his successor, David.

Now, many excellent comparisons have been presented over the years between these two men. Thus, we'll seek herein to cover just a few points that have become exceptionally poignant to us recently and which we believe may have direct application for all.

To begin with, Saul and David were both 'nobodies' each of whom God clearly and specifically anointed to be king. Neither one looked for the office. Both were from well-to-do families, and both are described in the Word as handsome men. Both had significant character flaws, and yet both exhibited greatness under the anointing of God. Both were revered by the people, hand-picked by God, sought-out by the great prophet Samuel, and yet one – Saul, ended up a devastating failure, a classic illustration for all time of good gone bad – really bad. And this is laid out in scripture for the saints to ponder - for each of us, in following after Christ, will face similar choices.

Referring to 1 Samuel 15, Saul reigned a fairly long time – 42 years, but the kingdom was taken away from him considerably earlier when, on one of his first assignments from the Lord, he failed to do all that the Lord commanded. He was instructed to wipe out the Amalekites – everyone including the livestock. He, however, gave in to the people's desire to keep the best of the livestock claiming later that he saved them for sacrifices. He also failed to 'do in' Agag, the king of the Amalekites.

Samuel lambasted him, saying, *"Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams. For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the LORD, He also has rejected you from being king."* (1Sam 15:22,23)

Now, Saul had no problem with executing severe judgment upon the enemies of Israel. In addition, Saul would later spend years trying to kill David. He even killed dozens of Hebrew priests and threw a javelin at his own son in a fit of rage. Saul wasn't a milk-toast king so to speak. He was never squeamish on capital punishment. So why did he fail, and specifically what happened such that God had to rend the kingdom from him?

True, he rejected the word of the Lord – Samuel said so. True, he feared the opinions of the people – he said so himself (1Sam 15:24) Yet, these outward issues were the result of something going on in Saul that is perhaps not so obvious.

It would be easy to focus upon the fact that he was not completely obedient to God's instructions and from that platform build a 'doctrine' supporting a legalistic adherence to some set of do's and don't's. This would play well with religionists. But that hypothesis would crumble as we consider David. You see, King David was plagued with sinful acts every bit as bad as this one of Saul's, yet God never took the kingdom away from him. In fact, although He dealt with David's sin, He ultimately promised him eternal life – a heavenly home. What was it that God saw?

Even Samuel needed a 'reminder' - for as he was sent to find and anoint the new king, he first saw Jesse's older son Eliab and was quite impressed. *"But the LORD said to Samuel, 'Do not look at his appearance or at his physical stature, because I have refused him. For the LORD does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.'"* (1 Sam 16:7) What God saw in Saul was not so much the outward disobedience but a heart problem.

I'll suggest we have a hint of it in 1 Sam 16:1,2: *"Now the LORD said to Samuel, 'How long will you mourn for Saul, seeing I have rejected him from reigning over Israel? Fill your horn with oil, and go; I am sending you to Jesse the Bethlehemite. For I have provided Myself a king among his sons.'* And Samuel said, *'How can I go? If Saul hears it, he will kill me.'"*

Yes, Sam saw it too – Saul would kill him if he heard of this new anointing and this new king. Saul, who once was mind-boggled just by the prospect of being a king had taken to it with such ferocity that it had captivated him. It owned him. It ruled him. God was a sideline for him; in his mind, the people had made him king – thus, he feared/respected their opinion more than God's. He held on to this position as king with the frantic tenacity of a desperate drowning man.

He later found out about God's call upon David to be king but fought against it tooth and nail. Nothing was as important to Saul as holding on to the earthly throne. And herein, is the difference between the two men.

David knew he was to be king many years in advance, yet he never strove after it. He never attempted to overthrow Saul but rather gave him allegiance and considered him as God's anointed all his days. Kingship was thrust upon David, but it never 'stuck' to him as with Saul. Oh, David remained king even after serious failures, but he never held to it, never lusted to keep it at all costs – in fact, when his own son Absalom sought to dethrone him, David left Jerusalem. Several loyalists followed him including Zadok the priest but, *"... the king said to Zadok, 'Carry the ark of God back into the city. If I find favor in the eyes of the LORD, He will bring me back and show me both it and His dwelling place. But if He says thus: 'I have no delight in you,' here I am, let Him do to me as seems good to Him.'"* (2 Sam 15:25,26)

David could lay it down. Saul couldn't.

Herein is the great lesson for all of us – it's about letting go and holding on. You see, this world is a 'sticky' place filled with 'sticky' stuff. It sticks to the heart, and when it does it tempts

us to hold on to it at all costs – even at the cost of the soul. On top of that, God Himself often gives us good things -- relationships, ministries, material goods, etc. that He sometimes later tests us with – will we adhere to them more than to Him? Or will we let go of them when He requires it and hold on to Him? Even in heaven, we find those who have been given glorious crowns casting them before the throne of God. (Rev 4:9-11)

And as a consequence, I'll suggest that those who are truly heavenly minded behave in like manner not just in heaven but here on earth as well. You see, even Jesus, Who the scripture says will subdue all things will then in turn surrender it all to Father God. (1 Cor 15:25-28)

It's not that God gives just to take away. In fact, the Bible says that the gifts and callings of God are for keeps (Rom 11:29). But He does test us from time to time to see what we're holding on to – the gifts or the Giver. What has God given you?

Good stuff and maybe ...some difficulty – so what are you holding on to? If God is leading you to, -- can you truly let it go. Abraham did with Isaac. Moses did with Egypt. David did with the kingdom. Paul did with his 'stuff and status'. Jesus did with His life. Father God did with His Son.

Now the great thing is that those good things which God has given – when you can truly let go of them in obedience to His will -- in placing God at the center of your heart's deepest desire – you will one day see God return to you much more.

As for the sticky stuff of the world – keeping God in that central role makes you 'stick-resistant'. You can 'use stuff and love people' rather than the other way around. Knowing what and when to let go and what and when to hold on – a key discipleship lesson. Lip-service doesn't count. Appearances don't matter. God sees the heart and knows the truth. Is an earthly throne sticking to you that shouldn't be? Conversely, are you holding on to what you should be - your faith, your Father?

I was so inspired when I learned of a wonderful brother who sincerely sensed the call of God to leave his position as senior pastor of a huge church in southern California to help a struggling little congregation of a couple dozen believers in a foreign country. (Obviously, I'm not advocating this for every pastor!) But this man heard the call and laid down the 'big ministry' for the 'small' (though what's big and small in God's eyes can be quite different than man's!). Interestingly enough, God later called Him back to help pastor an even larger work than the one he'd laid down.

Many of us can 'lay it down' when the cost is small but personal investment seems to increase the 'stick-value' of our earthly thrones. My pastor tells the story of a church meeting in which a man got up and gave a moving testimony of how, when he was just a young man with only \$10 in his pocket, that he gave that \$10 to the Lord. Now, some thirty years later, he was a multimillionaire. Asserting that God had honored his faith, he claimed, "I'm sure it's because I just gave it all to the Lord." At that, a sweet old saint chimed in, "And I dare you to do it again!"

Jesus plainly said, *"...suppose a king is about to go to war against another king. Will he not first sit down and consider whether he is able with ten thousand men to oppose the one coming against him with twenty thousand? If he is not able, he will send a delegation while the other is*

*still a long way off and will ask for terms of peace.” (i.e. he knows when to surrender his throne.)  
“In the same way,” (that is, when God requires it) “any of you who does not give up everything  
he has cannot be my disciple. Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty  
again? It is fit neither for the soil nor for the manure pile; it is thrown out. He who has ears to  
hear, let him hear.” (Luke 14:31-35)*

May God grant us ears to hear, to discern. May we have hearts filled with heaven, with  
God’s good and perfect ways, with the relentless love found in Christ. May we handle the  
‘thrones’ so to speak of God’s blessings as David did his. In contrast to Saul, may we hold tightly  
to the Lord and keep only a ‘loose grip’ on the things of this life.

# Seeking Face-Time

It was dark outside on the deck as I saw him huddled in the far corner. His gut-level weeping was like a knife in my heart. I approached slowly and knelt down beside him laying my arm on his shoulder. In a moment, his tears were falling on my chest as he buried his face.

Behind it all was a terrible tale of bewildering betrayal and abandonment that had ravaged an innocent, loving heart. In the cold night air, he seemed so incredibly alone and devastated. A week earlier, he had despaired of life and came very close to ending it. You see, his wife had been cheating on him for years, treating him with disdain and mind-numbing abuse and then one day simply left him with their two children. Now, with a deathly sense of finality, having had his latest request for reconciliation trashed, he understood just how dark her heart was, how it really was over. In addition, it wasn't that long ago that his little brother, who he was so close to, had died.

He had always been tender, as a child and as a man, filled with the sincere desire to live a godly life. Now, he was utterly broken.

Comfort? What does comfort look like in times like these? For it's at the bottom of these deep canyons of anguish that we're vulnerable to feel abandoned by God as well. You can question the very beliefs that have guided your life and devotion. It's the heart-cry that's present in death, in divorce, and in the often-rapid-fire succession of destructive dilemmas that seem to rain down on us and can crush a tender soul. Bitterness, anger, hurt can flood in and be vented out in all directions.

Comfort? We want answers, explanations, freedom from the pain and comfort seems like a vapor, an empty theory.

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Her eyes were filled with loss and pain as she looked into mine. Her precious daughter had died and though her faith was deep and solid, she, like so many of us, cried out inwardly for comfort and assurance. Many had consoled, many had cried with her and her dear husband. Now, as she gazed into my soul, she gently smiled and said, "You know. I know you know." She did the same with my wife.

*"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God." 2 Cor 1:3,4*

We need to believe God's Word regardless of how we feel. It's simply true. But what does this comforting by God look like; how does it work out?

Basically, there's a face to face encounter that's necessary. Just as my dear friend looked into my eyes knowing that we shared a common experience, a common grief, so we can each look into the loving, compassionate and fully understanding eyes of our God, and know He knows as well.

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It wasn't long after I lost my son that I realized that the heart of God not only understood my grief but knew it firsthand and to a degree that dwarfed my own. Not only did His Son die, but He died in sinful alienation from His Father. Now, it was in obedience to the Father's will, but He was carrying the sins of the whole world – past, present and future. Father God not only watched Him die but sent Him to Hell all for us. It was the horrible complete judgment we all deserved.

*“Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith; that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death,...” Phil 3:8-10*

You see, there is an amazingly deep relationship, a fellowship derived in suffering. Of course, there are also the ‘hill-top’ experiences – powerful encounters with a holy, all powerful God – just ask Moses, Peter, or Elijah. And there is a fellowship there too.

But just ask any soldier who has fought for his life alongside another. The bond of a really meaningful shared experience is very powerful. And God has shared your grief, your suffering. Is it any wonder He calls His Spirit “Comforter”? The name literally means one who comes along side to help.

So again, how does this comforting work? It's like a pearl. Like the very doors of heaven.

This is how it works. Each time you come to God in prayer or worship and find the understanding kindness in His face, your pain is covered, it is assuaged. The scaring, however, is not removed. As with Christ's scars, you keep them just like that piece of grit in the center of a pearl. But, slowly and purely, that grit, that scar, is transformed. Oh, you will always know it is a gritty deal at the core, but God and others will increasingly see it in your life as a pearl. Yes, this comfort is an increasingly beautiful thing; a patient process requiring lots of ‘face-time’, lots of fellowship, with our Father and our Savior.

And out of this fellowship, you will find the trust to continue, to know that His coming along side is indeed to help. It's not about answers or ‘what-if's’ or quick-fixes. It's about a continual covering, it's about communing, it's about eternal assurance and healing. And I will tell you from first-hand experience, it does work. That's because, like with my friend and I, you can look into His eyes and say, “You know. I know you know,” and be comforted.

# Priceless Love

How much is your life worth?

Now, before you can answer that, you must consider 'your market'. By that, I mean your life is worth only as much as someone else is willing to pay for it. You may think you're a worthless bum or that you're worth the world, but that's irrelevant. Why, even Satan told God in the book of Job, "...all that a man has he will give for his life." (Job 2:4) What really matters is what someone else thinks you're worth.

So, what do you think? \$10? \$100? \$100,000? How about a whopping \$1,000,000? What would someone else pay for your life? In some places today, you can buy a goat for \$50 and a servant for just \$35. If we consider only the raw materials, you'd be worth between \$5 and \$10. And that's only if we could find someone who needs the chemicals.

"Wait a minute!" you say. "I'm not just a bunch of chemicals. I'm me! I'm a person!"

And you're right; but, the value of a person is what? – Depends on who's doing the valuing, the price fixing so to speak. In the Bible, Judah sold Joseph for the price of a child slave – 20 pieces of silver. Judas sold Jesus for the price of an adult slave – 30 pieces of silver.

It would seem that Judah didn't value his little brother very highly. His brothers with him had plotted to kill Joseph anyway. And Judas? Well, who knows what was going on in that guy's head. Clearly, he didn't value the Son of God very much. So, you see, your value -- the price for your life -- is related to how the one valuing you perceives you and/or feels toward you.

May 10, 1748 was a day in which one man began to perceive, and thus value, many things quite differently. On a homeward voyage, while he was attempting to steer the ship through a violent storm, John Newton experienced what he would later refer to as his "great deliverance." When all seemed lost and he knew the ship would surely sink, he exclaimed, "Lord, have mercy upon us." Later in his cabin he reflected on what he had said and began to believe that God had spoken to him through the storm and that grace had begun its work in him.

Over the course of time, John came to value the lives of the slaves he was transporting entirely differently. These were men and women and children and no longer cargo. He treated them much more humanely; meanwhile, his perception of the slaves continued to be radically changed. Seven years later, he gave up seafaring forever and pursued with increasing enthusiasm a life of humble ministry under the mentoring of George Whitefield and John Wesley. A few years afterward, he wrote this song: Amazing grace! (how sweet the sound) That sav'd a wretch like me! I once was lost, but now am found, Was blind, but now I see. 'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, And grace my fears reliev'd; How precious did that grace appear, The hour I first believ'd!

Salvation by grace taught John to see others more as God sees them – to perceive them as eternal beings.

And then there's love. Toss love into the mix and the value-proposition changes radically. Do you love anyone? What does that love do to your sense of their value? The more you love, the more you value someone. Unfortunately, human love is often short lived. It can be changed by mood, circumstance and the sense of reciprocity.

Before Calvary, buoyed by his loving devotion to Jesus, Peter vowed that he would never deny Christ, yet you all know he did so three times. After the resurrection, on the shores of Galilee, he was ministered to by Jesus. Twice, our Savior asked Peter if he loved Him using the word for godly love (agape). Peter responded each time with "yes," that he loved Him but answered with the word for human relational love (phileo). Finally, Jesus asked him a third time the same question but used Peter's own word. Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, "Do you love (phileo) Me?" And he said to Him, "Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You." (John 21:17) Peter knew he had phileo love for Jesus, but such love is what left him in the crisis of Gethsemane.

Now, all of this pertains to the verses Revelation 5:11,12 which say,

*"Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels around the throne, the living creatures, and the elders; and the number of them was ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice:*

*'Worthy is the Lamb who was slain  
To receive power and riches and wisdom,  
And strength and honor and glory and blessing!'"*

Herein, we're considering honor. You see, this word in the Greek means a valuing by which the price is fixed and comes from the word meaning 1) to pay, to recompense or 2) to pay penalty, suffer punishment.

In comparing this word "honor" in Mat 15:4 and its Old Testament reference in Ex 20:12, we see that the Hebrew word for the honor of which Jesus is worthy means essentially to be 'heavy or weighty'. In other words, it is very substantial.

Surrounding the throne, this heavenly throng will proclaim that Jesus is worthy of supremely heavy or weighty value – that's what this "honor" means. But why?

The apostle John wrote, "...we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is." (1Jn 3:2) So, how did John see Him? There at the throne John saw Him and wrote – "I looked, and behold, in the midst of the throne and of the four living creatures, and in the midst of the elders, stood a Lamb as though it had been slain..." (Rev 5:6) Now, we will also see Him in His splendor and glory, but this is the scene that is pertinent to our study. This is the scene in which Jesus is proclaimed worthy of honor.

You must understand that there was a price to be paid. What for and how much? To answer that, we'll look at something Jesus taught his disciples concerning value or honor. He said,...

*"...the kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and hid; and for joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field." Mat 13:44*

*"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking beautiful pearls, who, when he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had and bought it." Mat 13:45,46*

That field, that dirt, is planet earth. That pearl, that piece of dirt covered by countless layers of beautiful grace, is you. Those that have taught that it's you that goes and sells everything to buy God have got it all backwards. God's not dirty and He's no piece of grit in need of a covering of grace. And you simply don't have enough to purchase Him anyway.

But note that in each case the One doing the buying sold all that He had to obtain His desire. This speaks to how Father God values you. Not \$10. Not \$100. Not \$1000. Not even a whopping \$1,000,000. He could have given the whole cosmos but no, he sold ALL that He had – His Beloved Son Who was One with Him. He gave what was more valuable than all the created order – more than the entire spiritual and physical universes put together.

What's your life worth?

In God's eyes, all that He had, for it is Christ who is "all in all" and "in Whom all things consist". The Bible says, "*You are bought with a price.*" (1 Cor 6:20)

What's your life worth?

There's simply no value, no honor in this cosmos that can compare to the value God has placed on you.

Now, because of what happened in Eden, the price was set – a sinless man for a sinless man (see 1 Jn 2:2, 1 Cor 15:2). And there was only one way for a sinless man to do the job. God's Son became a man. There simply was no other way, and Jesus submitted to that in the garden of Gethsemane. Father God values you and I, all of us, so highly! That's because He sees us through the lens of His infinite love. Greater love – greater value.

Thus, He sacrificed His Son, His Lamb, a Lamb who was above creation, for that which was mortal. He paid a price that can never be measured. It can never be valued enough. It can never be honored enough.

In contrast, the enemy of our souls, Satan, despises our very existence for we are made in the image of God. Satan thinks we're worthless hunks of dirt.

But we already know that, don't we? We know that it's only because of God's measureless love and unfathomable grace that we're saved. We know it's Jesus who is so worthy of our acclamation. He is the value, the honor, the heavy, weighty price of our salvation.

*"Unto you therefore which believe He is precious." (1 Pet 2:7)*

*"Now unto the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen." (1 Tim 1:17)*

Forever, worthy is the Lamb!



# The Circle of Life

The typical wide brimmed Chinese hat he wears is covered in ancient plastic wrap and shades a face that is aged with wrinkles and downcast. He stands or rather stoops, broom in hand, in a surreal contrast to the flashy, young and sensuous billboards overhead and 30 foot high advertisements for Esprit, Top Girl, Totally Jo-Jo and the hundreds of other false boastings of a modern materialistic world which is quiet now but only a few hours earlier was bustling with crowds of people shopping, flirting, seeking gain.

I gently shook my head and thought, 'What a life.'

Life – I don't think we really 'get it'. I don't think we really understand what life truly is. Consider... As the actors beheld a beautiful sunset and drank their beer, the old commercial used to say, "It don't get any better than this." And many people think of life in such terms.

Clearly, the overwhelming majority of us think of life as the never-ending pursuit of pleasure. In fact, it's common, when we're stuck in an unpleasurable routine, to hear someone say, "Hey, get a life!"

But life is not primarily 'biological'. It's just that 'biology' so to speak -- the physical world and its values -- are easier for us to deal with, to perceive and identify. Neither is life simply existence; you and I will exist forever, but we know that eternal existence will be either eternal life or eternal death. So, there's another more fundamental quality of 'life' to consider.

And I don't think we really 'get it' – but we should definitely try. The Apostle Paul admonished the early church saying, *"...you should no longer walk as the rest of the gentiles (unbelievers) walk, in the futility of their mind, having their understanding darkened being alienated from the life of God..."* (Ephesians 4:17,18)

The very fact that he made this statement shows that we as believers can have the same misunderstanding about life as unbelievers. So, what is life – really? And why does it matter? To the one who has never tasted the goodness of God, never been 'born again' through faith in Christ, any attempt to communicate this will make no sense. It will be like describing the most incredible sunset to someone born blind.

Randy Alcorn, in his novel "Deadline", put it this way – his character Finney is ushered into Heaven – "The crowd visible beyond the passageway grew with each step he took. Some faces he did not recognize, many he did. He took the last step – or was it the first – and entered the new world. As he came out the end – or was it the beginning – over the threshold, he gasped his first breath of heaven's air. The gasp was a gasp of wonder at the beauty of this place, and the magnificence of its inhabitants. ...Many hands grabbed Finney's, which he stretched out toward them, as if to confirm they were real. He must have some sort of body, since he could feel their touch. This struck a chord of familiarity. It had happened before. Or something very much like it. Yes, of course, when he was born into the other world. The passageway had been the birth canal between earth and heaven. And these were the midwives of heaven, supervising his birth, pulling him into the world, fussing over him and proudly presenting him to his new

family. This was the real world, which he'd been no more capable of imagining before than an unborn child can imagine the infinite wonders that lie beyond the womb."

Now, the Bible uses two terms for what we have translated as "life". Their meanings are the same in both Greek and Hebrew, the original languages. However, they represent to the discerning heart, things that are worlds apart. The first term comes from the word to breathe and means a breathing creature. In scripture, it always refers to earthly life. A few examples are:

Mat 6:25 - *"Therefore I say to you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink; nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing?"*

Mat 10:39 - *"He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for My sake will find it..."*

John 10:15 - *"As the Father knows Me, even so I know the Father; and I lay down My life for the sheep."*

The second term means life or vitality and is the word always used in referring to the eternal quality. A few examples are:

Mat 7:14 - *"Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it."*

Luke 12:15 - *"And He said to them, "Take heed and beware of covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses."*

John 1:4 - *"In Him was life, and the life was the light of men."*

John 5:24 - *"Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life."*

John 10:10 - *"The thief does not come except to steal, and to kill, and to destroy. I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly."*

Genesis 2:7 - *"And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being."*

Now, Jesus in His great "I am..." statements used this second term to describe Himself seven times, twice as much as any other attribute. (e.g. John 6:48, John 14:6, John 11:25). And God Almighty is specifically referred to as the "living God" 30+ times in scripture - more than any other descriptor. So clearly, this is of paramount importance.

In fact, I'll suggest that it is THE theme of God's plan and purpose for man. It was the very thing we forfeited in Eden and the very thing we have had restored through the cross of Calvary. Life!

What happened back in the garden of Eden? We died.

You see, by Adam and Eve, we broke off, detached, separated, became alienated from our Creator. Death is exactly that - separation from God. We say an electrical circuit is dead when it is open or separated from the flow of power. In a similar way, we lost connection with our

Source, the essence of life; apart from Him, we rot and decay in every way. (As a matter of fact, we call it the Second Law of Thermodynamics - a law of physics.)

As a result, what does the world consider to be 'life'? Really, it can be summed up in four letters, s-e-l-f. Self-satisfaction, self-gratification, self-absorption, self-realization, self-will, self-ishness. Every attribute or quality of what the world thinks of as life is tied to self and thus separated from God.

And analogous to the scene of my companion on the early morning streets of Taipei, many of us are generally inclined to consider life just as a spectrum of worldly opportunities ranging from the poor have-nots to the blissful, binge-ing gotta-haves. But in reality, life, real life, is not even on this plane. As we study scripture, it's obvious that the closer you are to the Lord, the more connected, the more intimate (John 17:3), the more LIFE you have; consider the four creatures immediately surrounding God's throne in heaven. These are the most privileged created beings of all. Notice, what is their common identifier? (See Revelation 4)

They are LIVING! Could God be any more obvious?

You know, in my ignorance, I used to think of these creatures as somewhat robotic or mindless to continually be saying, "*Holy, holy, holy. Lord, God Almighty. Who was and is and is to come.*" When in fact, they are just the opposite. Their incredibly outstanding intellect affords them the ability to comprehend, which leads to their awe and in turn, leads to their continual worship.

No, I don't think we 'get it', but we can – we'll 'get it' as we get it. Got it? If you have a loving, believing, submitted relationship with Jesus Christ, eternal LIFE will one day soon stun you with joy indescribable. When you are in His embrace, you will know, perfectly, that everything is right – everything – I said everything.

- I'm not talking about some blissful forgetfulness, but the actual tangible understanding of truth, the grasping of His accomplished plan.

- I'm not talking about some feigned obligatory posture of praise in spite of pain but an actual overwhelming change and restoration of your spirit, soul and body as well as ALL that pertains to your joy.

- I'm not talking about a temporary emotional swing or flirtatious affair with glee but a completed work, a never-fading, always-dawning, ever-lasting, ever-expanding gift from God.

Moses, in the Old Testament put it this way, "Choose life!" (Deut 30:19,20) That is, consciously allow God's Spirit to draw you into the closer, more connected, more intimate relationship with Him. Pursue this course with wild abandon of self (and expect the world to think you're nuts!). You have nothing to fear – He's not too busy for you; He'll never leave you; His thoughts about you are without number and are for your good. It's in this relationship and the never-ending pursuit for more of God that we comprehend and enjoy life.

We GET it. ...to know Him is to love Him ... is to Know Him is to Love Him ... is to KNOW HIM is to LOVE HIM... IS TO KNOW HIM IS TO LOVE HIM... This is the circle of life!

John 17:3 – *“And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.”*