



Artist Unknown but appreciated

Fellowship in Faith

By JR Dickey

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Introduction

Would you like a real friend? Someone with whom you're at ease, someone who honestly cares about you and whom you care about?

Would you like a purpose and pathway in life that actually inspires? One that stirs you up and causes you to pinch yourself to see if it's real? One that scares, delights and lifts?

Would you like a confidence based upon knowing something unshakeable? And an attitude resulting from it that is gentle and kind yet strong and peaceful?

If so, you can consider each page of this little book as a doorway presenting opportunities to know and explore the character of our Servant-King Jesus Christ. Having said that, no doorway herein is intended to lead you to religion.

What I pray you'll discover as you open and pass through is greater appreciation and attachment to Him – our Shepherd, Brother, Friend, Savior, Lord, Creator, Holy God - for these lessons have all been penned if not skillfully, at least in brokenness and in hope.

Bail More!... or Snore

‘Bail more. Bail harder! Bail MORE! BAIL HARDER!!’ With waves tumbling over the side of the boat and the wind nearly ripping the sails, no matter how much they all toiled, they were losing the battle, and the little ship was about to capsize. Only a short while earlier, Jesus had told them to take the boat to the other side of the sea of Galilee, but that was then... now, the wind and waves were threatening their very lives and He was sleeping at the back of the boat! Sleeping!

Scared, exhausted and at wits end, they woke Jesus up, exclaiming, “*Master, don’t you care that we are about to die!?*” (See Mark 4)

Years later, Peter lay chained between two soldiers, about to die once again, this time at the hands of Herod. Earlier, upon the shores of Galilee, Jesus had told Peter how he would die and clearly indicated he would live to be an old man. But that was then... now, the king was intent upon execution. However, this time it was Peter who was sleeping. Sleeping! Sleeping so hard that the angel who came to set him free had to give him a kick just to wake him. (See Acts 4)

Now, how does someone facing certain death, sleep so soundly? How can you and I deal with the calamitous world in which we live with that kind of peaceful confidence? In the first case, Peter was a wreck and about to be wrecked. He had heard the Lord’s command to go to the other side of the sea, but the circumstances changed, and Jesus seemed to be ‘tuned out’. In the second case, Peter had also heard Jesus speak concerning his life and death, but with James having just been executed and now his own death being scheduled for the morning, again the circumstances had changed and surely, he could have felt like Jesus was ‘tuned out’ again.

But he didn’t. This second time, he was behaving just like Jesus. Why was that? What was the difference? Clearly, Peter was a different man. Earlier, upon the sea he had followed Jesus – he had heard Jesus. In the second circumstance, he had followed Jesus – he had heard Jesus – but this time he was very different. This time, he believed Jesus.

Of course, he ‘believed’ Jesus in the first instance as well, but it was a shallow intellectual belief, one that lacked spiritual power. In fact, Peter could assert, before anyone else, that Jesus was indeed the Messiah. He could follow Him for years and do all that Christ commanded. He had that kind of belief as do many Christians. But it was shallow and limited to the rational. It made sense only when the circumstances made sense. And for every follower of Christ that’s a key point to understand.

My granddaughter was crying the other day because the girls she went to Christian school with just a couple years ago are now ‘sleeping around’, getting drunk on liquor or high on drugs and want

nothing to do with Christianity. The very ones who had recently been honored in the Christian school as daily examples of godliness are now embracing worldliness. Sadly, this is pervasive, and in our generation many in the church have this kind of 'belief'. It's a belief that 'caves to the waves', that adapts to the circumstances, that lacks power when pressed.

But Peter had become a different man. His faith was deep and unshakeable. How? Had he 'worked through' his problems? Had he achieved a 'higher plane' of sinless living? Did he find a secret prayer or great book or conference speaker that had delivered the answer? Nope.

Quite simply the difference in Peter was the empowering presence of God's Spirit. After the Lord's resurrection, Jesus had breathed upon him and given him the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. (See John 20:22) and then in Acts 2, Peter had received the anointing, the 'coming upon' of the Spirit while in the upper room. You could say that the first gift saved his soul and the second empowered him to serve. **It is only by God's Spirit that we can hear Christ's Word and truly believe, that is, believe despite the adverse circumstances.**

When you surrender your heart to the Lord and ask him to forgive your sins, to save your soul, you are given the indwelling of the Holy Spirit just as the disciples were given when Jesus breathed upon them. Yet, in addition to this, you have available to you the power of the Spirit by way of His filling, overflowing, anointing, His 'coming upon'. It is the power to believe and to be a testimony like Jesus in the storm or Peter in the jail cell. Now, this subsequent anointing is NOT the same thing as your salvation, it is your power to serve, to sleep in the back of the boat or between two guards if you know what I mean. Its 'timing' isn't what's important; the Bible shows that this powerful anointing can come at the same time as the moment you first believe. But whether He comes upon you then or later, He is utterly supernatural and a tremendous help for selfless ministry and godly living in a godless age.

As our times wax worse, our circumstances as believers are not going to be without serious challenges. In these last days, the Bible declares, *"times will wax worse and worse"*. Trials and deception will abound, and shallow intellectual belief just isn't going to cut it. But Jesus has spoken, *"Never will I leave you, never will I forsake you."* We know the end of the story and it's glorious!

So, if you haven't received the anointing, the baptism of the Holy Spirit, I encourage you to simply pray to receive it. Talk to your Pastor or Elders. They can pray with you, laying their hands upon you. Study the book of Acts and you'll learn how to discern Him, the Spirit of Christ, and His work. This is important because unfortunately, there are fakers out there, deceivers who will lead you down a serpentine trail if you let them. They'll claim they are 'spirit-led' but it isn't God's Spirit! You see, the power of the Holy Spirit is NOT a toy or game for pleasing or glorifying yourself or any other minister.

Here's a clue -- the Spirit will not put a spotlight on you -- He is dedicated to glorifying Christ. The power of the Spirit is for service to Christ, for His glory and His alone. See Gal 5:22-26!

So, whether in a storm or a prison cell, you can sleep soundly because Christ has spoken, and you absolutely believe Him. You know in your 'knower' that you can take Him at His Word. He has said, "I love you" on the Cross of Calvary and that He will guide you through all this life's challenges. Be filled with His Spirit and be at peace!

Bleats *and* Roars

It was the most pitiful, tragic face I'd ever seen (no, I wasn't looking in the mirror!). Somehow, a news photographer had captured the portrait of a terrorized man in India. The caption read that he was a Muslim surrounded by an angry mob of Hindus who clearly were about to kill him.

His expression said it all – he'd begged for mercy and there was none. Now, he faced death with what appeared to be an awareness of eternal, unchangeable disaster.

Now, in considering strength and weakness, I was amazed at how these concepts weave almost without notice throughout the entirety of the scripture. You know, there are about 50 different words in the original Hebrew, Greek and Aramaic that we simply translate as strong, strength, power or might.

You'll find "vigor", "permanence", "speed", "quiet", "a twist", "a vision", "an open hand", "a belt", "a bone", "a separation", "a cliff or rock" and many other expressions for strength in the scriptures. But something seemed to stand out as an important strength, if you would – the strength associated with courage and faith. It is especially significant as it applies to facing the fear of death or disaster. Here are some examples for us:

- Abraham feared for his life in Egypt but later became the 'father of faith'.
- Moses first ran for his life from Pharaoh's wrath but later faced it fearlessly.
- Joshua had to be told multiple times by the Lord not to fear and he proved to be faithful.
- Gideon was found by God's messenger hiding as he threshed wheat and likewise was

admonished by the Lord several times not to fear. You know the story of his ultimate courage against incredible odds.

On and on it goes, into the New Testament where we find Stephen at the point of death praying for his executioners, Peter sleeping so soundly before his apparent death sentence that the rescuing angel had to strike him to wake him up.

And there's Paul, getting up after being stoned and left for dead, walking back into Lystra to preach again.

What courage, what overcoming faith! Where can I get me some of that?!

Understand, strength is not a scriptural option. The Word never suggests, proposes or asks us to be strong. In fact, the Lord commands it over and over (see Deut 31:6,7; Josh 1:6,7; 2Tim 2:1, etc.). Yet, if that stirs up an image of some Basic Training Drill Instructor chewing out his bumbling green enlistee – hold on.

You see, according to scripture, the actual well springs of strength are not the ‘Christian Superheroes’ or ‘Spiritual Drill Sergeants’ so to speak, not the naturally bold and confident, not the ones to whom we are most inclined to look to as examples to emulate. Rather, it is from:

- babes and sucklings -- Psalm 8:2
- those who have no might -- Isaiah 40:29 and
- the weak -- Romans 5:6, 1Cor 1:27, 2Cor 12:9, 10

For counter to our natural expectation, it is weakness which is an essential preliminary ingredient for strength – Hebrews 11:34.

Once again, God shows us that we are the ones who are upside down. After all,...

- Who among us wants weakness?
- Who desires a sincere personal awareness of it? (not just intellectually but from experience!)
- Who even remembers the names of last season’s losers?
- Who finds failure a ‘friend’?
- Who considers crushing a kindness?
- Who willingly sheds fame and power for society’s ‘bargain basement’ of notoriety?

Our nature is to flee from the cross when it is ours to carry, to rationalize our rejection of it, to convince ourselves that morality is an adequate substitute. Honestly, we generally want nothing to do with real weakness unless we can toy with it to obtain attention.

One reason for this is that sin misleads us to a false understanding about strength and a false compass concerning its source. Nevertheless, Christ said that His followers would follow Him. (Mark 8:34) And that inevitably means first, like Jesus, you are to be like a lamb – the epitome of weakness. That is, at some point in your life as a believer, or at many points, the Lord will allow you to realize some portion of your own weakness in order to discover His real strength.

You may think, ‘Yes, but you know, I’m saved by grace and that’s all I need. Jesus just wants to give me an abundant life – health, wealth and lots of celebration here and now! After all, don’t the saved go from “strength to strength”? It’s just those unspiritual folks who have marital, financial, emotional or physical problems.’

Hmmm, your salvation is indeed secured by faith in God’s gracious gift – Jesus’ atoning death and resurrection. But let me suggest that you will enjoy your gift and your heavenly eternal home to degree you enjoy Christ – all of Him! Lamb and Lion, weakness and strength.

‘Enjoy weakness??’

No, rather enjoy what you find out about Christ in weakness. In Daniel chapter three, you know the story, 'Shadrach, Meshack and Benny' were thrown into the raging furnace for their refusal to worship the pagan king's idol. They were first bound before being cast in and yet they were freed by the flames. The ropes were the only things to burn, and in the furnace, there with them, was a fourth Man, the Son of Man – Jesus, in His pre-incarnate appearance.

Now, the point to note is that they did not rush to leave the fire – in fact, the king had to command them to exit. You see, when you realize the presence of Christ in the flames, in the furnace of trial, hardship, brokenness/weakness, you're just not in any hurry to leave. This is NOT to say that you should look for hardship or the breaking of heart, mind or body – not at all. But, if you desire to sincerely identify with Jesus, you must understand that when these come, and they do come to everyone, that in them you will discover a strength the world does not know or value or comprehend. Yes, it is the Lord Himself (see Ex 15:2; Psa 18:32; 19:4; 27:1; 28:7; 29:11; 37:39; 73:26; Isa 41:10).

You see, it is God's plan both to save you from sin and death AND to conform you unto the image of His Dear Son. Did you suppose that to be a painless intellectual process? Did you want to roar with the Lion and not first bleat with the Lamb? Armchair Christianity is of no more value than armchair quarterbacking. Everyone likes the idea of 'roaring' but who truly wants to 'bleat'?

But the strength of overcoming faith is born from the womb of personal weakness. (2Cor 4:7) It is reared by the recognition of Christ's footprints in the blood and tear-stained soil before us. It is courageous and confident (Isa 30:7, 15) without worldly cause.

The strength that knows the truth and fears not brokenness or death (or even life) is not lunacy but loving trust in a faithful Father. It is God's desire to make us 'Lion-like' in courage and faith. In fact, the very first attribute of those condemned to "*their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone...*" (Rev 21:8) is cowardice.

Here's some good news -- for those of us who believe, who truly trust in Christ, in the end, salvation and never-ending strength will come (see Rev 12:9-11 and Isa 40:28-31).

For now, remember:

- His strength in you is made complete in your weakness. 2 Cor 12:9. If you're lacking spiritual strength, it could be that as yet you're not realizing your weakness. You may still be wrestling with God, like the patriarch Jacob, and it might take the Lord putting something 'out of joint' to get the message through – "You are weak. Admit it, and cry out to Me." Hosea 12:3,4 James 4:8-10

- If you've been dashed about by a loss, be encouraged -- you will one day 'roar' about life. *"For though He was crucified in weakness, yet He lives by the power of God. For we also are weak in Him, but we shall live with Him by the power of God toward you."* 2Cor 13:4
- If you're ill, be confident -- your illness is not an end -- only a means and God will heal you, perhaps temporarily in this life but for sure eternally in the real life of heaven. *"The body...is sown in weakness, it is raised in power."* 1Cor 15:42,43; Psalm 103:3
- If you're alone, be expectant -- your loneliness or forsakenness prepares your heart for an eternal spring of incredible relationships which will come. Psalm 68:6 and Genesis 2:18

We have a choice, we can ignore the truth and 'strut around' in rebellious 'strength' now and consequently find weakness throughout eternity (like Satan -- see Isaiah 14:10-12) or we can walk, like a lamb, with the Lord and inherit real strength forever. See Revelation 12:10 again!

In the deep wells of weakness, you'll find the waters of God's strength.

But One Thing

“Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me. Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.” (Phil 3:12-14)

We’d so much like to think that the ‘older’ we get in the Lord, the saintlier we get. Whole denominations are built on this notion. Of course, there is some validity to this, but there is also a tension, if you would, with it as well. For, the more ‘mature’ we become in Christ, the more ‘taintlier’ we realize we are in comparison to our dear Savior.

Now, some would characterize Paul as an ever gung-ho, you-can’t-hold-me-back kind of guy. Maybe so, but what he is asserting in this passage has much less to do with spiritual accomplishment and much more to do with facing the balance of life when knowing that ‘much water has already passed under the bridge’ so to speak. It is an attitude necessary for finishing well.

Perhaps, you’ve accomplished much; perhaps, you’ve suffered much; perhaps, you’ve failed greatly and repeatedly. Perhaps, there’s reason to be proud or thankful, or perhaps, there are woeful regrets. Paul had them all; perhaps you do as well. Towards the end of his life he could justly boast of his sufferings for Christ as in 2 Cor 11 and yet, he came to esteem himself as the ‘chief’ of sinners (see 1 Tim 1:15).

You see looking backward is often a trap; focusing on the past, we swing from castigation to congratulation back and forth. Both are balls and chains to the Spirit-filled believer. And of course, Satan knows this, so he endeavors to fix our attention there.

So, looking ahead, how will you finish? With a sigh or a shout? With a limp or a leap? Paul said, “I press on” which is a symbolic use of words. You see, the Greek word he used here is most generally translated as ‘persecute’. What he was alluding to was that the same fervor he had in persecuting or chasing down the believers before his conversion characterized his chasing down of Christ afterwards.

Paul also said, “I lay hold” which means “to take possession of”. Possession of what? The promises of God in Christ. Paul was as fed up as you and I are with the failures of the flesh, but there is one way to deal with them, one thing to do. *“...forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead”*. The Greek is more emphatic – “truly forgetting”. And, *“reaching forward to those things which are ahead”* -- picture a racer stretching forward to break the

tape. It's been a long race and, yet the end is near, so the racer stretches forward knowing the final effort is worth it.

For Paul, this wasn't a spiritual 'mid-life crisis' but a resolute determination to consider the past as 'hidden' in Christ and to face each step in the road ahead with faith and a grand anticipation.

Here's a short story to illustrate this point: "Together a father and son hiked through the mountains of Washington, Oregon and California. For many days they were alone on the trail, often camping above the 10,000-foot level. They faced every sort of discouragement—lack of food and water, danger from wild animals, danger from robbers they might meet, days of rain and mud, incredible physical exhaustion, the very real possibility of physical injury, not to speak of loneliness, blisters, mosquitoes, and the extremes of heat and cold. Before leaving on the trip, the father discovered that over 90% of those who set out to hike more than 500 miles never make it. Fifty percent never get started and 40% quit after they start. Only 10% ever finish a long-distance hike. After studying the 10% who succeed, he came to certain conclusions. Some of it involved strenuous training and meticulous logistical preparation. But there was something else involved. He discovered that those who succeeded versus those who failed understood that the biggest block was mental. They knew that their real enemy lay within, not without. Those who succeeded made two important decisions: First, they decided they would finish the trip no matter what happened, and second, they expected bad things to happen and decided they would not be surprised or dismayed. So, when the rains turned the trail into a quagmire, they didn't quit because they weren't surprised. When black clouds of mosquitoes descended like some Old Testament plague, they didn't quit because they weren't surprised. When they faced days of loneliness and nights of hunger, they didn't quit because they knew it would be like this. In essence, the successful backpackers adopted a certain mindset. They knew that the key was simply putting one foot in front of the other. You take a step and hit the mud. You take another step and see a bear. You take another step and your legs begin to cramp. You take another step and the crazy people come out of the woods. Doesn't matter. You aren't surprised because you knew the crazy people would show up sooner or later. So, you just keep putting one foot in front of the other and eventually your journey is finished."

— Ray Pritchard

"Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus,..." (Heb 12:1)

It is so worth it to finish well! Like Paul, let's do this 'one thing'. Forget the past, Faith the future. Follow Jesus! All the promises of God are Yes! and Amen! in Him.

“Therefore let us, as many as are mature, have this mind;... “

“For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body, according to the working by which He is able even to subdue all things to Himself.” (Phil 3:15,20,21)

Can You Hear Me Now??

“And He said to them, ‘He who has ears to hear, let him hear!’” Thus, Jesus ended His teaching. *“But when He was alone, those around Him with the twelve asked Him about the parable. ...And He said to them, ‘Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables?’”*

You all are familiar with the parable of which Jesus spoke – it concerned a sower and seed. Of particular note is that He clearly indicated it was a key lesson leading to the understanding of all the parables. This wasn't because other parables were 'built' upon it, but simply because it addressed the fundamental issue of how you hear the Lord. Jesus was saying, 'If you can't hear the message on hearing, how will you hear any other?'

The old adage, 'Seeing is believing' is patently false. On the other hand, to say 'Hearing is believing' is a basic truth of the scripture when it is applied to hearing from God. Romans 10:17 says, *“So then faith comes by hearing the word of God.”*

For that reason, let's examine this important parable (Mk 4:3-20) in more detail for so much depends upon what and how we hear.

“Listen! Behold, a sower went out to sow.” Right away, Jesus clued them in to what the lesson was about even with the first word – Listen! Or Harken! He used this exclamation with only two parables and each time added, *“He who has ears to hear, let him hear!”* In this case, He addressed hearing and in the second, speaking (Mk 7:14-16); that is, what goes into the heart and what comes out of it.

He explained that the sower sows the Word of God. Clearly, this pertains to all of us who share the Word whether pastor or pedestrian – anywhere, anytime. But perhaps even more importantly, it speaks of God Himself as the ultimate Sower.

“And it happened, as he sowed, that some seed fell by the wayside; and the birds of the air came and devoured it.” Jesus later said, *“... these are the ones by the wayside where the word is sown. When they hear, Satan comes immediately and takes away the word that was sown in their hearts.”*

In another gospel account, He also admonished, *“Therefore take heed how you hear.”* (Luke 8:18) This is relevant to the parable because how one hears God's Word is directly related to the condition of the heart. In this first instance, the seed fell by the wayside or literally, “a traveled way or road”. This isn't where seed is normally sown for the ground is hard-packed from myriad travelers. As a consequence, it has no chance to germinate for it never gets below the surface. It's like the old saying 'in one ear and out the other'. Not only that, but Satan himself is instrumental in stealing it away

“immediately” through distraction, doubt and/or disputation. It’s the ole ‘harden and heist’ ploy he has found so effective.

Hardened hearts cannot hear. That’s why the scripture says, *“Sow to yourselves in righteousness, reap in mercy; break up your fallow ground:”* (Hosea 10:12). Hard hearts are fallow ground and unreceptive to the seed that is sown upon it. Jesus said of the people of His day, *“...the hearts of this people have grown dull (literally, thick). Their ears are hard of hearing,”* (Mat 13:15)

So how is such soil broken up? It’s plowed. *“For our sakes, no doubt, this is written: that he that plows should plow in hope;”* (1 Cor 9:10) Of course, many a missionary has held this hope. But pertaining to the heart, the important question is, has God been plowing in your field? You know, many difficulties, trials and breakings come our way for this express purpose.

We need to remember that we cannot ‘train ourselves’ to be Christians; we cannot ‘discipline ourselves’ to be saints; we cannot ‘bend ourselves’ to the will of God: we have to be broken to the will of God. (Oswald Chambers)

It takes broken soil to produce a crop, broken clouds to produce rain, broken grain to give bread and broken bread to give strength. It is the broken alabaster box that gives forth perfume. It is the broken Peter, weeping bitterly, who returns to greater power than ever.

Dwight L. Moody said that one of the happiest men he ever knew was a man in Dundee, Scotland, who had fallen and broken his back when a boy of fifteen. He had lain on his bed for forty years and could not be moved without a good deal of pain. Probably not a day had passed in all those years without acute suffering. But day after day the grace of God had been granted him, and when Mr. Moody was in his room it seemed as if he was as near heaven as he could get on earth. When Mr. Moody saw him, he thought he must be beyond the reach of the tempter, and he asked him, "Doesn't Satan ever tempt you to doubt God and to think that He is a hard master?" "Oh, yes," he said, "he does try to tempt me. I lie here and see my old schoolmates driving along, and Satan says, 'If God is so good, why has He kept you here all these years? You might have been a rich man, riding in your carriage.' Then I see a man, who was young when I was, walk by in perfect health, and Satan whispers, 'If God loved you, couldn't He have kept you from breaking your back?' "

"And what do you do when Satan tempts you?"

"Ah, I just take him to Calvary, and I show him Christ, and I point out those wounds in His hands and feet and side, and say, 'Doesn't He love me?' The fact is Satan got such a scare there nineteen hundred years ago that he cannot stand it; he leaves me every time."

That bedridden saint of God did not have much trouble with doubts; he was too full of the grace of God.

Some things are ruined when broken, but the heart that God will use, is at its best when broken.
(Mark Roper)

Jesus continued the parable, *“Some fell on stony ground, where it did not have much earth; and immediately it sprang up because it had no depth of earth. But when the sun was up it was scorched, and because it had no root it withered away.”*

Through the practice of gardening, I’ve noticed that plants in shallow soil will put the energy of growth into their visible parts versus the roots, just as Jesus said. At least, in this case there is some soil and a place for the Word of God to germinate. But like shallow soil, a shallow heart is a fickle one.

The Lord continued, *“These likewise are the ones sown on stony ground who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with gladness; and they have no root in themselves, and so endure only for a time. Afterward, when tribulation or persecution arises for the word's sake, immediately they stumble.”* Often, when a plant has adequate soil conditions, environmental ‘persecution’ will cause it to generate more root growth and thus a more stable situation. However, when the soil is thin or shallow because it’s sitting on a bed of rock, the plant will wither under ‘tribulation’.

Isn’t it interesting how He characterized these as “immediately” receiving the Word with gladness. You see, visible receptivity of an audience is not a dependable measure of the effectiveness of teaching. The wise pastor/teacher knows that the length of the line at the tape booth after the sermon is not as important as the depth of the hearts that heard it. The rise of so much Christian celebrity in churches, denominations and in society at large is a testimony to the shallowness of our spiritual lives.

Popularity can be like a spiritual ‘narcotic’ if you would; among the pastorate, it is a plague that can blind the shepherds to the true condition of the sheep. Sadly, in these last days, it has skyrocketed even in movements that were once very focused on the Word and obedience to the Spirit. And so, a lot of our churches are filled with folks that have a good display ‘above ground’ but not much root.

For believers, in pew or pulpit, seeking popularity among the congregation is very dangerous. Fundamentally, it is me-focused rather than Christ-focused. Now, most if not all of us naturally enjoy the ‘strokes’ of being popular. However, it is not the same as being loved, though on the surface it can appear that way. Popularity is a nice word for what is basically a subtle form of worship. Some Bible teachers think that the desire for it was the sin that toppled Satan (see Isa 14:12-17). Entertainers live for it – the ‘all eyes on ME’ desire.

Paul wrote to an immature Corinthian church caught up in the divisive cult of popularity, *“And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual people but as to carnal, as to babes in Christ. I fed you with milk and not with solid food; for until now you were not able to receive it, and even now you are still not able; for you are still carnal. For where there are envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like mere men? For when one says, “I am of Paul,” and another, “I am of Apollos,” are you not carnal?”* 1Cor 3:1-4

In the parable of the sower, you can consider the roots which come from the good seed as a picture of faith. Shallow, rocky heart soil responds almost too quickly to the seed because it’s a mostly visible, carnal, popular response. It does not result in true faith.

“And some seed fell among thorns; and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no crop.” Oh, those thorns! Many a good sermon has dealt with this. Jesus explained, *“Now these are the ones sown among thorns; they are the ones who hear the word, and the cares of this world, the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things entering in choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful.”*

Let’s consider two things herein – cause and effect. The soil is good, the seed is sown, but the story is sad. This is because of three thorny issues – cares of this world, deceitful riches and lust.

We can recall from another parable that the sower of bad seed or tares is Satan. And though he is instrumental in fostering thorny thistles, he is not the sole culprit. Our own sin nature can do plenty of damage as well.

The *“cares of this world”* is literally anxiety and specifically pertains to eternal issues. That is, it isn’t simply your late mortgage payment or stress on the job. Perhaps more importantly, it points to insecurity and thus angst about the truly big issues – everlasting issues. Christians who are insecure in this way will not bear fruit. As people living in this world, we face all the extremities of daily life like everyone else. We aren’t exempt from them. As believers, we learn to deal with those difficulties and cares by faith and patience. If, however, we are anxious about eternal issues, those **MUST** be weeded out – such insecurities are not a part of God’s planting. They are founded upon lies and doubts. Paul wrote, *“Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God;”* (Phil 4:6)

“Deceitful riches” is also translated beguiling abundance. Now, we are quite quick in this country to assume that all abundance is the blessing of God and that any lack of satiation is related to being out of His will. Wrong. Simply wrong. In fact, the scripture clearly shows that the fundamental problem in Sodom which led to its judgment was not immorality. Speaking to Jerusalem, the prophet Ezekiel

declared, *“Look, this was the iniquity of your sister Sodom: She and her daughter had pride, fullness of food, and abundance of idleness; neither did she strengthen the hand of the poor and needy.”* This abundance led to iniquity – *“And they were haughty and committed abomination before Me; therefore I took them away as I saw fit.”* Eze 16:49, 50

I’ve got friends who have loved the Lord, who landed that ‘great job’ and just disappeared spiritually. The Lord says, *“If riches increase, do not set your heart on them.”* Psa 62:10 In fact, I’ll submit that one of the greatest perils in the affluent Laodicean church of today is the deadness of abundance (Rev 3:17). Of course, this is completely counter to what you hear in the so-called Christian media. The Bible, however, is clear that although abundance CAN be God’s blessing, riches are inherently deceitful and beguiling. They can choke the good seed and thus cheat you out of much, much more than they ever deliver. Christians are naïve to believe every enhancement to their ‘quality of life’ in the carnal sense is heaven sent.

“Lust for other things” is simply the desire for everything else, i.e., what you don’t have – perfect job, home, spouse, things, power, position, prestige... When you focus on what you don’t have and thus lust for it, your ‘achievements’ are inevitably fruitless from a spiritual standpoint. On the other hand, when thankfulness fills your heart soil, spiritual fruit grows and flourishes.

Thus, these three things are thorns in your heart. They are the cause of unfruitfulness in the life of the believer. Now, for the ‘effect’. Lack of fruit is the end result for sure, but what we should note is the process – Jesus said that these things, *“entering in choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful.”* To choke, in the Greek, is ‘to press round or throng one so as almost to suffocate him’. It’s a cutting from the air supply, the pneuma. This clearly points to the quenching of the work of God’s Spirit which the Word says is indeed fruit (see Gal 5:22,23 and Eph 5:9).

The sobering part though is that this choking leads the heart soil to become unfruitful which, by definition, implies that it once did bear fruit or at least began to bear. Individuals, churches, movements and denominations are all at risk. Usually, this ‘becoming’ is so gradual that it goes unnoticed. People, churches and organizations that were once spiritually vital and fruitful often become only the superficial image of what they once were, and they don’t even realize it.

“But other seed fell on good ground and yielded a crop that sprang up, increased and produced: some thirtyfold, some sixty, and some a hundred.” Finally, the good ground – it is broken up with enough depth to support hearty root growth. It is also free from thorns and thistles. As a result, *“...these are the ones sown on good ground, those who hear the word, accept it, and bear fruit: some thirtyfold, some sixty, and some a hundred.”*

In summary, three things are put forth – to hear, to receive or accept and to be fruitful. The first group in the parable represented those who never really heard the word. The second group heard but didn't receive it, that is, take it to heart. The third group heard and accepted but stumbled in fruit-bearing. The last group goes the whole distance.

Now, fruit glorifies God, and more is better. Jesus said, *"Herein is my Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit; so shall ye be my disciples."* (John 15:8) However, there is no comparison given by the Lord between the fruit-bearers. He doesn't say or ever indicate that those who bear 100-fold should celebrate over those who bear 30-fold. In a similar parable about 'talents', the Lord gave to each servant a set amount of resources, to one, five talents, to another, two talents and to the last one talent. You know the story. (Mat 25:14-30) Apart from the doubtful sluggard who hid his one talent, the others gained an additional amount exactly proportional to what they had been given. Both were commended and rewarded.

In addition, we should comment on the fruit. First, it is always brought forth with patience (see Luke 8:15) and it comes in its season. Culturally, we are conditioned to expect quick fixes and 'McFruit' but spiritual fruit takes time.

Next, we must discern what's fruit and what's phony. True fruit is the result of grace. In Leviticus 19, we see a picture of this principle – the law instructed the Jews who planted trees to wait until the fifth year to eat the fruit thereof. Five is commonly understood to be the number of grace in the Bible. In other words, the fruit God is looking for in your life is not simply the result of your own efforts – it is not a work of the flesh. If you don't believe me, find an apple tree and put your ear near its trunk. (You can pretend you're inspecting it if anyone sees you.) Now, listen closely. What do you hear? Nothing! No grunts or groans. And it isn't even sweating! Yet, in due time, out pops the sweetest fruit. It's the sap! No, not you... the tree! Ha! It's the tree's sap. Seriously, in like manner, it's the Holy Spirit in you that brings forth divine fruit. (thank you, Jon Courson)

The Word identifies the fruit of the Spirit as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. You can think of it as primarily being love which is manifested in joy, peace, patience, etc. Also, you can consider it simply as a fruit with multiple attributes. Think of say a watermelon – it's green and red and it has seeds (usually) and it's watery and sweet (usually)... it's one fruit with many descriptors. Such is the fruit of the Spirit. Now, the scripture has much to say about fruit, so I recommend that you do your own study on it. Just remember, the fruit that glorifies God is the work of His Spirit.

So how do you hear? What is the condition of your heart soil? Recall, Jesus said, *“Take heed how you hear.”* And the prophet proclaimed, *“Break up your fallow ground.”* In other words, it’s how we participate – the receptivity of our heart or how we hear. Like Mary, we should sit at His feet, so to speak, to hear Him (Luke 10:39). When we do, we’ll follow as sheep with their Shepherd (John 8:47a, 10:27). May God give us wisdom to listen, to submit to the work of His Spirit when our field is being plowed, to be faithful in weeding out the thorns and to be patient in bearing much good fruit.

“He who has ears to hear, let him hear!”

Dumbfounding Grace

Her heart pounded loudly enough to be heard by the others in the room. Outside, the streets were filled with horrible screams – people were dying. The house she was in quivered and at times seemed like it would collapse; the neighboring homes were already in rubble.

Her hands shook uncontrollably, and the situation seemed completely unreal – as her mind considered her present condition, she was bombarded with images from her past – a sordid, dismal past. She was a whore and her livelihood had been known by all.

Not only so, but the city she called home was so filled with vile practices that she knew it deserved every bit of the terrible judgment it was now receiving. Through the dusty air, she could make out the devastation and it was complete – every building, every life, gone.

Except hers! She knew without a doubt that she, as much if not more than the others, deserved the same fate, yet here she was along with her family – huddled together – alive and unharmed.

Her brother who at first had scoffed when she warned him to take shelter from the attack in her home was now on his knees hugging his wife and children.

“Are you sure we’re safe?” he whispered trying not to alarm the children.

“Why would they spare you and us? You said their God abhors harlotry. How do we know they won’t just save us for last?” her father asked.

“What makes us different? Are we going to die too?!” queried her young nephew.

Suddenly, there was silence outside. Shortly thereafter, loud trumps from a ram’s horn sounded and the thousands of soldiers who had utterly destroyed her city began to depart.

Slowly, and with a shaky hand, she opened the door. In a moment, several men approached her. “Stay inside until we come for you!” they commanded. Remembering her promise to do just that, she closed the door and began to reassure her relatives.

What seemed a long, long time passed until a strong rap on the door was heard and three soldiers entered, fully armed.

“You may come out now,” said one of them, taking her by the hand and gently leading them all out of the devastated city. They’d not gone far when she gasped and said, “May I get something I forgot? Please?!”

The soldiers were quiet for a while and then assented, watching her carefully as she scrambled back to the only standing part of the once mighty wall. Running to the window which faced outward, she grabbed a large scarlet cord that she had hung there and made her way back to the escorts.

The story of Rahab speaks so very loudly to my own heart. Obviously, I've dramatized it (see Joshua 2), but here was a woman no one would have thought worthy of the mercy of God. She had no good works, no history of devotion. As a matter of fact, her fame was a shameful one and her life a cruel testimony to the passion of the sinful human heart. Yet one thing stood between her and a horrible death – a scarlet cord.

You see, she lived in the fortified city of Jericho and her home was actually a part of the city's wall. When the two Hebrew spies sent by Joshua needed a hiding place, she gave it to them. She was convinced that the God of these Hebrew invaders was going to give them victory and thus asked for their protection. In response, the spies promised her the same if she hung a scarlet cord outside her window and remained in the house.

You know the story. The hosts of Israel marched around the city for seven days then shouted and blew their horns. At that, the walls of Jericho tumbled outward – all except Rahab's portion. She and her family were saved by the scarlet cord.

But the story doesn't stop there. As merciful as it was for her to be spared the fate of the rest of Jericho, she also received a marvelous gift – an awesome outpouring of grace. You see, she somehow became acquainted with a man by the name of Salmon (maybe the kind of guy who goes 'against the current'!). He may have been one of the spies or a guard to Rahab and her family, but against ALL the odds, this man took her as his wife.

Think about it! God had commanded the Hebrews to annihilate virtually everything in the promised land – to absolutely clean house – to 'wipe the slate clean'. Moses had strictly admonished them, *"...you shall destroy all the peoples who the LORD your God delivers over to you; your eye shall have no pity on them..."* (Deut 7:16). The mood was NOT one of tolerance if you catch my drift.

Yet, in spite of this, God put it in the heart of Salmon to go against the flow, to actually take her into his family – I mean this was without a doubt a huge leap of faith for him. Dumbfounding indeed.

But the story doesn't stop there either. Rahab had a child by the name of Boaz who had a child by the name of Obed who had a child by the name of Jesse who had a child by the name of David – as in king David. Yes, Rahab was actually the great, great grandmother of the great king and sweet psalmist of Israel!

But the story doesn't stop there either. You see, this genealogy also put her in the Messianic line as well! Jesus Christ was a descendant of David, and thus, of Rahab – whoa! This is a story of mercy followed by grace after grace after grace... Why? Simply a scarlet cord? Could all this be bestowed upon her because of a scarlet cord?! Can I get me a couple hundred yards of it somewhere??

Dear friend, here's a foundational principle many of us need to be reminded of frequently – and I'm one of them. This may surprise you, but... well... I'm not any better than Rahab. (Steady Mom, you want to sit down? Need a glass of water?) And neither are you! Oh, you may not have consciously brought to the Lord a Samsonite full of what YOU think is terribly gross Rahab-like sin when you asked Christ to be your Savior; then again, maybe so. In either event, as you grow in the Lord and endeavor to walk more closely to Him, you'll realize to a greater and greater degree that Rahab should have been 'your middle name'.

And you will thereby cling more tightly than ever to that glorious scarlet cord. Why? Because of what it represents – the blood of our spotless Lamb, Jesus, Who constantly prays for us and justifies us to the Father. He covers us over and over and over and over ... (imagine a LOT of 'overs') in grace.

In fact, if you consider that in Revelation, each gate of the heavenly city is described as being one pearl and you know that the wall of the city is recorded as 144 cubits or about 216 feet. Plus, you consider that one thin coat of the nacre of the pearl is about 0.35mm or about 0.1378 inches. Well, then each pearly gate could have over 18,000 coats of 'grace and beauty' around that initial piece of underlying grit. Now DON'T start counting your sins! It's a PICTURE!

The point is, when we fail at the gate of our lives so to speak, when we make poor choices, bad judgments, let the wrong influences in, etc. (which we all do quite often), God is gracious to us over and over and over and... not because we deserve it, not at all. It's the scarlet cord you see – for the scarlet cord is all He sees. He has chosen to see only the Blood of Christ covering you from the moment you believe and accept His free gift of forgiveness and eternal life.

So, don't forget that cord! Don't leave it behind. Don't start thinking of your own good works or noble attempts at greater purity or personal holiness as substitutes for it – those are responses, not replacements! Nothing replaces that 'cord'. Nothing substitutes for the Blood of Jesus Christ. Nothing.

Fastened by Forgiveness

“Then one of the Pharisees asked Him to eat with him. And He went to the Pharisee’s house, and sat down to eat. And behold, a woman in the city who was a sinner, when she knew that Jesus sat at the table in the Pharisee’s house, brought an alabaster flask of fragrant oil, and stood at His feet behind Him weeping; and she began to wash His feet with her tears, and wiped them with the hair of her head; and she kissed His feet and anointed them with the fragrant oil.”

“Now when the Pharisee who had invited Him saw this, he spoke to himself, saying, ‘This Man, if He were a prophet, would know who and what manner of woman this is who is touching Him, for she is a sinner.’”

“And Jesus answered and said to him, ‘Simon, I have something to say to you.’”

“So, he said, ‘Teacher, say it.’”

“‘There was a certain creditor who had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. And when they had nothing with which to repay, he freely forgave them both. Tell Me, therefore, which of them will love him more?’”

“Simon answered and said, ‘I suppose the one whom he forgave more.’”

“And He said to him, ‘You have rightly judged.’ Then He turned to the woman and said to Simon, ‘Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave Me no water for My feet, but she has washed My feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head. You gave Me no kiss, but this woman has not ceased to kiss My feet since the time I came in. You did not anoint My head with oil, but this woman has anointed My feet with fragrant oil. Therefore, I say to you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much. But to whom little is forgiven, the same loves little.’”

“Then He said to her, ‘Your sins are forgiven.’”

“And those who sat at the table with Him began to say to themselves, ‘Who is this who even forgives sins?’”

“Then He said to the woman, ‘Your faith has saved you. Go in peace.’” (Luke 7:36 – 50)

The word the Holy Spirit chose with which to describe this woman means one “dedicated to sin or especially sinful”. Yet when she approached Jesus, she “fastened” to Him. That’s what the word “touching” really means in the verse. Now, this offended the Pharisee, Simon, because the whole premise of the Law of Moses is that sinful man cannot approach a Holy God let alone cling or fasten to

Him. 'One must be clean and pure to come before God.' In their minds, the same would be true of a prophet, rabbi or anyone strongly adhering to the Levitical system.

But I can relate to this woman. I often wonder why in world God gave me a ministry of encouraging people to be spiritually or heavenly minded. I rejoice in it, but just shake my head at the irony. And I am blessed just wonderfully by this story because in it, Jesus directly fastens love to forgiveness. The way Jesus said it, her love led to His forgiveness; and then, implied in the next part, "*But to whom little is forgiven, the same loves little.*" is the counter-point that His forgiveness also leads to love on our part. That is, it's a two-way deal; you see His forgiveness → our love → His forgiveness → our love... and so on.

And to boot, this passage also shows that the degree of such love is directly related to the degree of forgiveness. Now, this is awesome because that explains to me why the people I know who clearly love God very dearly are the ones who have been faced with the reality of their own human frailty and sinfulness. And they have acknowledged it in sincerity.

You see, God can (and does) tell us we are sinful creatures, but unless we truly believe Him, we don't really see the need to accept His forgiveness. Obviously, this is fundamental to salvation, but it is equally relevant to our lives as believers as well. At times, we may be moved to an intellectual response or assent, but we know that that is quite different from a sincere acknowledgement.

Frankly, the 'better' we do in keeping whatever moral code we personally believe in, the less we think we need His forgiveness, and thus the less we find ourselves enraptured with love for Him. This is NOT a justification for immoral behavior by the way! For the love that is engendered by forgiveness leads us up the high road of repentance. "We don't need to go and sin more in order to be forgiven more, thus loving God more - all we must do is become more sensitive to our current state of sinfulness." (D Guzik)

Simon may have had fewer outward sins to forgive than the woman, but the result was a coldness of heart. He did not even grant Jesus the customary courtesies of water to wash His feet or anointing oil. I've known people like that; maybe you have too. "Good people". In fact, they are fastened to looking good (notice I didn't say doing good) to the exclusion of faith, love and humility.

"Simon was a rude host. And in that culture hospitality was something that was treasured highly. When you invited guests to your home, they would leave their sandals at the door, but immediately there would be a servant there with a towel and with a basin of water, and the host would provide that servant to wash your feet in order that you might come into the house to dine. Of course, they wore open sandals; they had dirt pathways that they walked on, and it was just a common,

accepted courtesy that the guests that were invited would have their feet washed by the servant when they entered the door of the house. And then it was customary to greet your friends with a kiss. Usually it was a kiss on each cheek. This was just common. And, in fact, in some of those areas it is still practiced today. Italy, the men in the church when they come up and greet you, kiss you on both cheeks. And it's a sort of a beautiful, loving thing. But it was common in that culture. And then also it was common to anoint with oil. To pour oil on the head of the guest. Which was a symbol of the joy that you'd hoped to share together that evening. And they would then serve you your first cup of coffee, no sugar, strong Turkish type coffee, bitter. The idea being that you are washing away now all of the bitter experiences that you've had. The second cup they offer you is very sweet. Symbolic of that sweet time that we can now share together, that all of the bitterness was taken away." (Chuck Smith)

Now, this woman, whom by contrast, we do not even know by name, was washing His feet with her tears. I don't think it was intentional. You see, she had brought perfume to anoint Him, but finding Him willing to let her 'fasten' to Him if you would, she broke into tears at His acceptance. It must have just boggled her mind and heart for in that society and especially in that house she was virtually untouchable, religiously filthy. She probably wiped these loving tears off His feet with her hair in absolute humility perhaps concerned that she'd unintentionally gotten His feet wet. Her hair may have simply been cleaner than anything else she had at hand. Using her hair was a very intimate thing. She didn't come to wash His feet, but it happened that way because God wanted to expose her love.

Are you willing to be exposed?

And she kissed His feet; kissed His dusty feet. What a humbling thing. Simon had not given Him water to wash which was customary in that culture where most people wore sandals. Jesus' feet were undoubtedly soiled.

Humiliation, indeed, is a 'dirty' experience, but on the other hand, it can lead to a clean heart. Unfortunately, we really know precious little of this in our prideful, self-oriented culture.

Of note is that this woman, the one who was 'especially sinful', had to enter the 'house of hypocrisy', Simon's house, in order to reach Jesus and display her affection. She probably could have found Him somewhere else, but she exposed herself in front of the very audience that would have condemned her. In doing this, she faced her accusers and her Lord at the same time, and often times so will we. As we approach our Holy God, say in prayer or worship, we can be sure that we'll recognize also the drivel and whine of the 'accuser of the saints', Satan. If we listen to his diatribes, we may back away.

But deep love beckons us onward, into the intimate presence of the One who's feet have been dusty. The One who walked on earth will not turn you away. If you approach in love and faith, you may

proceed. If you will allow the love He's planted in your heart to humble you, you'll be exposed. In that, you'll very possibly kindle rage from the religious but raves from your Redeemer.

And like this woman, it may be that you'll have no 'name'. You may never be asked to speak at the next conference or huddle with the religious 'honchos'. But, you see, that's really the essence of this new life. It's your love and faith that identifies you with Jesus; it's a humbling love and that's your ticket, not your standing in the congregation or the ministry or the movement. When you're breathing the heavenly air of humble love, your life, your works, and your display are all unto Him and that's what matters.

The Christian culture of today, especially in the West has fostered many 'Simons' if you would – people seeking a name for themselves and their ministries. Once humble ministers, lovers of God, have increasingly been convinced that they deserve more spotlight. As a consequence, they are embracing positions of ministerial power or celebrity more and people less.

David L. McKenna writes, "Of all the traits that parents instill in their children by example, forgiveness is the most difficult. Early in my career..., a sophomore appeared before me as court of last resort to appeal his dismissal from school. Violation after violation of residence hall rules had exhausted the patience of directors, deans, and disciplinary committees. His hostility knew no bounds. Whatever awe may seem to pervade a president's office had no effect on him. Anger and hatred exposed a vicious rebellion against anyone in authority. As I listened to him vent his spleen, a contradiction posed itself in my mind. His father enjoyed the reputation as one of the most powerful and effective evangelists in the church. The inconsistency snagged my thoughts. When he had finished and waited for my response, I caught him completely off guard with the unofficial question, "Have you ever been forgiven?""

"A slap in the face would not have been more shocking. His eyes emptied of fire, his head dropped, and he choked out a barely audible, "No.""

"Would you like to be forgiven?" I asked. His answer taught me a lesson of a lifetime. Sobbing now, he lifted the lid that covered his resentment, "I have heard my father invite thousands of people to come to Christ . . . but he has never asked me if I wanted to be forgiven."

When I was younger, I was focused on encouraging those to whom I ministered to invite Jesus into their heart. Surely, that's important, conceptually. But, the heart of the matter is the matter of the heart. We've often heard sermons that highlight the fact that the Laodicean church in Revelation chapter three has left Jesus outside. He says, "*Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me.*" (Rev 3:20)

But opening the door is just the step in the right direction. The question remains, what will you do when Jesus enters? You indeed may 'dine with Him', yet what kind of relationship will emerge? This is critical not just as a new born babe in Christ but throughout your Christian life. Having encountered Jesus, having invited Him into your 'home', what attitude will you embrace?

I submit that there is the human tendency to 'simonize' – to ask Jesus in to our home but to come to treat Him quite casually. The religious and the righteous are not necessarily one in the same. Oh, may God give us a fresh glimpse of how desperately we need Him, and as a consequence, may our hearts be fastened to Him by forgiveness – by our recognition of the need for it, along with our humble, trusting petition, and our honest acceptance.

Have you invited Him in? Dined with Him? Do you love Him? How much?

Handling Love

“It’s scandalous!” “It’s immoral!” “It’s disgusting!”

Whispers, intentionally loud enough to be overheard, passed around the circle of clerics who hung together in a clique as though they feared contact with those outside their spiritual club.

“This proves it. I don’t care what tricks he does,” spoke up one well known apologist, “he’s defiled, and he has obviously done this with a willful disregard for the scriptures.”

“He clearly has no love for God. He wouldn’t stumble us...er...all these people like this if he did.”

“Yes, you’re right. These poor souls around us don’t understand this display is... is... not from a holy God.”

Murmuring ebbed and flowed in the group, but here and there the more curious members slipped away. Their attention being drawn to the man that was causing all this fuss. With torn filthy rags still hanging on him, he was surrounded by common people now whose eyes beheld with amazement what had happened.

Moments earlier, he had broken the traditional laws by approaching the teacher as he left the synagogue. It was a rare moment when relatively few people were around him. Time seemed to slow to a crawl as he neared – his heartbeat visible under his tattered clothing.

Leprosy had made him an outcast so long ago, he’d forgotten... no, not really forgotten...it was just that the memories of his family and friends, who now never came close to him, were too painful to recall. His skin was covered with oozing wounds, his nose and ears were gone. Several of his fingers and toes were gone too. His face was covered and barely human. He shuffled from imbalance not pain – physically, he felt nothing.

His soul, however, was searing with brokenness – he’d pondered taking his life countless times; his rejection by everyone had cast him into a vast abyss of loneliness. He was an abhorrence even to his own children.

If anyone could see inside his heart, they’d view a sight far more wretched than his outward rottenness. He believed in God, but for a time, he’d hated Him – convinced that Jehovah must also disdain him or not care.

Everyone who ‘understood’ such things said that he was a sinner, rejected by God, reaping the consequence of an immoral life. And he figured that this must be true for there was nothing to refute it.

Meanwhile, he begged for scraps of food. Money was nearly useless – he couldn't enter a marketplace, and no one would handle the coins he'd touched. Most of what he ate, the dogs had left behind. 'Could hell be worse than this?' he wondered.

But just today, while scrounging for morsels, he'd overheard rumors about this teacher, this rabbi that could heal people.

Could it be true!? But no one could cure leprosy! Never, had that happened to a Jew. But wait...he thought for a moment and vaguely remembered the tale of a Syrian whom the prophet of God told to wash in the Jordan river and sure enough – he had been healed! He thought of how far the Jordan was from where he sat. Could he walk that far? Maybe. But would this rabbi help him? Maybe...but like the Syrian, maybe he needed to be or to know someone special or maybe he needed some coins to give... alas, he was helpless in either case. The rabbi would surely recoil at the sight of him.

After hours of mental turmoil, he decided that if the teacher truly had this power from God, then he had nothing to lose by seeking his help – it would only be a matter of his willingness to give the command. And somehow, after that, he'd shuffle his way to the river.

Now, as he approached, he stumbled, got back up, and nervously he neared the man, Jesus. Odd, he thought, he didn't dress like a famous rabbi. But something about him was so approachable – there was an 'air' about the man – a kindness that seemed to radiate from him. 'Well, here goes...' He closed in on the small group – his eyes riveted upon the man in the middle. As he neared, an angry voice seemed to shout in his mind that he wasn't supposed to get this close to people, but his fear was overpowered by his hope.

Now, just a few yards away, he watched the teacher turn to behold him. At any moment, he expected a look of abhorrence and disgust. But to his utter surprise, the tender eyes he beheld pierced his soul like a sword and then filled him with an unearthly, supernaturally-natural warmth.

Suddenly, he realized this was not simply a gifted rabbi. He fell to his knees and bowed on his face. He was oblivious to the remarks of those around him.

His heart poured out, *"If You are willing, You can make me clean!"* he exclaimed. In the silent moment that followed, an eternity passed. Would Jesus speak the Word? Would He give the command to be cleansed? And then the incredible happened.....

Jesus, moved with compassion, put out His hand and touched him...

'He touched me!!' the stunned leper cried in his heart. He hadn't been touched by anyone in years! That for which he had anguished and wept and hoped for such a long time had actually happened!

You see, touching him was forbidden. To the religious, Jesus had defiled Himself – in contacting the man's uncleanness, He Himself was now supposedly unclean. In reality, He remained spotless (See Titus 1:15,16) And with this gentle touch upon his decaying flesh, the man sensed an eruption, a mighty cascading flood of love! Inexplicable, indefinable, uncontainable, unconditional love!

As he gazed into those heaven-filled eyes, his leprosy became almost irrelevant. He'd approached Jesus for the healing of his body, but now, the healing of his heart, by love, was his consuming joy.

And then came the words, *"I am willing, be cleansed."* Immediately, his body was totally restored -- his skin, as soft as a child's, his senses, restored. And the best part of all – he knew, he truly knew that God loved him!

Now, sad to say, I've personally struggled at times with something many of you have, no doubt, found easy to accept. You see, I had no problem in perceiving the awesome truth of John 3:16 *"For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him should not die but have everlasting life."*

How could God be any more clear about His global love?! But, where I desire even more awareness is in the love of God for me individually. Now, I know, along with many of you, that indeed, Christ's incomprehensible suffering reflects His glorious love for each one of us, but when I'm hurting, I also find great comfort in the personification of love I see in Jesus as He dealt with bums like me.

Although as you can see, I have dramatized the story above with some hypothetical circumstances, nevertheless, I hope that the essential truth of the passage is pristinely clear – Christ loves us personally, and He's not afraid or shocked by our condition. He wants to touch us and to be touchable. Right now, He uses you and I to do this for one another. In fact, it's the proof to the world that we are following Him. However, very soon, He will return to snatch us out of here and then He'll hold us in His arms personally.

Now, we cannot define God's love – even 1Cor 13 is really a description. You see, the love of God is one of His infinite attributes. As such, it is by definition, undefinable. We can, however, appreciate the demonstration of His love by observing Christ. Consider His interaction with Peter on the shores of Galilee's lake.

In John 21, after His resurrection, Jesus confronted Peter with such loving openness – three times, He pressed the issue, “*Peter do you love Me?*” fully aware of the bitter sense of failure in Peter’s heart for his three denials the night of the Lord’s arrest. He even probed by shifting the question from Peter’s “agape” (or divine) love to his “phileo” (or brotherly) love which in itself is quite revealing.

But in it all, we see the tender love of Jesus for this bumbling, hurting guy. He was not just instructing or testing, but He was healing Peter’s heart. The story reverberates with Christ’s individual, unbounded love for the man. Certainly, His inquiry was never one of doubt or discipline, but of revelation and restoration.

Consider His loving compassion when He wept with Mary and Martha at the tomb of Lazarus.
(John 11)

Consider His loving patience with doubtful Thomas in the upper room. (John 20)

Consider the loving truth revealed in His interaction with a single Samaritan woman by the well.
(John 4)

Consider virtually every facet of His earthly life and you’ll see love – approachable, personal affection.

Then consider the cross.

Countless volumes have still understated the marvelous measureless love of God as demonstrated on Calvary that, when you think about it, was “just three days ago” for the believer. Armies of gifted preachers and expositors have proclaimed it in every corner of the world. How then, could anyone ever have the slightest doubt of God’s earnest desire for intimacy with us?

We can doubt for many reasons – none of them good – but nevertheless, real.

- We may be hurt or sorrowful
- We may suffer from ‘worthiness-worries’
- We may have put one foot back in the world or never left it
- We may see the cross as being done just for the world and not for us individually
- We may misperceive Abba (Father, Papa) – Who He is.

Let me explain further...

First, many if not most of us have experienced at some time a crushing tragedy. The loss of a child, a spouse, a break-up, an endless series of foster homes, terrible abuse, a lifetime of loneliness... Without the hope of heaven and a present trust in Abba, these experiences will turn to bitterness and worldly sorrow which the Bible declares bring death – separation from God (See 2 Cor 7:10). Now, God doesn’t command us to pretend such things don’t hurt, to play a spiritual masquerade, but rather to run

to Him for help and to know that the day is soon coming when sorrow will be no more. Read Isaiah 51:4 and Jeremiah 31:13.

I'll share a private moment with you that I hope will not offend anyone nor draw attention to me except as an illustration. You see, crushing hurt can overwhelm our ability to sense or even believe in God's love temporarily. This is not a failure on God's part nor necessarily a permanent condition of our own hearts. But a crushed, truly crushed human heart simply lacks the ability to discern anything but grief, sorrow and pain. Though admittedly a weak example, if you took a hot branding iron and seared my back and then offered to give my neck a massage, I surely wouldn't enjoy it because the pain of the burns would be so great.

I sat beside my boy. He had just left his failing body to join his older brother in the awesome presence of our Lord. I cannot and do not want to try to describe the flood of grief experienced at that moment. I was alone with him, his empty 'tent', and I held his hand and brushed the hair I had cut so many times – even though I knew he was at peace, I was in the most devastating, crushing war of my existence.

I prayed and tried to hold on to what shreds of trust I had left. Those of you who have lost a child know what I mean. I couldn't believe it; I was surely in a nightmare that would end but then, I knew the nightmare was real.

At that moment, my dear friend entered the little unlit hospital room. My first reaction was the purest indicator of my heart – I turned away from him and wept bitterly. I wailed uncontrollably. It wasn't him that caused my desire to run and scream – it was what he represented – my God. The One who was supposed to love me and yet had taken my child.

He grabbed me gently and I turned around and buried my agonizing face in his chest (he's a tall guy!). All I could sense was my heart and his powerful hug. He'd traveled more than two hours to see us and at that critical moment he was God's love to me even though I had no more ability to discern it than to swim across the ocean. And God knew it.

Later, however, as the Spirit of God began the mending process, I considered how loving it was of my Lord to send him and He also showed me numerous other things that He had done which were just incredibly loving. Now, as I look to heaven, I have come to love the Lord and His children so much more dearly as a result. When your heart fails, God hasn't failed. He never fails. (See Psalm 73:26)

Next, we may think, 'Oh, I'm such a worthless 'loser'. How could You love me?' or 'I'm confident of God's love because I've been good or I've led someone to Him or...' How often have we entertained such ideas? The pitiful estranged condition of our 'old man' always wants to swing us from 'castigation

to congratulation' and back. All because we have a tendency towards trying to earn love. All our lives, it has seemed like people have either loved, liked, ignored or hated us based upon what we did or didn't do – this has conditioned or reinforced the notion of our needing to merit love. However, God's love (like it or not) is unconditional – totally lop-sided if you would. He never measures out His affection for you based on your worthiness or unworthiness. In fact, He never measures out His love period – it is infinite and relentless! (See Jeremiah 31:3)

Next, Jesus prayed that Abba would not take us out of the world literally (until the rapture!) - John 17:15, but the Bible says we are to leave the world's attachments and entanglements. (See Luke 14:33, 2 Tim 2:4 and 1 John 2:15). That's because although our Father will always love us, we will not perceive, receive or respond to it if 'the world gets in our eyes'. We only have the capacity to love one ideal – one master (Mat 6:24).

Next, we can misperceive of Abba in our minds as playing the role of a global-God but not as a personal God. It's humanly easier for us to accept a deity who deals with the 'big picture', the fate of all, the grand design – as if God's some CEO in the sky.

We can even look to John 3:16 where it says, "*For God so loved the world...*" and accept that more easily since "world" is a big word and God's a 'big Guy' – right? (I'm mean that reverently.) And when that is the case, our relationship with Him remains mostly theological, theoretical, philosophical, religious – dutiful but loveless.

The fact is, Abba's love for you is absolutely personal. You are NOT some speck of dust in the huge cosmos of His plan. You, individually, are worth everything to Him – yes... you – no, not the guy over there – YOU!

Jesus explained it in several stories like in Matt 13:46 where He gives everything to obtain a single pearl – you; or in Luke 15:4, where He leaves everything to find one lost sheep – you; or in Luke 15:8 where He drops everything to find one lost coin – you.

And Paul said it too. He recognized the cross as intimate and personal when he wrote in Gal 2:20, "*I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.*"

Finally, we are naturally so spiritually near-sighted that the only God we can perceive, looks like us, thinks like us and behaves like us. No wonder we distrust such a Being. The first thing sinful man did in the Garden of Eden when he heard the Lord coming was to hide. You see, sin twists and contorts our perception of God a full 180 degrees. But Jesus displayed Abba's character to the world – healing, blessing, loving, compassionate, giving, patient, forgiving and on and on. This why it is so critical that we

endeavor to see God as He is – not as the religionists teach or as the world portrays or as the devil fumes. The truth is utterly good. God is good and oh, how He loves you. He doesn't see you like you see you. When you're saved, covered so to speak by the atoning sacrifice of Christ's blood and broken body, Abba sees you as beautifully clean -- worth everything it cost Him to redeem you.

Let me wrap this up with a meditation – the first mention we have in the Bible of love is in Genesis 22:2 where God told Abraham to offer up his son. He said, “...your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love...” This is clearly a picture of the measureless love Abba has for Jesus and yet He gave Him – His only Son, for you. Put it this way, the same strong, gentle hand that lovingly touched that pitiful leper also lovingly took the spike of his sins and sickness to make him truly whole.

Let Him touch you too.

Heaven's Joy

"Americans are amongst the loneliest people in the world. I'm not talking just about divorce -- we are a very mobile country. Generally speaking, you graduate from high school, move away from home for college, and then you move again for your job, and most people will switch jobs 2-3 times. Now, there's nothing inherently evil about this but it contributes to the loneliness in the United States, and you couple this with a high divorce rate in the country and that makes for some very lonely people." -- Eric Snyder

The nuclear and cooperative extended family is an endangered species in the industrialized West. Most communities are composed of neighbors in name only. Meanwhile, multiple aspects of our daily lives are encouraging further and further isolation -- our work, our education, even our entertainment.

A study by the American Council of Life Insurance reported that the loneliest group in America are college students. Next on the list are the divorced, welfare recipients, single moms, rural students, housewives and the elderly.

Charles Swindoll mentioned an ad in a Kansas newspaper. It read, "I will listen to you talk for 30 minutes without comment for \$5.00." Swindoll said, "Sounds like a hoax, doesn't it? But the person was serious. Did anybody call? You bet. It wasn't long before this individual was receiving 10 to 20 calls a day. The pain of loneliness was so sharp that some were willing to try anything for a half hour of companionship."

A true sense of community is essential to a healthy Church. It's been said that as our lungs require air, so our souls require what only community provides. Consider that we are designed by God (who Himself is a group of three persons living in profound relationship with each other) and in His image.

"Christ works on us in all sorts of ways...But above all He works on us through each other. Men are mirrors or carriers of Christ to other men...Usually it is those who know him that bring him to others." -- CS Lewis

What's heaven like? As we read of it in scripture, we only get glimpses, but they are startling and compelling. Paul wrote humbly, "*I know such a man—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows—how he was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter.*" It is written of Jesus, that, "*for the joy set before Him*" He endured the cross. And, we're all aware of the Apostle John's description of the streets of gold and gates of pearl.

So, what we do know of it is that what is spoken and seen there is mind boggling at the least. But the part that fascinates more than any other is the aspect of its community. Consider that we are instructed to regard God as our Father, Jesus as our Bridegroom, our Brother, our Friend and the Holy Spirit as our Comforter. We are described as brethren and family, (Eph 3:15) integrated so tightly as to be like parts of the same body or living stones in a temple – joined together perfectly (Eph 2:21,22; 4:15,16; Col 2:19).

With all focus upon our God (Rev 4 and 5), heaven is truly about community. In fact, as you study Revelation, you can't help but be impressed with its sense of togetherness. As God's character fills all, heaven's essence is genuine, loving relationship in every direction. Even while we're here on earth, Christ said, *"Where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them."* (Mat 18:20) Our Father *"made us alive together with Christ...raised us up together and made us sit together in the heavenly in Christ."* (Eph 2:5, 6)

Together. Together. Together. It resounds in scripture, but too often it echoes only faintly in the halls of our existence. For many Christians, the closest thing to a sense of community they get to experience is a weekly hour or so in a prayer breakfast or home fellowship group. Hey, these are indeed great, but they're like the first step in a marathon – a means and not an end.

Jesus described the cause of joy in heaven in Luke 15 with three parables. In the first, there was a lost sheep – when it was found and united with the flock the owner called his friends and neighbors together to rejoice; in the following parable of a lost coin – the woman who finally finds it also calls her friends and neighbors together to rejoice; in the story of the lost son – the outcome is a relationship restored and a grand celebration.

Friends, family, neighbors – the community of heaven. Not only do these parables point clearly to finding what was lost and a consequent reuniting, but in each case, there is a celebration with others who cared. And why would they care? Because Jesus was also saying that heaven is a community that is composed of truly integrated lives and truly incredible relationships.

Acts 2:44 says of the early church, *"...ALL THAT BELIEVED WERE TOGETHER..."* This passage has led sincere believers to adopt at least a couple of different perspectives – either that their model of communal living was the epitome of how a real church ought to function, or that it was a dismal failure and is irrelevant to our time. I like however, what my former pastor Jon Courson has to say about it...

"If you were around in the 60's and 70's, you might remember the many communal-type ministries which sprang up on the West Coast. Where are they now? Why didn't they work? I suggest they failed in their attempt to duplicate what happened in Acts 2 because there was no inherent reason

for them to do so. On the Day of Pentecost, 3,000 folks got saved in one day — 3,000 people who had come from all over the world to celebrate Pentecost. Following their conversion, they sensed the need to remain in Jerusalem in order that they might be grounded in their new-found faith. But what were they to do? Jump on a 747, fly home, get their stuff, and come back?”

“You see, the early Church didn't arbitrarily say, ‘Wow! Here's a groovy idea: Let's live communally!’ No, the believers in Jerusalem pooled whatever resources they had for the express purpose of allowing the new believers to remain in Jerusalem rather than having to return to the lands from which they came.”

“I suggest to you that we may very well see Christians living communally again — but it won't happen because someone says, ‘Here's a neat idea...’ If persecution were to fall upon this country, which it may; if the economy were to collapse, which it might; if things really get tough, which they could — you'll be amazed how quickly and how beautifully the Church will come together communally. But until then, it's artificial.” —Jon Courson

Regardless of method, this side of heaven we are clearly called by Christ to demonstrate to the world the sense of community, of belonging, of acceptance that only God's love can accomplish (John 13:34,35; 17:20-23). Easy theoretical love is always at a distance, it doesn't touch, it doesn't commune with the object of its affection. This kind of love is the staple of dead religion. Real love naturally integrates the life of one with another and another and another into a masterful and divine tapestry.

Now, our modern church organizations have become experts at gathering people for a few hours at a time, but as good and necessary as these gatherings are, they only serve a very temporal purpose if they don't nurture the ongoing process of linking lives to The Life and thus to one another. The call to each of us is to foster fellowship and to build the body in radically loving ways as a life-style. The Great Commission is NOT just finding the lost but building them into a community representative of God's nature.

“The experience of authentic community is one of the purposes God intends to be fulfilled by the church. The writings of Scripture lead one to conclude that God intends the church, not to be one more bolt on the wheel of activity in our lives, but the very hub at the center of one's life...” -- Randy Frazee

Some have made sound doctrine of scripture the main point of their ministry and we need that. Some have made godly worship their focus and we need that. Some have emphasized evangelism and missions as their main thing and we need that. But apart from demonstrating to the lost world the

beauty of godly community, we fall short -- especially in these last days. In fact, the Bible indicates that it is in these days more than any others that we must be in close community relationship.

Heb 10:25 says -- *“not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching.”*

Friends, the Day of the Lord is fast approaching. And in this day of increasing isolation and selfish independence, we need communities of Christian faith based upon sincere discipleship.

Sure, the application can be pretty sticky, kind of a pain. But, that reminds me of a story told by the philosopher Schopenhauer – ‘a group of porcupines were marooned one bitter cold night in the middle of a large frozen field. There was no way to escape the biting wind. They could not burrow into the frozen ground. As they huddled together to keep warm, their sharp quills began to pinch and hurt. The closer they moved together, the more the pain increased. Some of the animals could not bear the pain and drew apart to sleep alone. In the morning they had frozen to death. They didn’t survive.’

"Friendship is necessary, like philosophy, like art... It has no survival value; rather it is one of those things that give value to survival." --CS Lewis

May we be stirred to emulate heaven, to understand that as it is fundamental to the joy we'll know there, it is here as well. Certainly, we're going to struggle with it in our human frailty, but we must be, more than ever, making the effort to be bound together in loving community – not in word, not in theory but in fact. May those of us who feed the flock and/or find the flock also fellowship with the flock. Jesus did. May we all, in following our Lord, help create that heavenly sense of community where ever we go. It's a real part of heaven's joy.

It Is Written...

You've been tempted today, haven't you?

Some of you are thinking about this and some are nodding your heads rather emphatically. Being tempted does not make you a sinner – you were already born that way. What you do with temptation, however, is critical.

In researching for this topic, it's just amazing how many methods, gimmicks and sure-fire ways of overcoming myriad temptations have been espoused over the years. And overcoming is indeed so important that Jesus mentioned it to all seven of the churches of Revelation chapters two and three. Confessing your faults, accountability partners, boundaries and safeguards are all good, but interestingly enough, there is little attention by comparison given to a key point and one that Jesus Himself illustrated for us in Matt 4:1-11. Let's study it.

"Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil." (v1) When you consider this, it's really radical. Jesus, the Son of God, had to be tested. And it was the Holy Spirit who led Him into the desert. Our first observation here is that if Christ Himself had to deal with temptation, you and I should not think we're exempt.

The scripture says, *"For in that He Himself has suffered, being tempted, He is able to aid those who are tempted."* (Heb 2:18) And, *"though He was a Son, yet He learned obedience by the things which He suffered."* (Heb 5:8) *"For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin."* (Heb 4:15) Because He went through it, He learned obedience to our Father and He can now help us.

Unlike Jesus, however, the Holy Spirit doesn't lead us into temptation. The Word of God tells us, *"Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am tempted by God;' for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone. But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed."* (Jam 1:13,14) Jesus had no sin nature. We do.

Indeed, we do. And it is that same nature that can not only lead us by the nose so to speak to that dark den of temptation but also leads us to think we've got to get ourselves out. As if Jesus will just shake His head and turn away until we 'clean up our act', we can hang our heads in defeat, because we eventually know we can't overcome on our own. So many have believed the lie of condemnation and have not recognized the loving, forgiving arms of our Savior outstretched and within our grasp if we will only look up to Him, not ourselves.

Temptation is humbling, isn't it. Just when you're thinking how 'well' you're doing spiritually (ha) along comes the tempter. And even when you do the right thing, you realize you're vulnerable. Whether it's lust or anger or selfishness, we've all got 'buttons' and he knows how to push them.

Temptation is also a bitter learning experience. Yielding to it brings both immediate and sometimes longer-term consequences. Praise God, Jesus never yielded. *"After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. The tempter came to him and said, 'If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.'" (v2,3)*

If you've fasted, you know the first three days are brutal – you get really hungry. Then, it seems to taper off. The next time you start getting hungry, it's because you are starving to death literally. The body starts cannibalizing itself. If you don't eat soon, you will die. This is the point at which Jesus faced this temptation.

Now, Jesus could have easily done exactly what the devil suggested but He chose to put His trust in God's provision. He rejected the devil's advice to take matters into His own hands, 'to look out for No. 1' so to speak. It would have been logical – He had the power and the need. Most counselors would have told Him not to be so fanatical, so extreme about trusting God. Nevertheless, it was the Holy Spirit who led Him into the wilderness to face the danger and hunger; so, He chose to wait on the Lord God. Yet, the basis of His decision wasn't a matter of stubbornness – it was based upon something He knew to be a rock-solid fact. *Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"(v4)*

End of the temptation. However, noting His reference to the Word, the enemy tried something else. *Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. "If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down. For it is written: 'He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.'" (v5,6)*

The apostle John summarized for us the essence of sin in man (what is "in the world") when he wrote that it was associated with the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life (1 John 2:16). You can see that the devil appealed to the first one in his first temptation. Here, in this second attempt he appealed to pride.

Again, it was 'logical' for Jesus to make a display of His power. He had it, why not use it? He was the Messiah, after all. And implied was the devil's trying to twist Christ's obvious trust in God. It was like he was daring, "OK, you have a radical trust in God. Prove it to everyone. Let everyone see

your trust in the scriptures and your divine powers.” Interesting, that His own flesh brothers later used this same instigation (John 7:3-5). But Jesus declined.

Jesus answered him, "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" (v7)

The devil can quote scripture. Yet he failed to finish quoting it for the passage continues – “*You shall tread upon the lion and the cobra, the young lion and the serpent you shall trample underfoot.*” (Psa 91) – which are obvious references to Christ’s crushing underfoot of Satan.

Here, Jesus presented additional scripture. In other words, He showed that it was wrong to isolate a verse and present it out of context. He looked to the whole of scripture, the whole counsel of God.

And He could have put on the display; after all, He later walked on water. But Jesus later said, “*Most assuredly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of Himself, but what He sees the Father do;*” (John 5:19). If the Father didn’t say jump, He wouldn’t jump. But if the Father said, “Go walk on the waves to your disciples.” He’d do it. To the lust of the flesh, Jesus responded with trust in God’s provision. To the pride of life, He responded with submission to God’s direction. Time for round three...

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. “*All this I will give you,’ he said, ‘if you will bow down and worship me.’” (v8,9)*

The lust of the eye – men want what they see. And after all, this was what it was all about – right? Earthly rule, earthly power, earthly splendor? The devil offered Him the whole earthly enchilada. For what? A little bow. What a deal. Ruling the whole world is exactly what the Jewish Messiah is expected to do – right?? It was like the devil was saying, “You don’t have to do it God’s way. After all, that involves so much trouble and time. Do it my way. You can have it all now for just a little compromise.”

Doing it God’s way can indeed seem like a ‘long hard road’. Asaph, the psalmist, wrote,
*“I was envious of the boastful,
When I saw the prosperity of the wicked.
For there are no pangs in their death,
But their strength is firm.
They are not in trouble as other men,
Nor are they plagued like other men.
Therefore, pride serves as their necklace;
Violence covers them like a garment.
Their eyes bulge with abundance;*

*They have more than heart could wish.
They scoff and speak wickedly concerning oppression;
They speak loftily...
Behold, these are the ungodly who are always at ease;
They increase in riches...
When I thought how to understand this,
It was too painful for me—
Until I went into the sanctuary of God;
Then I understood their end.” (Psa 73:3-8,12,16,17)*

Yes, with God’s means, you reach God’s ends – eternal life. With Satan’s means you get Satan’s ends – eternal death. Regardless of the difficulty, God’s plan is the only plan that’s good for His children.

Jesus said to him, *“Away from me, Satan! For it is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.’ Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.”* (v10,11) For the third and final time Jesus responded, *“It is written...”*.

‘Marvelous’ you may think, ‘how Jesus knew the Word and quoted it accurately to the devil.’ But this wasn’t what decided the day. Jesus didn’t simply know the Word of God; it wasn’t that He had studied it diligently; it wasn’t that He could quote it or even that He kept it in context. That was basic and academic. What made the difference was something else far, far more powerful. He was submitted to it, all of it.

And this is more explosive than you may at first consider -- the incarnate Word of God submitted to the written Word of God. Jesus is the Word of God and yet He submitted Himself to the written scripture. The Bible says that He has been given the *“name which is above every name”* (Phi 2:9) yet it also says of the Lord, *“...You have magnified your Word above all Your Name.”* (Psa 138:2)

Here’s the rub – many of us ignore the written Word of God and wonder why we submit to temptation. Many hold only to select portions of the scripture as if God is bound by each and every sentence in isolation. You must take the whole of His Word in context or you’re headed for bitter disappointment. Many of us know the Word and can even quote it, witness with it, minister it to other brothers or sisters, yet we aren’t truly submitted to it. Like having a prescription of a vital medicine and only reading the label, submitting to the authority of the written Word is different than knowing it. Good grief, even the devil knows it.

There was a Baptist pastor named Peter Miller, from a small town in Pennsylvania who lived during the American Revolution. There was also another man who lived there named Michael Wittman, an evil-minded sort who did all that he could to oppose and humiliate the pastor. He made his life miserable. One day Michael Wittman was arrested for treason and sentenced to die. At first, Peter Miller thought, "Well, thank goodness the Lord took care of that guy. I didn't know how much more I could take!" But then he remembered the part of the Bible from Matthew chapter five which said, "*Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.*" And he was like, "Oops! I guess I blew that one, Lord." And he decided to travel seventy miles on foot to Philadelphia to plead for the life of the traitor. He approached General George Washington with the request.

Washington said, "No, Peter. I cannot grant you the life of your friend."

The old preacher said, "My friend? This guy's not my friend. "He's the bitterest enemy I have!"

"Washington said, "What? You've walked seventy miles to save the life of an enemy? That puts things in a different light. I'll grant your pardon." And he did.

Peter took Michael Wittman back home - no longer an enemy. But a friend. By his act of love, he demonstrated the difference between merely knowing the word of God and being submitted to it.

May each and every one of us who truly love the Lord overcome temptation and live victoriously by sincerely submitting to the scripture, the written Word of God.

Monster or Messiah?

If there was ever a potion that could turn a man into a monster it is surely unforgiveness. Beginning with the pain of a real or perceived wrong, it unleashes sinful hatred from our fallen natures and foments hideous imaginations in our minds and hearts. It is the front line of an enormous battle in our heart for it seeks to annihilate loving trust in God and inflict an amplified vengeful wound in someone else.

Unforgiveness puts distance so to speak between us and God and without His help, it can stick to our souls like hot tar. I've seen it destroy very godly people, marriages, missionaries, churches...you've seen that too, haven't you. It tests what we believe, what we really believe... Let me explain:

His name was Ahithophel. It means something like, "my kinsman is a fool" or "unsavory relative". He had power and great prestige in the court of David. How he came to such a position is not clear, but many scholars attribute the following passages to his relationship with the king:

"Even my own familiar friend in whom I trusted, who ate my bread, has lifted up his heel against me." Psa 41:9

"For it is not an enemy who reproaches me; then I could bear it. Nor is it one who hates me who has exalted himself against me; then I could hide from him. But it was you, a man my equal, my companion and my acquaintance. We took sweet counsel together and walked to the house of God in the throng." Psa 55:12-14

Yes, Ahithophel, once a friend, turned on David. At one point, his counsel had been as if he were the very oracle of God. In listing the most senior members of David's court, the scripture places him very prominently (see 1 Chron 27:33). Few if any enjoyed a greater or more trusting relationship with the king.

But all that went sour. Acidic. You see, Ahithophel was wronged by David. Someone he dearly loved was taken advantage of, and another he cared about was murdered by the king. I understand this to some degree. When someone did that to me, I also was incensed. Hateful, vengeful imaginations played over and over in my own mind. I related to Ahithophel's feelings and some of you may as well. He hated David as passionately, or more so, than he ever loved him. Why?

Bathsheba. Most of you know the story of David's adulterous affair with her, (see 2 Sam 11:2-5) but what you may not have known is that her grandfather was Ahithophel. Eliam, her father, was one of the king's mighty men (2 Sam 23:34, 2 Sam 15:12). When David forced himself upon her and sent her

husband, Uriah, to his death, he didn't just ruin his own life and his own family, but he effectively destroyed much of Ahithophel's as well. And his cover up only made things worse.

When he was finally confronted about it by the prophet Nathan, he repented. Perhaps this is when Ahithophel found out the truth or perhaps earlier. Whatever the case, he refused to believe or accept David's repentance and continued to seek revenge. It may be that David never acknowledged his sin to his counselor for Psa 51:4, in recording his prayer about this to God, he said, *"Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done [this] evil in thy sight:"* Whether that be the case or not, their relationship, once beautiful, became a bitter enmity.

Later, when David's son Absalom fomented a rebellion against him, Ahithophel joined with the would-be king (2 Sam 15:12). Upon entering the vacated city of Jerusalem, the counselor advised Absalom to have sexual relations with all the concubines of David who had been left behind to care for the house. Not only this, but he was advised to do it in full view of the people of Israel.

The scriptures record that Absalom and all the people, the men of Israel, came to Jerusalem; and Ahithophel was with him...

"Then Absalom said to Ahithophel, 'Give advice as to what we should do.'"

"And Ahithophel said to Absalom, 'Go in to your father's concubines, whom he has left to keep the house; and all Israel will hear that you are abhorred by your father. Then the hands of all who are with you will be strong.'"

"So, they pitched a tent for Absalom on the top of the house, and Absalom went in to his father's concubines in the sight of all Israel."

"Now the advice of Ahithophel, which he gave in those days, was as if one had inquired at the oracle of God. So was all the advice of Ahithophel both with David and with Absalom." (2 Sam 16:15, 20-23)

Can you see how his counsel was intended to hit back at David in the same way his family was hurt? Only note that it was magnified tenfold and done in public. This is the way of the vengeful heart, one that is filled with unforgiveness. 'You hit me once, I'll hit you back ten times!'

But it didn't stop there for such a heart is rarely satisfied.

"Moreover, Ahithophel said to Absalom, 'Now let me choose twelve thousand men, and I will arise and pursue David tonight. I will come upon him while he is weary and weak and make him afraid. And all the people who are with him will flee, and I will strike only the king. Then I will bring back all the people to you. When all return except the man whom you seek, all the people will be at peace.'" (2 Sam 17:1-4)

You see, this is why John said that the hateful heart is one full of murder. (See 1 John 3:15)

Now, ultimately, Ahithophel's counsel was not taken, and it so drastically affected him that he rode home, set his affairs in order and hanged himself.

Can the lesson be any more obvious? Can it be any more poignant? Unforgiveness not only seeks to take vengeance on others but in the end, it kills you as well. The only other person to hang himself in the Bible was Judas Iscariot. It is a traitorous emotion. It will suffocate your soul.

It made Ahithophel a monster.

But the reverse is also true. Let me explain.

Crying out for mercy, he shuffled frantically in the deep pit below his hateful brothers. It was no use trying to climb out for they were talking about killing him. He continued to cry but they ignored him. Finally, a rope was let down and he found himself sold as a slave to a caravan of traders headed south.

Years later, after faithfully serving the household of a senior military officer, he was falsely accused of gross misconduct and was put in prison – again in a pit so to speak. Nevertheless, he faithfully served the other inmates. When the opportunity came, and he flirted with vindication, he was left to serve two more years in the pit.

You all know the story of Joseph in Egypt. It may have been 14 – 16 years that he dealt with the harsh consequences of his brothers' betrayal. But then came his exaltation – from pit to Prime Minister in a day. Yet his past was so painful that he praised God for helping him forget it. He even named his first son as a testament to that fact. His life had been a long series of betrayals but through it all he kept his heart humble before God.

Nine years later, he had a chance to 'get even' for some of it. The Bible tells us:

“Joseph was governor over the land; and it was he who sold to all the people of the land. And Joseph's brothers came and bowed down before him with their faces to the earth. Joseph saw his brothers and recognized them, but he acted as a stranger to them and spoke roughly to them.”

“Then he said to them, ‘Where do you come from?’ And they said, ‘From the land of Canaan to buy food.’ So, Joseph recognized his brothers, but they did not recognize him.” (Gen 42:6-8)

Joseph feigned a harshness in order to test the hearts of his brothers but treated them generously. When his brother Judah, sometime later finally showed that they were sincerely concerned for the welfare of their father and offered himself as the Prime Minister's slave instead of his little brother Benjamin,

"... Joseph could not restrain himself before all those who stood by him, and he cried out, 'Make everyone go out from me!'"

"So, no one stood with him while Joseph made himself known to his brothers. And he wept aloud, and the Egyptians and the house of Pharaoh heard it."

"Then Joseph said to his brothers, 'I am Joseph; does my father still live?'"

"But his brothers could not answer him, for they were dismayed in his presence. And Joseph said to his brothers, 'Please come near to me.'"

"So, they came near. Then he said: 'I am Joseph your brother, whom you sold into Egypt. But now, do not therefore be grieved or angry with yourselves because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life.'" (Gen 45:1-5)

Shortly thereafter, the family was reunited and for seventeen more years they dwelt in the land of Goshen under Joseph's authority and graciousness. Then Jacob, their father, died.

"When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, 'Perhaps Joseph will hate us, and may actually repay us for all the evil which we did to him.'"

"So, they sent messengers to Joseph, saying, 'Before your father died he commanded, saying, 'Thus you shall say to Joseph: "I beg you, please forgive the trespass of your brothers and their sin; for they did evil to you.'" Now, please, forgive the trespass of the servants of the God of your father.'"

"And Joseph wept when they spoke to him."

"Then his brothers also went and fell down before his face, and they said, 'Behold, we are your servants.'"

"Joseph said to them, 'Do not be afraid, for am I in the place of God? But as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive.'"

"Now therefore, do not be afraid; I will provide for you and your little ones.'" And he comforted them and spoke kindly to them." (Gen 50:15-21)

For some 40 years, the older brothers had lived with the guilt of their betrayal. In considering the passage above, several questions arise:

- What was their expectation? They anticipated that with Jacob gone Joseph would reveal his hatred and repay them for the evil they had done to him.
- What was the quality of their repentance? They never expressed repentance or sorrow of heart but rather a fear of retribution first from God (in an earlier chapter) and then from Joseph.

- What was the nature of their confession? They claimed the request for forgiveness came from Jacob and were quick to position themselves as the servants of the God of Jacob. (Very transparent, huh?)
- What was Joseph's response? He wept.
- What was Joseph's perspective? God. Regardless of their purposes, God had His own and that is what Joseph kept in front of him.
- What was Joseph's counsel? "Do not be afraid." He comforted and spoke kindly to them.
- What was Joseph's promise? "I will take care of you." The opposite of the expected retribution. Regardless of the brothers' lack of sincere repentance, Joseph had forgiven them long ago because his eyes were on heaven, on the heavenly Father. He understood, probably after much prayer and weeping, that the betrayals were just the beginning of a glorious plan.

The forgiveness in his heart made Joseph a messiah, a savior to his family and a type of Jesus Christ, our true Messiah who likewise prayed as He hung on the cross, "*Father, forgive them...*"

The same choice is presented to each of us at some time or another. Monster or messiah – one who destroys or one who delivers.

"At last I understood: in the final analysis, forgiveness is an act of faith. By forgiving another, I am trusting that God is a better justice-maker than I am. By forgiving, I release my own right to get even and leave all issues of fairness for God to work out. I leave in God's hands the scales that must balance justice and mercy."- P. Yancy

"We must forgive those who have hurt us because God commands it, because our own forgiveness hinges on it, but also because it is the best thing for us. When we refuse to forgive, the bitterness grows like a cancer within us and it eats away at us, causing stress and illness and great lack of joy. The only therapy for this cancer is the surgery of forgiveness. When we refuse to forgive, we allow the sin that was committed against us to hurt us twice: once when we were first sinned against, and again by keeping us from receiving God's forgiveness. We need to stop the pain and forgive." – M. Wilkins

Never So High

Never, had he seen such a sight! Oh, Jon, the king's son, had fought many battles, and the people had often lauded his achievements. Indeed, he was next in line for the throne; but this, this was something that truly gripped his heart and brought a whole new perspective.

Before him, stood a lad with a ruddy complexion. His face was familiar of course for the young man had entertained his father with the harp before the war, before the present conflict. But now, at his side dangled the huge bloody head of the once dominating giant Goliath. Even as it swung, its grotesque savage face made him sick. "Who are you?!" his forgetful father Saul had queried, likewise amazed at what he'd witnessed.

This boy, David, had just single-handedly taken out the greatest enemy of the nation – a display of faith and courage unparalleled in history. Without a doubt, it was the Hand of God for the antagonizing monster had towered nearly ten feet tall – at least twice the size of the boy.

David answered, "the son of your servant Jesse."

Ka-BOOM! It was at this point that something happened in Jonathon's heart – as amazing as David's display of courage and faith had been, his heart attitude afterward was even more so. There was no chest-pounding, no pretense or feigned posturing, no assertion of the king's obligation. But rather, what Jon witnessed was an attitude of pure humility and it somehow prompted his own heart to respond.

And then, inwardly, it was something he just let happen – his soul became knit with David's. The Master Weaver entwined the very fabric of his heart with that of the humble giant-slayer before him. And because he loved him as his own soul, they made a covenant – a holy, unbreakable promise to one another.

At that point, responsively, Jon did something that although absolutely appropriate, may have left those watching aghast. He took his princely robe, his armor, sword, bow and belt and gave them to David. It was completely voluntary – he stripped himself so to speak.

And thus, is presented in scripture a picture-lesson for us all:

In like manner, there has stood before us the largest and ugliest – the most rotten of creatures – Satan. Like Goliath with Israel, he has taunted and bullied all of us with sin and death. And every one of us has been fearful of his gigantic threats – even those of us upon the 'throne' (who, when you think about it is each one of us, for we have all sat upon the throne of our own lives).

Then appeared the Shepherd Jesus Christ, who came as a servant. He spoke of faith and the greatness of His God. And with a single stone, one rock, one noble act – the cross – He forever destroyed the destroyer.

Like the king's son, Jonathon, we may have seen Him before but regarded Him as a mere distraction, perhaps a source of entertainment, someone there just for our selfish benefit. But when we recognize His meekness, His humility, His strength so completely under God's control, we likewise are compelled to strip our own 'regal' coverings, to lay at His feet the 'armor' we've hid behind -- our sword and bow (that which we've used in hand-to-hand fighting or at a distance to attack others). And there we lay our 'belt' – that which previously 'held it all together' for us.

That is when our heart is knit with the Son of David – Jesus. For although the greatness of David's deed was unparalleled, it was the humility, the character of his heart that was overwhelmingly attractive. So, it is with Christ, the Son of David, and consequently it 're-wires our circuits'.

Our surrender to Him is a heart-changing response to His own humble surrender unto God the Father. His deed was, is and always will be indescribably awesome, but His character is even more so. The deed illustrated it for all of us to see.

Oh, the awesomeness of true humility! Not merely the occasional outward self-abasement we can use to flatter ourselves with but the holy heart and mind clean of the filth and fantasy of unwarranted pride.

This is the 'stuff' of heaven.

There are no 'proud-sters' in heaven – no one looking for flatteries or temporal esteem. You might say heaven's air is love and heaven's fragrance is humility.

There, we will know endless, fulfilling relationships, perfect joy and explosive grandeur amidst this beautiful scent. There, we'll fully realize that it is our omnipotent King who is the source of this perfume.

As high as the heavens are above the earth, so high are God's ways above ours (see Isaiah 55). Yet, the 'high' way is, in deed and character, the 'low' way. That is, when the Creator looked upon our desperate, self-destructive world, the One who is all powerful, all knowing and all present, decided to come to us; not only so, but also to empty Himself of His divine powers. He bridged the infinite gap between us and God Almighty, becoming a single cell, an embryo, a fetus, a baby, a toddler, a child, a teen, a man.

And as amazing as this is and truly incomprehensible, we need to understand that it was NOT out of character. It was an act that expressed then, now and forever who He is – purest love and purest humility. (Ps 45:4).

Now, humility is scorned here in the ‘Shadowlands’ for it is usually associated with weakness. Consequently, in its sincerest form it is rarer than diamonds for every thought of mortal man opposes or disdains it.

You see, humility is not the attribute of simply being less prideful or less self-consumed; rather it is the absolute absence of these sin-motivated characteristics. And contrary to the world’s inclination, the Lord instructs us to seek it out (Zeph 2:3) and to put it on (Col 3:12). But why? Of what benefit is humility? And why is it so dismissed in this world?

Among the many blessed promises for the humble, the Bible tells us:

- that God guides and teaches the humble (Ps 25:9)
- for they are glad in heart when they sense His pleasure (Ps 69:30-32).
- Thus, God is pleased with them and beautifies them with salvation (Ps 149:4)
- and unmerited favor (Jam 4:6, Pro 3:34).
- The humble have wisdom (Pro 11:2)
- and honor (Pro 29:23)
- and increasing joy (Isa 29:19).
- In addition, God dwells with the humble in a high and holy place, heaven. (Isa 57:15)
- He revives them (Isa 57:15)
- and lifts them up (Jam 4:10).

As a matter of fact, the words for “humble” in both testaments means to be “low”. In other words, God’s way up is down. Before us, upon the pages of scripture, we have the beautiful sample of Jesus’ earthly life – from His humble beginning there in the feed trough in Bethlehem’s stable to the washing of His friends’ feet in the upper room – all that we observe is a grand display of humility.

And then the culmination – we learn of His beating, His utter degradation, His rejection -- Isaiah described it prophetically, *“He was oppressed, and He was afflicted, yet He opened not His mouth; He was led as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so He opened not His mouth.”* (Isa 53:7) This is humility.

In Hebrews 12:2, it says that He despised the shame of the cross, but this was not because of pride. We must understand that this word translated despise or despising means to “think little of” and

that is its connotation elsewhere in the New Testament. So, of course Christ 'thought little of' the shame compared to the eternal joy that awaited.

Oh, but you might think, 'Yes, but this humble behavior was because He was 'found as a man and emptied of His divine powers' (Phil 2:5). You might be linking His humility to His humanity.

And, of course, there was a 'positional' humility or 'low-ness' therein. However, it is missing the mark to view Christ's humble character solely as the result of His human condition, as something otherwise uncharacteristic of Him as our risen Lord of All.

Consider His appearances to the disciples after His resurrection. There were no bands playing (on earth), no pomp, no General MacArthur-like "I have returned." But rather, He was mistaken for a gardener, an out-of-touch traveler, a stranger on the beach. In fact, in John 21, when the disciples came ashore, He even had a breakfast cooking for them. Does this sound like the behavior of the King of Heaven and Earth? Not to our carnal minds, it doesn't!

We give lip service to the concept of a 'noble humility' and will even go so far as to appear outwardly humble now and then (especially in church) but all the while, we know that our hearts scream inside for accolades, attention and gratefulness from people and God. That's because we've been infected with Satan's poisonous attitude - he said, *"I will ascend above the heights of the clouds, I will be like the Most High."* (Isa 14:14)

Ponder this -- our sin-filled minds think 'up' is up, that greatness comes by mastery. We even miss the fact that although the 'church' in Rome held mastery over the western world for hundreds of years, it never brought in the Kingdom of God, but rather a good deal of death and cruel domination.

We don't recognize that sin has warped our perceptions 180 degrees. However, in God's kingdom we discover the eternal reality - 'up' is 'down'. The 'highway' of holiness is the 'low-way' of humility. Jesus, knowing our hearts, said, *"If anyone desires to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all."*

"Then He took a little child and set him in the midst of them."

"And when He had taken him in His arms, He said to them, 'Whoever receives one of these little children in My name receives Me; and whoever receives Me, receives not Me but Him who sent Me.'"
(Mark 9:35, 36)

That's a perfect picture for the best approximation we have of humility in this life is our children. Jesus was saying that entrance to and enjoyment of heaven is immersed in humility - not just an outward appearance but a character trait running through and through. In that humble moment of receiving Him by faith, you are most like Him in character and thus a genuine relationship begins.

Now, you may say, “Hold on, you’re going overboard. You’re making too much of this. Even God commands reverence and worship. We’re made in His image. Why shouldn’t we deserve a little respect? After all, humility will never get me anywhere in the here and now. People will just walk all over me.”

To respond let me say that when God commands us to worship, it is because He knows who He is and who He’s dealing with – like the one who has to slap a hysterical person to get some sane attention – our sin-natures are so out-of-touch we frankly need to be commanded at times. Second, He doesn’t do it for His own sake – He doesn’t need it. He does it for our sake. We do!

Next, you may be right about the outcome of humility in this world – at least some of the time. But God’s instruction in the attributes of a heavenly character are not really designed to feather your earthly temporal nest so to speak. Rather, He wants to prepare you and me for life in eternity. It is for our eternal benefit. Your acceptance of this lesson is based upon what you value most – the temporary treasures of this life or the enduring ones of heaven.

So where does this true humility come from? If it’s not just a matter of outward deeds but of character, where can we buy “Humility for Dummies”? Is there a Humility 101?

Jesus said, *“Take my yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly (humble) in heart”* (Matt 11:29). In referring to the practice of yoking a young ox to one who thoroughly understood the work at hand and thus teaching the youngster ‘the ropes’, Jesus was clearly saying that His gentle, humble character is imparted as we ‘plow with Him’ – walk with Him, work with Him. And at times, this will be humbling. Yet, a very wise pastor of mine, speaking of men, once said, “There is no humility without humiliation.”

Yes, His yoke is easy, and His burden is light (Mat 11:30). But with it will undoubtedly come some much needed low-ering. So, when it comes, and it will (cause you’re no prima donna, nor am I!) recognize it for what it is – God’s loving hand. He’s not crafting a life designed to bring you merely the respect of men but the rewards of heaven.

When our dear boy went home to be with the Lord, one kind man, a vice principal who had known him at school, sent us the following note: “I saw something that showed me yet another side of Gabe. One of the ladies in the attendance office got pretty mean with him when he brought a note to the office. She ended up ridiculing Gabe’s voice doubting he was being honest, etc.” (He had a raspy voice because of congenital vocal cord deformity.) “But Gabe was very calm and seemed to take no offense at all. He gently explained that he really did talk this way. I saw the patience of Christ’s love that day...”

I mention this only to point out that people notice our 'walk'. They recognize when someone has been yoked with Jesus for a while. (Incidentally, it takes oxen a long time to learn how to plow right, sometimes years. Likewise, it can take a LONG time for some of us to begin walking like our Yokefellow, Jesus.)

Thus, a 'low'ering, a humiliation, can work in us to bring about the more Christ-like character we long for inwardly and which those who are headed for heaven appreciate.

Therefore, let no humbling circumstance drag you down. Rather go with it – go willingly God's way and discover the peaceful joy of His humble heart. There, you'll find why His yoke is light. There, you'll be higher than the heavens. There, you'll find the awesome fellowship of humility with the Most High.

Outside the Camp

For Moses, it was an absolute crisis. Undoubtedly, his heart was overwhelmed with the seriousness, the direness, of the situation - God's presence had departed from their midst. For more than 80 years, God had prepared him to lead this massive host of Israelis, but nothing had prepared him for this.

Many of you will remember the story of Moses climbing the mountain to commune with the Almighty while below the people, under Aaron's timid and/or misguided leadership, built an idol of gold and partied wildly before it. Of course, when Moses saw it for himself, he was disgusted, ashamed and angry. He chastised the people – how could they do such a thing. God had delivered them from slavery, given them the wealth of the Egyptians and was in the process of leading them to a new prosperous land.

But then the real catastrophe came - the LORD said to Moses, *"Depart and go up from here, you and the people whom you have brought out of the land of Egypt, to the land of which I swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, saying, 'To your descendants I will give it.' And I will send My Angel before you, and I will drive out the Canaanite and the Amorite and the Hittite and the Perizzite and the Hivite and the Jebusite. Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey; for I will not go up in your midst, lest I consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people."*

This was the crisis. Moses and the people of Israel were in a place, a situation, much as we are today. "This was a challenge to Moses and the nation as a whole. God told them they could have the Promised Land, but He would not remain with them in a close, personal way. If they were satisfied with that arrangement, it would prove they only loved God's blessings and not God Himself. If they challenged God - pleading with Him for His presence, not only His blessings - it would show a genuine heart for God Himself. This was the first step towards revival in Israel." (D. Guzik)

"To be given every other blessing is of no value if God is not with you. What is the value of Canaan? What is the value of milk and honey? What is the value of having possessions, if God was not with them? They saw that the realization of the presence of God, having this fellowship and company, was infinitely more important than everything else." (Lloyd-Jones)

Sitting in his tent, Moses knew what he had to do. He called for his helpers, including Joshua, and instructed them to pack up his tent. In all likelihood, it was unnerving for the people to watch. With all Israel looking on, he hiked away from their midst to a place way outside the camp – still visible,

but quite far away. There, he set up his tent. "This was not something that Moses organized or planned or strategized. He sought God, radically and spontaneously." (D. Guzik)

Exodus 33 records this event - Moses took his tent and pitched it outside the camp, far from the camp, and called it the tabernacle of meeting. And it came to pass that everyone who sought the LORD went out to the tabernacle of meeting which was outside the camp.

"When the Holy Spirit of God begins to deal with any one of us, there will be this separation. It will not be paraded; it will not be the Pharisees' 'I am holier than thou' attitude. No, once a man begins to be burdened for the glory of God and the state of the Church, he immediately feels the call to consecration, he 'goes out' as it were." (Lloyd-Jones)

It was there, outside the camp, that God met with and spoke to Moses "face to face", that is, intimately, as a friend.

The point was, and is, the camp with all its blessings, blessings of Egypt which God had bestowed were insufficient. The promise that God would guide them to the promised land was insufficient. Guaranteed angelic defense and miraculous obtaining of prosperity were insufficient. Stardom, celebrity among the chosen people was insufficient.

"For Moses, it wasn't enough to know that he and Israel would make it to the Promised Land. In his estimation, the Promised Land was nothing special without the special presence of the LORD." (D. Guzik)

Many scriptures speak of doing certain things outside the camp. In the Law of God, we find verses such as:

And Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet with God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. (Exo 19:17) And...

But the flesh of the bull, with its skin and its offal, you shall burn with fire outside the camp. It is a sin offering. (Exo 29:14)

Along with about a dozen or so other instances where, if you think about it, the fundamental question is not necessarily about the actions associated with cleanliness or purification or atonement but rather – where is God's presence?

Perhaps, the most powerful example of this is from the writer of Hebrews who says, "*For the bodies of those animals, whose blood is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest for sin, are burned outside the camp. Therefore, Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people with His own blood, suffered outside the gate.*"

“Therefore, let us go forth to Him, outside the camp, bearing His reproach. For here we have no continuing city, but we seek the one to come.” (Heb 13:13,14)

True salvation requires each one of us to leave the camp of mere religion, to follow our Savior. Then, in graciously obtaining it -- His life, His Spirit indwells us. Hallelujah! And He has promised, *“Never will I leave you, never will I forsake you.” (Heb 13:5)*

So, you can be assured that once you are genuinely saved, His presence will abide with you – He will never leave. He has also promised to the true believers, *“For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.” (Mat 18:20)*

So, for the sincere individual or ardent small group of believers, the presence of God is more readily realized and we, like Moses in the tabernacle of meeting, can speak directly with our Lord. But the larger congregation, the church at large, has a dire problem and one that, like Moses, each person must face and decide what to do.

“The camp” to those Hebrew believers whom [the writer] is addressing, of course meant apostate Judaism that had crucified their Messiah. But the term “camp” includes all those “religious” developments, by whatever name called, which, though professing to be Christian, are Judeo-pagan. You must choose between earthly “religion” and heavenly reality. You must know a heavenly Christ or not know Christ at all.

For if there is anyone despised or reproached on earth, it is one openly holding a hope of Heaven, yet having no connection with human “religion”. Of course, all this makes him “different” from the world. Unless your only hope is not “religion,” not being a “church member,” not so-called Christian activity, but – the blood of Christ...your hope is a damning delusion, whatever your “priest, “pastor,” or “spiritual adviser” may tell you.– William Newell

Is God outside our camp?

Having obtained deliverance and great blessing, has the church today failed to appreciate His presence?

Once purely motivated movements have lost their bearing. Pulpits are used to sell rather than save. ‘Churches’ are handled like businesses; some are even franchised! Ministers are going through motions within the ‘confines of the camp’. Ministerial celebrity, being the idol of this age has alienated many and corrupted many. As a consequence, enormous numbers of believers are looking for the Lord, so to speak, in home churches and other small groups. They are looking for His presence outside the camp.

Of course, not all are pure of heart in this – there can be much haughtiness, self-righteousness and some plain ole’ self-centeredness in it. But many are truly, like Moses, wanting more than the blessings and promises. They want to know the Lord and His divine presence. They want to experience His glory.

"Have you ever read of Jonathan Edwards describing his experience of it in a forest while he was there kneeling in prayer for about an hour? Have you read of David Brainerd, the great apostle to the American Indians, experiencing the glory of God, and literally sweating, though it was cold, and though it was freezing round and about him? What was causing the sweating? Oh, it was the glory, the character and the transcendence of the glory. And to give you a man who is much nearer to ourselves, D. L. Moody, a very strong man physically, a very sturdy man. And yet when God gave him a glimpse of his glory, he had to ask him to desist and to hold back his hand, because he felt it was killing him. He is not the only one who has felt that." (Lloyd-Jones)

In a sense, these people want to abide in the ‘tabernacle’ like Joshua did, even when Moses had left. They simply are not going to ride the band wagon of popular Laodicean Christianity. They want the real deal, not the rote and dead. How about you?

Is the Lord in your camp? Is He really? How do you know? By the blessings and promises alone? With Moses, God guaranteed to get them to the promised land – He had not departed altogether. But for the man of God, that was still crisis time. So, Moses went outside the camp to meet with God and thus did each sincere worshipper.

For many, perhaps a great many today, Jesus is outside our churchianity. In fact, it is a characteristic of the Last Days church. In the book of Revelation, He says to this group, *“Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me.”* (Rev 3:20)

“The idea of Jesus at the door applies to the sinner and to the saint just the same. Jesus wants to come in to us, and dine with us, in the sense of having a deep, intimate relationship. Sadly, Jesus stands on the outside, knocking to get in. If the church at Philadelphia was ‘The Church of the Open Door,’ then the church at Laodicea is ‘The Church of the Shut Out Jesus.’” (D. Guzik)

Can I challenge each of us to do as Moses? Why? Because as the writer of Hebrews concluded above, *“therefore let us go forth to Him, outside the camp, bearing His reproach. For here we have no continuing city, but we seek the one to come.”* It is clear in the Bible that the distinction of this continuing city – New Jerusalem – the heavenly city, is the abiding presence of God.

Do you want that in your church? Like Jesus, like Moses, like Paul, like St. Francis, like Luther, Wesley, Smith and every deeply dedicated disciple, you may have to go outside the camp.

I'm packing up.

Package Deal

900 tired eyes watched as bucket after bucket of water drenched the sacrifice upon Mt. Carmel. Earlier, the prophets of Baal had vainly prayed and danced and even drawn blood to get the attention of a lifeless god. Now, Elijah calmly commanded his temp-assistants to make the sacrifice to Jehovah as wet as possible. He was supremely confident as he spoke, *“LORD God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that You are God in Israel and I am Your servant, and that I have done all these things at Your word. Hear me, O LORD, hear me, that this people may know that You are the LORD God, and that You have turned their hearts back to You again.”*

You know the story. Fire came down from heaven and consumed not only the burnt sacrifice but the wood and the stones and the dust, and it licked up the water that was in the surrounding trench. Now when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces; and they said, *“The LORD, He is God! The LORD, He is God!”*

And Elijah said to them, *“Seize the prophets of Baal! Do not let one of them escape!”*

So, they seized them; and Elijah brought them down to the Brook Kishon and executed them there. After this, he boldly instructed the wicked king Ahab to eat, drink and then to ‘hit the road’ because it was going to rain (something it had not done in three years due to Elijah’s prayer). Subsequently, he prayed for rain to return and sure enough, dark clouds and heavy showers covered the land. Then, on foot, he outran the king’s chariot arriving at the royal city ahead of Ahab. Awesome!

Hundreds of mocking eyes watched as mountains of lumber and lakes of pitch were used to erect a strange edifice, something so large in size and structure as to awe even the ridiculers. Noah and his sons labored with fantastic patience and tenacity. Simply setting the massive skeletal timbers in place required incredible planning, preparation and pulley-genius. Surely, years and years of constant prayer, dialog with the Designer, was necessary. Dozens of times, an exhausted Noah probably felt challenged to give up. But he didn’t. He was taunted, harassed, oppressed, and discouraged by nearly everyone. In an environment where the thoughts and imaginations of all the people – every man, woman and child, had become violently evil continually, you can imagine his concern with vandalism to say the least.

He was alone, but he was faithful.

And he finished! He did all that the Lord God instructed him to do. No detail was tossed aside. No effort was considered a waste of time. Finally, the time arrived. With just a week’s warning, Noah prepared to board. Perhaps it was a crisis of faith. God had to beckon him from within the ark to enter.

Noah knew that in going into the ship, he was leaving behind all he knew, the entire world was going to be destroyed. He obeyed but surely with overwhelming sobriety. Shortly afterward, pair after pair of all sorts of animals filed tamely into the monstrous structure.

Curious neighbors looked on. Rumor had it he thought it was going to rain (something it hadn't ever done before). And there in the boat was this preacher of righteousness along with his family. "Hey! How are you going to close the door??" they laughed. But the mirth changed to death when God Himself closed the doorway. Awesome!

Thousands of anxious fearful eyes gazed upon a young lad as he exited the king's tent. Some shook their heads, some turned away, dropping their weapons in sheer disillusionment. Some shouted 'attaboys' but they could barely be heard above the din of jeers and laughter coming from across the valley. Poised on opposing sides of the gulf between them which was strewn with discarded armaments and the previous days' casualties were the hosts of the Philistines and the army of Saul.

'Surely this is a ruse,' some thought. Perhaps it was Saul's way of discrediting the taunting challenges of the enormous man now standing between the armies.

They all watched in fascination as a young lad trotted down to the stream and seemed to be praying. "No, he's not bowing, he's picking up stones?!" said one Israeli soldier to another. Stones?? The young boy was David and before him a giant nearly twice his height.

"Eliab! Isn't that your little brother??"

"What!?" Eliab's face was part angry, part shocked, part afraid as he noticed it was true. He was about to run down and stop his youngest brother when suddenly the giant roared again, "Am I a dog? Who is this pitiful little runt with a stick in his hand?" David shouted something back, but it was hard to hear.

"Don't worry Eliab," said one of the soldiers nearby holding him back. "He'll dance around, dodge a spear and then come back up here as fast as a mountain goat."

'I hope so!' thought the older brother knowing his father was going to hold him responsible. But just then David ran headlong towards the giant. Straight at him!

"What's that in his hand? A SLING??" someone nearby shouted. A veteran fighter next to Eliab turned away.

"I'm sorry, friend. It'll be over quick."

Suddenly, there was a thunderous CRACK that rang out across the valley and where the giant had stood arose a cloud of dust. In the midst of it, a large sword flashed in the sunlight.

Both hoards could not believe their eyes as the young boy held up the dismembered head of Goliath the champion of Gath. Like a mighty wave, courage filled the hearts of Saul and his men while horrible fear engulfed their enemies. The battle was engaged. Victory was complete. Awesome!

The scripture is filled with such stories of supreme faith and obedience. In considering them meditatively, we can almost hear the crowds cry out or mock or cheer. Nevertheless, these heroes inspire us to greater obedience to the Lord. As Rich Mullins sang, "...stories like that make a boy grow bold. Stories like that make a man walk straight".

But we have a particularly nasty aspect to our nature that God doesn't. We are awed by the heroic deeds of the faithful, but we are also inclined to critique anything and anyone that falls short of our personal standards. When someone fails our measurement, we are often moved to 'write them off', to look elsewhere for our picture of perfection. Thus, marriages crumble; thus, pastors fumble; thus, friends and followers grumble. Yes, even heroes fail.

Elijah sulked. Exhausted from his arduous journey to the back side of the desert, there he moped and felt the weight of the world on his shoulders. The hole he was in was more than this cave; it was darker than the mountain's hole. It was lonelier than the desert wastes. It was a fear filled depression. God spoke to him, *"What are you doing here, Elijah?"*

So, he said, *"I have been very zealous for the LORD God of hosts; for the children of Israel have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars, and killed Your prophets with the sword. I alone am left; and they seek to take my life."*

Noah puked (possibly). There in the lonely tent, he fell down utterly drunken from the wine he had made. Was it because of the reality of worldwide devastation that set in? Was it fear of the burden of starting a new world all over from scratch? Was it unexpected fermentation? Whatever the cause, he was drunk as a skunk and as a result presented a real stumbling block to his family. The preacher of righteousness was wasted, inebriated and probably 'in the buff'.

David ogled. He had turned from leading the armies of Israel to voyeurism. His lust for the naked woman on the nearby housetop erupted. Orders were given and in a short space of time, David had violated terribly the marriage of one of his most trustworthy mighty men. Not content with betrayal, he plotted deception and when that failed, he plotted murder. In doing so, he set in motion the consequences that brought lifelong tragedy, personal grief, family chaos and national disaster.

Heroes and 'hienies'. Just about the time we're thinking someone is really awesome, they turn out to be awful. And we're bitterly disappointed. We break up, walk away, go to yet another church.

We become 'monastic', bombastic, sarcastic and sad. But someday you'd think it would sink in – it's a 'package deal'.

Now, God is never surprised. He knew it before they blew it. He knows the 'end from the beginning'. We, however, are amazed and disillusioned by how those we admire can rise so high and yet fall so low.

Why do you suppose God promised, "*Never will I leave you, never will I forsake you.*"? Precisely because it is our inclination to believe that He is caught off guard and becomes as bitterly disappointed as we are in others' failures or our own. But He is not. That is not to say, however, that He condones our sin or even tolerates it. He dealt with it eternally on Calvary and deals with it even now as we submit to Him (yes both dealings are part of the 'deal'), but He made the 'package' in its original perfection and understands exactly what we have become in its corruption. When Jesus died on the cross, He bought the whole package if you would. It's not that part of our nature belongs to us or to the devil and part to God. He owns it all, lock, stock and barrel.

So, when He put you together with that spouse, it wasn't surprising to Him that you've had 'challenges'. And when He led you to that church, He knew you'd find people and situations that rubbed you the wrong way. And when He says, "I love you," it's not because you've fooled Him into thinking you're better than you are.

I submit that a significant part of the fractured, disintegrated condition of the contemporary church is related to this issue. The Bible makes it clear that our faults need to be confessed -- not so we can react to them in knee-jerk fashion but so that we will humbly "*pray for one another*".

One thing I so greatly appreciate about my own pastor is his candor and awareness of his need for God's grace.

Understanding that we are each a 'package deal' so to speak won't make it hurt less when the ugliness of our sin nature rears its head. But, if we do, perhaps we will consciously seek to appropriate more of the heart of God when such is the case. How does the Lord deal with us?

He chastises His children to be sure but always in love. He never gives up on you – in fact, the completion of His good work in you will skyrocket your appreciation into the heavenlies. He is so patient and longsuffering as to boggle the mind. He is always lifting up those who are bent or loaded down. He forgives and forgives and forgives and forgives and forgives and... He always welcomes back those who have strayed. In fact, He also searches them out. He guards and protects the weak. He binds up the broken hearted. He is never too busy for us. He is never insincere. On and on it goes.

Has someone let you down? Have you been the letter-downer? Step back for a moment before you react. Go to prayer. Consider the package. Seek the heart of God.

In his book "What's so Amazing About Grace," Philip Yancey tells a story about a man and wife who one night had an argument about how supper was cooked, it was so heated that night they slept in separate rooms. Neither has approached the other to say I'm sorry or to offer forgiveness, and they have remained in separate rooms years after the argument, each night they go to bed hoping that the other will approach them with an apology or forgiveness, but neither goes to the other.

"... in the final analysis, forgiveness is an act of faith. By forgiving another, I am trusting that God is a better justice-maker than I am. By forgiving, I release my own right to get even and leave all issues of fairness for God to work out. I leave in God's hands the scales that must balance justice and mercy."—
Yancy

Elijah, Noah, David, you and me – we're all a package deal in God's eyes and, Praise His Name, He knows just how to deal with it.

Uncrossable

I was a goner. All it took was one look and WHAM-O; yep, when I first met my wife, I was instantly attracted to her (we won't get into what she first thought about me.) And it was a unique attraction. She wasn't (and isn't) just pretty – she seemed to me to be glowing, radiant in beauty. Her voice was like a song and her eyes like deep mysterious pools. She danced as she walked. Forty-five minutes later, I asked her to marry me. That was 45 years ago.

And what does that have to do with holiness? A LOT. Hang with me now – you'll see what I mean. Holiness is from the Hebrew word pronounced 'qadash' and it means to be separate, set apart and sacred. Importantly, it is derived from the word meaning to be or to make clean. Thus, it is far more than simply a separateness; it points to a quality or essence of being that is absolutely without imperfection, without the slightest hint of impurity. But this definition is a mere shadow of the reality and a fuzzy one at best.

Let's search the scriptures to better understand it.

"Who shall not fear You, O Lord, and glorify Your name? For You alone are holy." (Rev 15:4)

OK, here's a key point - God alone is holy in and of Himself. Seventy people, places or items are declared in the Bible to be holy. But, anyone or anything in scripture that is declared truthfully to be so derives that attribute solely because of a relationship with God Almighty.

Scripture clearly portrays that although there is a 'binary' status with holiness (either someone or something is or isn't – see Lev 10:10 as an example), there are also 'degrees' of holiness. This is pictured quite clearly in the design of the tabernacle and later, the temple. Let me explain:

While in the wilderness, the general congregation of Israel camped outside the tabernacle. Within the outer court area of the tabernacle, came those seeking to worship. Within this court, was the Holy Place in which the priests alone ministered. Then, within the Holy Place was the Holy of Holies into which the High Priest alone could enter and that only once per year.

So, as you can see, there is portrayed in its design a greater and greater association with holiness moving from the outer camp inward to the Ark of the Covenant in the Most Holy Place (i.e. the presence of God). At this point though, the holiness 'curve' takes an asymptotic turn and shoots right off the graph so to speak. Let me explain further:

Occasionally, we find double declarations in the original languages for emphasis such as "peace, peace" (Isa 26:3) or "grace, grace" (Zech 4:7) or "Truly, truly" (John 1:51, 3:5, 5:24) but there is only one

triple-declaration in all of scripture – “Holy, holy, holy” (see Isa 6:3 and Rev 4:8). God’s holiness isn’t just perfect; it’s in a class by itself.

And so, conceptually or pictorially, within the congregation of believers (the camp) is found the holy place of worship (the court) within which is found the even more holy place of ministry to God (the Holy Place) within which is found the intimate place of one-on-one fellowship (the Holy of Holies) with the only One who is Holy, Holy, Holy.

“God’s holiness is not simply the best we know infinitely bettered. We know nothing like the divine holiness. It stands apart, unique, unapproachable, incomprehensible and unattainable. The natural man is blind to it. He may fear God’s power and admire His wisdom, but His holiness he cannot even imagine.” (A.W. Tozer)

This fundamental point must be accepted and underscored – God alone is holy. Nothing, no one, no place is holy apart from its connection to God’s presence, His Spirit. If you don’t hold to that, your understanding of holiness will be superstitious and misled.

Now, here’s a stunning and breath-taking truth: God, contrary to what Satan suggested in the Garden of Eden, WANTS you to be a partaker of His holiness (1 Pet 1:15,16). This does NOT imply hair buns or black hats. I’m not knocking those expressions – you simply cannot equate them with the divine holiness. OK, when you catch your breath, consider how significant this is – God wants you to share in the characteristic which mesmerizes the highest of His created beings:

“The four living creatures, each having six wings, were full of eyes around and within. And they do not rest day or night, saying: ‘Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, Who was and is and is to come!’” (Rev 4:8)

To illustrate this sharing, God calls His people a holy people and a holy nation. (See Deut 7:6, Ex 19:6) and this serves at least three great purposes:

1. To testify to the world
2. To bless and protect us individually and...
3. Most importantly, to bless God

Let’s look at each of these. First, set apart and clean from the world, we are meant to be a visual display of what our Lord and His heavenly home are like in character. Thus, when the church is indistinguishable from the world, it is failing. When we are consumed with self-gratification, we only betray the gospel no matter what T-shirt slogans we wear, which church we attend or ministries we pursue.

Now, being distinguishable from the world doesn't necessarily mean being 'weird' (though the only man in the Bible apart from Christ who is specifically named as holy was clothed in camel's hair and ate bugs – John the Baptist). Holiness may seem strange to the world of the spiritually blind, but it's not because of our trying to appear outrageous.

I was recently told by a pastor in France that a wide spread perception of the evangelical church there is as a bunch of 'crazies looking for a comet to be beamed up to' – that's clearly a misrepresentation, and it's certainly not the distinguish-ability of holiness. But the world, when it sees true holiness, is utterly convicted and reacts by either accepting or rejecting it.

Second, in partaking of God's holiness, we remain 'salty'. That is, the continual work of His Spirit in separating us and cleansing our hearts creates an inward condition that is suited to spiritual growth like a weed-free garden; in addition, it frustrates and 'de-fuses' the attempts of the enemies of our souls (the devil, the fallen world and our own sin nature) to seduce, intimidate or otherwise extinguish our distinguish-ability.

Third, it just amazes me that God would actually enjoy my fellowship (hey, you don't need to agree with me so quickly!) But He does! Yours too! He wants us to see Him and know Him as He is, but it's not a casual deal.

The Bible tells us to *"Pursue peace with all people and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord."* (Heb 12:14) That word "pursue" is actually a very aggressive word meaning to chase down in an almost violent manner, to run swiftly in order to catch a person or thing.

You see, if it was solely a matter of being saved and thus being holy, we would have no command to chase it. However, in partaking of His holiness to greater and greater degrees, the Lord becomes more 'visible' to us and in us and thus more impressive. As with the tabernacle illustration, the closer we progress from the camp toward the One who is Holy, Holy, Holy – the more intimate our fellowship with Him will be. When the temple veil before the holy of holies was torn apart from top to bottom at the end of Christ's crucifixion, God was saying that the way into His presence is now open – the entire way – all because of Jesus. He WANTS you in His presence!

So, practically, how does this happen? What is this pursuit, this swift running after holiness? Is it the result of how intense you appear spiritually or some secret 'deeper truths' or the result of going to the right conferences? NO.

By accepting the gracious gift of salvation through Jesus Christ, you become one of God's children – adopted into His family and therefore, by association with the only One who is holy, you are a partaker of His holiness. However, there is this issue of pursuit. It's not an issue of salvation, no

addition whatsoever to the finished work of the cross. It is, rather, a matter of response – “*Let us know, let us pursue the knowledge of the LORD.*” (Hos 6:3)

A careful word-study reveals that of the 669 mentions of the word ‘holy’ or ‘holiness’ by the 40 men used by the Holy Spirit to pen the scriptures, nearly two thirds of the mentions come from just five of the 40. Five of these guys seem to be really ‘into’ the Lord’s holiness – Moses, Isaiah, Ezekiel, John and Paul. Why?

Each of these men witnessed the awesome glory of the Lord (see Ex 34, Isa 6, Ez 1, Rev 1, Acts 9). They had personal encounters with our Holy God and it clearly impacted their appreciation of the holy. Based upon their testimonies, it’s obvious that once you’ve witnessed it, true holiness is simply not something you can be ‘casual’ about. As you draw nearer to the Lord, pursuit of personal holiness becomes a priority along with your appreciation of the divine.

Yet personal holiness does not and will not come from works – we must not confuse holy conduct with holiness itself. The latter results in the former and not the other way around. Peter wrote, “*but as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, because it is written, “Be holy, for I am holy.”* (1 Pet 1:15,16) Unfortunately, we can miss that this word “be” as in “be holy” is actually “become”. It is a puncticular action without regard for beginning or ending – we are to become holy in our conduct. How’s that work? – Four ways:

First, “When we put our focus on this world, it is hard not to be conformed to the world. We can still fall prey to the lust that enslaved us while we were ignorant of the devil’s deception. We need to look ahead toward the grace that is being stored up for us. If our hope is in this life, we will be disappointed. I do believe that God wants to bless us, but that is not my hope. I don’t know when or how God will bless me, so if my hope in is the blessing, I will be disappointed when God doesn’t fulfill my expectations.”

“My hope is in the fact that anything I lack in this life is grace stored up for me in the life to come. It is better to lack here because God will right every wrong and fulfill every shortfall if my faith endures until the end. If my hope is in the world – even if I am using the promises of God as my foundation, I will not be satisfied. God’s promises are not for us to bind God, but for God to teach us to trust Him.”

“When my hope is in heaven and in the coming revelation of Jesus Christ, I will be drawn into the holiness of God. My focus is on Him and reaching the finish line. Those who hope in the world will hope in His delay and neglect their call to holiness.” (Eddie Snipes)

Second, in Exodus 29:36, we have a wonderful illustration of holiness as we find the Lord giving instruction regarding the altar of sacrifice. In this passage, there are two actions specified. The first is a cleansing which comes from the blood. That is, the altar was made clean or 'righteous' by the blood of atonement. Next, the Lord says to anoint it in order to make it holy.

Recall that anointing is done with oil and is always a picture of the anointing of the Holy Spirit. Here we see then an important lesson – righteous standing is the result of the blood while holiness is due to the anointing of the 'oil' or Spirit of God.

Upon receiving salvation, accepting the atonement of Christ's indescribably precious blood shed on Calvary, we are covered by His righteousness, and because we receive at the same time the indwelling of His Spirit, we are made holy – that's why the Bible calls those who are saved saints or holy – same words in the original languages for both. Paul put it this way, *"...God from the beginning chose you for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth."* (2 Thes 2:13)

Upon being saved, we are sanctified or made holy by the Spirit taking up residence in our hearts and as a consequence, our conduct or manner of life is to become holy. The out-working of the Spirit's influence in our lives should be more and more evident.

Third, Romans 12:1,2 says,

"I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind..."

Paul picks up on the illustration of the altar of sacrifice and tells us, *"...present your bodies a living sacrifice..."* one that is holy and clearly different from the deathly avarice of the world.

Yes, this living sacrifice is holy, and it has nada, nothing, to do with somberness, monasticism or self-flagellation. As with salvation, personal holiness is a responsive choice on our part. God initiates, and we get to participate, but fundamentally, it is always Him at work in us by His Spirit.

The question becomes – how deep are you going to go? Just how much control are you really giving Him? – not just with the 'biggies' like 'should I take that new job?' or 'help me get through this trial.' But will you surrender each thought, word and deed?

Fourth, go ahead and read Ezekiel 47:1-12. Most scholars consider this passage as pertaining to the millennial period yet among other things, it speaks of the sanctifying work of God's Spirit. This mighty, life-giving river is a miracle in and of itself. It starts as a small rivulet flowing from south of the altar of sacrifice and without any tributaries becomes a deep uncrossable river. The altar points to the shed blood of Christ and thus His gift of salvation – righteous standing before God. But the stream, the

flowing water (literally living waters) speaks of the Holy Spirit. It's a small rivulet to start with and typifies the deposit of God's Spirit made in our hearts upon salvation.

But, Ezekiel is led down this rivulet's path a thousand cubits and is escorted across it. It's larger now, and the water comes up to his ankles. In like manner, as we follow the Son of Man, Jesus Christ, we are led to 'walk the talk' – ankle deep so to speak. The Holy Spirit begins to change us, and our walk is refreshed in His living waters.

Next, the prophet is led another 1000 cubits further downstream and again crosses it. Here, it is knee deep which speaks of humble worship and prayer. As we grow in the Lord, sincere worship and communication with Him become increasingly refreshing, cleansing and Spirit-led activities.

After this, Ezekiel is brought another 1000 cubits and again acrosses the river which is now up to his waist. The mid-section of the body was always considered by the ancients as the seat of the soul, the inner man. As such, this pictures the disciple's life as progressing with the Lord to the point that he/she is surrendering the thoughts and intents of the heart to the Holy Spirit. As David prayed *"Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, Oh Lord..."* (Psa 19:14)

Finally, he is brought another 1000 cubits and being led into the river, he finds it uncrossable – over his head. Here, he is purely 'in the flow' -- submerged. His guide brings him back to shore where he now finds the banks filled with fruit-bearing trees. The river heals and brings life wherever it flows.

At some point, full surrender, absolute emersion in the living waters is going to happen in the life of every true disciple of Christ – maybe here in this life, but absolutely in heaven. The living water gets deeper and deeper to the point where its current is uncrossable and that is the point at which we see its life-giving force. Partaking of God's holiness gets to be more and more of a 'current' in the life of the sincere follower of the Son of Man. Every action, every word, every thought fully submitted to its 'flow' is life-giving and healing. You don't cross it anymore; you can only go with it.

"What are the qualifications of those who learn to experience Christ in the Holy of Holies? Those who are unafraid to let Him display His awesome resurrection power before their very eyes. Those who can shake off the grave clothes of the former life and enjoy the freedom of the resurrection. Those who are not satisfied with the seen things of this world. Those who are willing to have all earthly perspectives stripped away and to allow God to renew their minds to a fresh capacity for understanding. And those who are willing to fellowship in His suffering. Yes, as hard as it may be to accept, if you stop short of a willingness to fellowship in His sufferings, you stop short of the indescribable experience of His Holy of Holies." (Beth Moore)

Yes, it's a CHASE –

“Come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord. Do not touch what is unclean, and I will receive you. I will be a Father to you and you shall be My sons and daughters,” says the Lord Almighty. Therefore, having these promises, beloved let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.” (2 Cor 6:17 – 7:1)

Perfecting holiness literally means to finish it, to complete it. But notice the “let us...”. In other words, it’s voluntary. It’s a matter of how ‘deep and far’ you’ll go in the ‘river.’

In conclusion, what does this holiness look like any way? The Bible uses just one word to describe the indescribable – we roughly translate it “beautiful” (Psa 29:2, 96:9)

It can also mean pleasant, lovely or delightful. What you may never have considered is that our Holy, Holy, Holy God is thus indescribably beautiful, pleasant, lovely, delightful. Absolutely nothing compares, nothing even approaches. His holiness is a beauty that fills eternity with awe, that makes the highest sinless angels blush, that makes life...life.

As we draw near to Him, this holiness is measured unto us and the result is just beautiful.

So, you see, when I first met my dear wife, the work of God’s Spirit is what I saw – and I knew it immediately. Likewise, with holiness, when you see it in someone’s life, you know it and there’s nothing more beautiful.