



Artist Unknown but appreciated

Freedom in Following

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Introduction

Fundamentally, a disciple follows the Master and in doing so 'abides' in Him, that is, partakes of His Spirit, His Life. It is a lifelong pursuit. It includes hilltops and valleys, stumblings, repentances and restorations. However, most importantly, the disciple, even if there has been a period of absence, when all is said and done, does not stop following.

Of course, in following, there may be elation and/or hardship; there may be tremendous grief and/or supreme hope and joy; there may be uncertainty and waywardness and/or absolute confidence and resolute determination; there may be fear and/or faith – in other words, the struggle between human frailty and spiritual strength will also never stop – not until your following becomes a transformation, an uniting, and you are truly, finally, completely born again into eternity.

Thus, despite the struggle, you will find a glorious freedom in following. And so, after 55 years of learning things the hard way so to speak, I'm humbly offering these lessons, intended for disciples of Christ, sincere believers – the dogged followers. By that, I don't mean a special class of 'super-Christians;' they are for any and all who are born again in truth and are offered to support your understanding of the pursuit, the holy 'chase', to encourage you along the way. See Luke 14:27, 33 Mat 4:19, 10:38, 16:24, 1Pet 2:21

After the Deception

A pungent odor of pipe tobacco filled the dark room. As I sank into the overstuffed chair in front of the large wooden desk, the place seemed dark...yeah, dark is the word. But it wasn't just that the lights were dimmed.

The campus reverend behind the desk looked at me, a 19-year-old just-wonderfully-saved kid and asked again what exactly I wanted. "I just gave my heart to the Lord last night and I'd like to follow Him. What do I do?" I responded.

His answer gave me the shivers, "Well, if you really want to know Him, you'll first have to know the devil."

I immediately excused myself and promptly made my exit. Clearly, this man's advice was at best misdirected. However, knowing about the enemy's devices is indeed an important part of our warfare.

For that reason, sin is the topic of this short article, specifically the 'pathology' of sin. It is my intent to briefly put a heavenly spotlight on it in order to remind us of sin's origin, its method of infection, its effects and consequences, and its conclusion. In doing so, it's my hope that we will glean additional Biblical understanding of it (versus any other kind), and that armed with this understanding, we will love, worship, pray and minister all the more effectively until the Lord's return.

Now, sin loves dark places. It hides in dark places and proliferates in the dark. Conversely, it simply cannot abide in the Light. Interestingly enough, it seems to have found its origin with or in Lucifer, which means "light bearer" for it transformed him such that his name became Satan, the devil, the destroyer, etc. (See Eze 28:12-15) Though he can yet appear as an angel of light, that's only a deception.

From here, it appears that he may have 'infected' some of the angelic host – perhaps a third of them (See Rev 12:4). And certainly, we know that he infected mankind. (See Genesis 3) Please note that I use the term 'infected' specifically, for sin is very much like a disease. It's spiritual in nature, but it's sickening consequences are very observable even in the material world.

Now, mankind is universally infected from conception. (See Rom 3:23 and 5:12) Nevertheless, sin displays degrees of magnitude within the individual and within a society. It is clearly constrained in this world by the Spirit of God, (2Thes2:7) but this is the topic of another discussion. Suffice it to say that the scriptures speak of trespasses, sins, great sin, besetting

sins, iniquity and blasphemy of the Holy Spirit – the latter being the only one that is not forgiven in Christ, for it is the rejection of Christ.

But herein is a very important point – sin always seems to start off small. This is a fundamental part of its deceptive maturation process.

Consider the Garden of Eden. Satan did not tempt Eve to murder, divorce or even hurt Adam. The lure was to do something seemingly 'small' in the way of disobedience to God; something that we can't be sure she even understood first-hand from the Lord since she wasn't around when the warning was given to Adam.

But the bombshell was that what looked like a small deal was actually a multi-megaton warhead – the first Weapon of Mass Destruction. The WMD was to doubt God. To doubt His Word, His motive, His goodness, His love and thus to believe Satan instead. You see, doubt is not the absence of belief but rather the believing of something else in its place. Mankind didn't just disobey, he switched masters.

And it is still true today. Sin crouches at the doorway of our hearts, (see Gen 4:7); it inhabits our flesh, and in stealth, in deception, it continually tries to lure us into its deadly jaws.

It appeals to three things – the lust of our eyes, the desire of our flesh and/or our stinking pride. It is so incredibly effective because as it is destroying, it blinds us to its true nature. Eve did not realize her own deception until after giving the fruit that “*was good for food*”, “*pleasant to the eyes*”, and “*desirable to make one wise*” to Adam. I used to tell the youth in our church that sin wants you to see it as an ice cream sundae and then taunts you for your 'diet'. All the while, it is really a steaming, stinking 'meadow muffin'.

Now, if it cannot lure us directly into its 'trap', it is satisfied initially in drawing us to the 'edge', to the brink of the cliff so to speak. Insidiously, it knows that as long as we hang out 'near the tree' so to speak, near the place of sin (in our minds or otherwise), that we will indeed be swept over the brink by the next 'wind' that blows.

Pathologically, the effect of sin is basically to harden, to desensitize and to disintegrate us. The Bible likens sin to two types or word-pictures – leprosy and leaven.

Leprosy is a disease that infects the nervous system and breaks it down. A leper loses feeling in the extremities.

Leaven is yeast, a material that basically rots or corrodes its host. And such is sin; it hardens (Heb 3:13, Mat 19:8, Job 41:24, Eze 3:7, 2Chron 36:13) and it creates a callousness over our hearts. Meanwhile, it rots and grows by festering. One sin leads to another to another to another... and you know along with me that it's never satisfied. Like yeast, it breaks down the

integrity of its host. It breaks down the mental, moral, physical processes and strives to bring its subject to disintegration and death (Pro 14:30, Isa 5:24). It's a horrific sight.

Now, I would love to be able to tell you that after you give your heart to Christ, this is no longer a problem, but we can all testify that just ain't so. In fact, in some ways, it's even more of an issue.

Upon accepting Christ as Savior and Lord, you were inhabited by His Holy Spirit and your sins – all your sins, big, little, past, present and even future were forgiven by God. It is also true that this forgiveness is complete – that is, God doesn't just put your sins on a shelf so to speak where He can refer to them the next time you blow it, but He utterly obliterates them from His memory and separates them from you by an infinite distance (as far as east is from west).

Nevertheless, that doesn't mean you will not be tempted by sin or experience the consequences of sin in this life. Paul gave perhaps the most outstanding treatise on this in the book of Romans chapters 5 – 8. When you're saved, you begin to change but sin does not. It still wants to destroy you. Fortunately, as a saved person, you have additional help – although the devil will try to convince you otherwise, you've actually been set free from the domination of sin in your life. When you are born anew, you have the ability to choose not to sin. Salvation results in the right kind of 'pro-choice' movement if you would.

However, you still occasionally sin don't you. (Yes, you do, don't deny it.) And what do you do about it?

This is where the saved person can even face more travail for unlike the lost and unrepentant, he/she cares about sin and increasingly recognizes sin for what it is. As Paul wrote, *"Oh, wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?"* (Rom 7:24)

But when you fail, if you'll listen to the Spirit of God and repent, the result can actually be healthy for it leads to greater and greater humility in your character as well as appreciation of holiness. The spiritually healthy Christian is much more concerned about personally pleasing God than in pointing out others' shortfalls. This isn't self-centeredness, it's God-centeredness.

But unless you know how to deal with sin, you can end up either tolerating it or being condemned for it. The Bible clearly states that *"if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous."* (1Jn2:1) And, *"If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."* (1Jn1:9) and *"there is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ."* (Rom 8:1). That is, we are to confess, repent and get moving in the right direction. We are also to 'rescue' our brethren in humility and love when we observe them having problems knowing that we are also vulnerable in the flesh. (See Gal 6:1,2)

Toleration of sin happens frequently when we listen to the thought that says, 'oh, it's not that bad' or when we use the wrong measuring stick – i.e. we compare ourselves to others. Now, I'm not trying to set a standard for you here, but as an illustration, I've had good friends tell me that they watch R-rated movies because "they're just a little violent" or because they know their pastor saw them.

I know sincere Christians who've let sin absolutely ruin their marriage, their ministry and their memories, pastors that have deserted their families and ministries, missionaries that have returned self-righteous or bitter and angry from their mission field, the list goes on and on...all because they tolerated sin.

God hates sin with a perfect hatred and we should also (Psa 97:10, Pro 8:13). He will never tolerate it because it's destroying His loved ones, and it cost Him the life of His only begotten Son.

You may think I'm being simplistic but I'm passionate about the ignorance of sin. None of us who believe have the 'luxury' (in these last days) of time to toy with sin, to ignore it or to walk under its cloud. And trust me, I say that 'in the mirror' much more than sharing it herein.

Certainly, none of us will 'attain' to some sinless state in this life. But as 'we see the day approaching', let's all fight the good fight day by day until our dear Lord's return.

Sin -- never become comfortable with it or condemned by it. Let's always keep the awesomeness of our Heavenly Father and our Perfect Savior in mind. For when we see Him, we shall be like Him. Hallelujah!

Big Deal

“At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, ‘Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?’ Then Jesus called a little child to Him, set him in the midst of them, and said, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever receives one little child like this in My name receives Me.’”

He was a BIG man, or so he thought, a BIG shot. And his goal in life was to get BIGGER. In his culture, the ‘mantra’ was BIGGER is BETTER and BIGGEST is BEST. He was even named after a BIG man – one who stood tall above everyone else. But with all these cloaks piling up at his feet and the crowd in front, he couldn’t see. Pushing some to the side, he then saw the one he wanted to die kneeling down, looking pitifully small and ... yet ... yet his face was radiant, even angelic. Saul was incensed! ‘How could this little man of no reputation defy his people, his whole culture, all us BIG shots, and still die with dignity?!’ Yet, that heavenly face would remain frozen in his memory and the conviction it birthed angered him – so much so, that he made it his priority to utterly crush these little people.

From house to house, he harassed and imprisoned Christ’s little lambs. He was a BIG man with soldiers at his command and a BIG job to do.

Searching for his father’s asses, another Saul in another time wandered through Mt Ephraim, Shalisha and Shaalim. With his supplies exhausted, he looked to return home lest his father begin to worry. Needing advice, he found himself face to face with God’s prophet.

Samuel, led of the Spirit, invited him to a feast and said, “...*on whom is all the desire of Israel? Is it not on you and on all your father’s house?*”

Young Saul was flabbergasted. Handsome and huge in stature, he was nevertheless small in his own estimation. He replied, “*Am I not a Benjamite, of the smallest of the tribes of Israel? And is not my family the least of all the families of the tribe of Benjamin? Why then do you speak so to me?*”

Little did he know that he was called to be the first king of Israel. He couldn’t imagine it. And he didn’t really want it. Nevertheless, Samuel anointed him, but Saul was too small for the job – at least in his own eyes.

Shortly afterward, Samuel gathered all the tribes of Israel to announce God's choice. Out of them all, he called forth the tribe of Benjamin and from these the family of Matri was taken. Drums rolled; trumpets sounded... but Saul was gone! So, they sought the Lord and He answered, *"Behold, he is hiding himself among the baggage."* Wow.

Saul, the persecutor of the church, became famous for his dogged pursuit of the new little sect of Judaism called the Way. However, the followers of Jesus had dispersed, and so for his mission to continue, he had to journey to Damascus. He sought and obtained authority from the High Priest to cross the border and bring the little 'traitors' to justice or to kill them. But, along the way, something completely unexpected happened – someone much BIGGER than Saul intervened, and the persecutor became the prostrated.

As he journeyed he came near Damascus, and suddenly a light shone around him from heaven. Then he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?"

"And he said, 'Who are You, Lord?'"

"Then the Lord said, 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. It is hard for you to kick against the goads.'"

"So, he, trembling and astonished, said, 'Lord, what do You want me to do?'"

"Then the Lord said to him, 'Arise and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.'"

"And the men who journeyed with him stood speechless, hearing a voice but seeing no one. Then Saul arose from the ground, and when his eyes were opened, he saw no one. But they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank."

Now, this event initiated a BIG change in Saul. His allegiance shifted immediately from the Sanhedrin to the Son of God, but there was still a struggle with the 'old man' evident in his life. The Bible tells us in Acts chapter five, *"And through the hands of the apostles many signs and wonders were done among the people. ... Yet none of the rest dared join them, but the people esteemed them highly."* So, you see, the Apostles were esteemed very highly.

Nevertheless, as he was used to doing, Saul went straight to the top – the Apostles. Barnabas brought him. Saul had been influential, after all, with the Jews, and he imagined that he could be instrumental in their conversion to Christ's teachings. The Jews, however, didn't see it this way and Saul's preaching only served to create heated disputes. Finally, when the

Hellenists tried to kill him, the brethren sent him back to Tarsus, his home. With his departure, the church had a measure of peace.

You see, as with us all, Saul had some growing up and down to do. The rest of his life was spent chasing the heart of the Son of David, Jesus. Along the way, he faced amazing trials, scourging, beatings, imprisonment and even rejection from the very ones to whom he ministered – quite belittling to the carnal man don't you think? Later, he even changed his name to Paul which means 'little'.

Saul the King came to a turning point as well. Only two years into his reign, he faced the approach of an overwhelming hoard of Philistines against a ragtag band of skittish followers.

"...the Philistines gathered together to fight with Israel, thirty thousand chariots and six thousand horsemen, and people as the sand which is on the seashore in multitude. And they came up and encamped in Michmash, to the east of Beth Aven. When the men of Israel saw that they were in danger (for the people were distressed), then the people hid in caves, in thickets, in rocks, in holes, and in pits. And some of the Hebrews crossed over the Jordan to the land of Gad and Gilead."

"As for Saul, he was still in Gilgal, and all the people followed him trembling. Then he waited seven days, according to the time set by Samuel. But Samuel did not come to Gilgal; and the people were scattered from him. So, Saul said, 'Bring a burnt offering and peace offerings here to me.' And he offered the burnt offering. Now it happened, as soon as he had finished presenting the burnt offering, that Samuel came; and Saul went out to meet him, that he might greet him."

"And Samuel said, 'What have you done?'"

Saul's excuse, of course, was lame. His action in doing what only Samuel was supposed to do set in motion a trend in his behavior that continued some 38 years. Soon afterward, he again took matters into his own hands and disobeyed the command of the Lord. Samuel then said to him, *"When you were little in your own eyes, were you not head of the tribes of Israel? And did not the LORD anoint you king over Israel?"*

You may know the story. King Saul spent his lifetime chasing down little David. Meanwhile, in his own mind, he became 'BIGGER' and 'BIGGER' and 'BIGGER' - hugely self-important.

At the end of his life, Paul's perspective of his Lord was so huge that he saw Him as being "all in all" (see 1 Cor 15:28 and Eph 1:23), filling all things. And though he esteemed himself as the chief – it was now as the chief of sinners (1 Tim 1:15). But full of faith, he looked forward to a crown of glory.

At the end of his life, King Saul's perspective of the Lord was so small that "...when Saul enquired of the LORD, the LORD answered him not" so he sought advice from a medium instead. Shortly afterward, he committed suicide and His crown passed to another.

Do you see the pattern? Saul versus Saul. One man at first esteemed himself greatly but upon yielding his life to Christ, gradually became small in his own eyes. As a consequence, his legacy and fruitfulness was/is HUGE. The other man esteemed himself lightly to begin with and yet because he resisted and rebelled against God's Spirit, came to think of himself and his own interests as paramount. As a result, his legacy and fruitfulness are INSIGNIFICANT. The first man found grace and glory, the second found only a grave. What a contrast!

You see, in a certain fashion, how we perceive ourselves is an inverse reflection of how we perceive God. That is, the 'smaller' we are, the 'bigger' He is in comparison and vice versa. This is an important understanding in today's Christian culture. The 'bigness' we're conditioned to value simply strokes the ego. It serves up very spiritual sounding justifications while subverting the very foundations of meaningful spiritual goals and growth.

Too many of us are convinced we've got to make it BIG or be a part of something BIG – musicians, pastors, missionaries as well as folks in the pews – in fact, the modern church is obsessed with bigness as a measure of God's blessing. In our culture, it is easy to forget, *"...that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called. But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, that no flesh should glory in His presence."* God chooses 'little' over 'big' every time because it glorifies Him.

What bigness generally means for the church is that ministry is significantly less effective on an individual level. Consequently, too many church attendees have no meaningful relationship with a pastor. Many simply rotate in and out of churches like trying a buffet. In effect, the individual is lost in favor of the multitude.

Fundamentally, the western church of today is behaving more like Saul than like Paul. As a result, the worldly culture it is meant to change is instead changing it.

Jesus did not minister this way nor did His apostles. He said, *“Do not fear, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.”* He could say that because He kept the focus of His pastoral ministry limited to the number of individuals He could disciple effectively. Check it out, throughout history as well as today, the church has done best spiritually when it was ‘small’ in its own eyes because it depended on God for everything. When the church has erred or become inconsequential, it has accompanied a worldly pursuit of ‘bigness’. It should sober us that the last days Laodicean church is said to think of itself as being in need of nothing, not even God.

Jesus said in His parable, *“Well done, good servant; because you were faithful in a very little, have authority over ten cities.”* Clearly, He’s saying that if we are faithful with the ‘little’ now, the big responsibilities will come when He returns. So why are we so intent on getting the BIG stuff now? If we’re preaching to the lost, then, to be sure, sometimes big crowds are just part of the deal, but the church itself is best tended and cared for when it is literally a ‘little flock’.

Jesus said, *“Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of God.”* For the individual believer, this whole sense of being little in your own eyes is a key part of what heaven is all about.

Let’s consider Jesus – why did He emphasize searching for and finding the one lost lamb and the one lost coin? Why did He limit the scope of His own discipleship? Why did the apostles do likewise? When He said that His followers would do “greater things” than He had done, did He really mean all that we have seen today?

May the love of Christ compel us to minister effectively but without regard for earthly values. (See Phil 2:3-8) His ways are not our ways. As we embrace what Jesus said in Mat 11:29, the bride He returns for will be truly pleasing to Him. Selah.

Daniel One – The Test

“In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah came Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon into Jerusalem and besieged it. And the Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, with part of the vessels of the house of God: which he carried into the land of Shinar to the house of his god; and he brought the vessels into the treasure house of his god.” V1,2

Now, Jehoiakim was a puppet king really, having been set in power by the Egyptian Pharaoh. As such, the picture of truth for us is that spiritual power had departed from Judah long before this attack. Nebuchadnezzar, who throughout the book of Daniel represents the world, did in no way overcome God, for Judah had long left the Lord.

Nevertheless, under Pharaoh, Judah had a false sense of security. It is the same today with God's people who, for any reason, turn from the invisible God to the material powers of 'Pharaoh' so to speak. There may ensue a period of seeming security, but when the real trouble hits, the pharaoh is nowhere to be found. You might say that the common thread to vulnerability and calamity is alienation from God. Judah was alienated from God because the people had opened the door to spiritual idolatry and had neglected to give the land its Sabbath rest for 70 years.

Yet, you may think, 'But why did God allow them to take the sacred vessels to Babylon? Doesn't that tell the Jews and their enemies that He's weak or uncaring?'

Frequently, as believers, we are challenged in our faith when we see the enemy apparently victorious. We can, in such a state, listen to the lies of the sleaze-tongued serpent and hang our heads in defeat. You see, our minds are so small and our perception so limited, we think in terms of the immediate and see only the surface of circumstances. God, nonetheless, is always at work in behalf of His children.

Yes, God allowed them to pirate these sacred vessels, but they were the very instruments of their undoing – in chapter five of this book, the king of Babylon presumptuously brought them into his banquet to use in his drunken orgy and that's when the ax fell. That very night, he was killed, and his kingdom taken over by the Medes and Persians. Later, the Jews who returned to Israel under the authority of the new king brought with them these same sacred vessels. God was always in control and caused the pride of man to ultimately crumble.

The lesson is clear. Never stop trusting in God even when you seem to be on the losing end of things, when things don't go 'right' in your eyes. It was the lesson John the Baptist was learning in his prison cell as Jesus told his messengers, *“Go and tell John the things which you*

hear and see: The blind see and the lame walk; the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear; the dead are raised up and the poor have the gospel preached to them. And blessed is he who is not offended because of Me.” (Mat 11:4-6) It was and is the ‘final exam’ of many martyrs. No one beats the rap – we all have to learn it.

“And the king spoke unto Ashpenaz the master of his eunuchs, that he should bring [certain] of the children of Israel, and of the king’s seed, and of the princes; Children in whom [was] no blemish, but well favored, and skillful in all wisdom, and cunning in knowledge, and understanding science, and such as [had] ability in them to stand in the king’s palace, and whom they might teach the learning and the tongue of the Chaldeans. And the king appointed them a daily provision of the king’s meat, and of the wine which he drank: so, nourishing them three years, that at the end thereof they might stand before the king.” V3-5

Recall that the king, Nebuchadnezzar is herein a pictorial representation of the world for us. As such, you can see in these verses the target of his plans and his goals. The ‘world’ wants our children. Or should I say, God’s children. Generally, the process is one of wooing, of alluring them into the place of vulnerability, then compromise, then apathy and then allegiance with the bully-power of this world.

And the process is multi-faceted. Forced education camps called public schools in which the standard indoctrination includes the denigration of Christianity, the elevation of erroneous theories, perverted values and the introduction of contemporary amorality.

In addition, there is the massive, unrelenting bombardment of ‘a new tongue’. That is, the communication, the language and concepts of ‘Babylon’. It spews forth from the depths of Hollywood, social media, and the media in general, into the homes and minds of everyone. And it continually devolves those who give it heed. Of course, the ‘wicked king’ wants everyone to speak this tongue, to think within the confines of his own diminishing mind.

Then there’s the ‘king’s food’. High-fat, loaded with carbs – tastes great. However, it represented a compromise of values. God’s children are presented every day with the same spiritual decisions and in the next verses we’ll see how Daniel and his friends dealt with the situation.

‘Now among these were of the children of Judah, Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah: Unto whom the prince of the eunuchs gave names: for he gave unto Daniel [the name] of Belteshazzar; and to Hananiah, of Shadrach; and to Mishael, of Meshach; and to Azariah, of Abednego.” V6,7

The name Daniel (meaning God is my judge) was changed to Belteshazzar (meaning Bel’s prince). The name Hananiah (meaning Beloved by the LORD) was changed to Shadrach

(meaning Illumined by Sun-god). The name Mishael (meaning Who is as God) was changed to Meshach (meaning Who is like Venus). The name Azariah (meaning The LORD is my help) was changed to Abed-Nego (meaning Servant of Nego).

Now, we must understand that names in the ancient world were not chosen because they sounded cool or trendy but rather implied character. To change their names was, in effect, an attempt to make them identify themselves with another god and thus to change their characters. When you recognize this, the lesson is entirely contemporary, isn't it?

Notice how all the new names center on Bel. As it turns out, this goes all the way back to Nimrod, who built Babel or Babylon. He conceived a one world government model in rebellion against Jehovah-God and went about to establish a one world government in the land of Shinar (which is today known as Iraq) and institute a pagan worship system that rejected the Lord God Jehovah. The primary false god worshipped was called Baal (Syrian & Phoenician), Bel (Assyrian), Moloch or Molech (Ammonites), Ra or Re (Egyptian) to name just a few.

Nimrod incorporated into his worship system the grisly practice of human sacrifice and cannibalism. Alexander Hislop says, "the priests of Nimrod or Baal were necessarily required to eat of the human sacrifices; and thus, it has come to pass that Cahna-Bal (cahna meaning priest & Bal referring to Baal), the Priest of Baal is the established word (cannibal) in our own tongue for a devourer of human flesh." That's what Baal (Moloch), or Bel worshippers did. They would also burn their children in sacrificial fires to receive blessings of pleasure from the deity. God spoke of this to Jeremiah the prophet when He said about the vile practice of the Jews of the time, *"they have built also the high places of Baal, to burn their sons with fire for burnt offerings unto Baal, which I commanded not, nor spoke it, neither came it into my mind."* (Jer 19:5)

Pleasures and delicacies are likewise today sought after at the expense of God's children. If we will 'sacrifice them to Bel', either in the womb or afterwards, we are named with new names so to speak, fitted with rancid, self-obsessed characters. In other words, the contemporary 'Nebuchadnezzar's' tactics haven't changed.

"But Daniel purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself with the portion of the king's meat, nor with the wine which he drank: therefore, he requested of the prince of the eunuchs that he might not defile himself. Now God had brought Daniel into favor and tender love with the prince of the eunuchs. And the prince of the eunuchs said unto Daniel, I fear my lord the king, who has appointed your meat and your drink: for why should he see your faces worse liking than the children which [are] of your sort? Then shall you make [me] endanger my head to the king."

“Then said Daniel to Melzar, whom the prince of the eunuchs had set over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, prove thy servants, I beseech you, ten days; and let them give us pulse to eat, and water to drink. Then let our countenances be looked upon before you, and the countenance of the children that eat of the portion of the king's meat: and as thou see, deal with thy servants. So, he consented to them in this matter, and proved them ten days.”

“And at the end of ten days their countenances appeared fairer and fatter in flesh than all the children which did eat the portion of the king's meat. Thus, Melzar took away the portion of their meat, and the wine that they should drink; and gave them pulse.” V8-16

The biggest lesson for us in this section is found in the first six words – But Daniel purposed in his heart. (Psa 17:3, Eph 3:11) The word ‘purposed’ is in the imperfect tense which means that it was not a one-time event but ongoing. It is this purposing or determining within the heart of every believer that God desires and blesses. It is our part, while His is to do the rest. He provides the way, the truth and the life. He leads, He counsels, He strengthens, He forgives, He restores... on and on it goes. But our part is to purpose in our heart all along the way. The fruit of which is trusting obedience.

Of course, if our ‘purposing is at cross purposes’ with the Lord, the fruit will be disappointment and distrust. We have to ask, what does the scripture say? What is His Spirit telling us? They will always be in harmony and their instruction must be the basis for what we purpose in our hearts.

Now God had brought Daniel into favor and tender love with the prince of the eunuchs. It wasn't a scheme or a schmooze that brought this favor but rather God. It was Daniel's part to purpose in his heart; he knew that his Lord would do the rest.

And the rest included a test. Now, as we study the book of Daniel, we can see a strong figurative relationship between the person of Daniel and the entity of the church. It is a striking similarity, and not, I suggest, coincidental. In like manner, Daniel's three friends picture the faithful remnant of Jewish believers in these last days; so, with the four of them, we have prophetically pictured the whole congregation of the righteous in Christ. We'll examine this in more detail later.

However, testing is a fundamental part of every believer's walk of faith – from Abraham to you and me, God proves us to perfect us. In this case, the test was for ten days and had to do with their diet as well as their countenance. It is interesting that they chose a ten-day period of time for the number ten is associated with testing in the Bible. For example:

“Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.” (Rev 2:10)

“...all these men who have seen My glory and the signs which I did in Egypt and in the wilderness, and have put Me to the test now these ten times, and have not heeded My voice...” (Num 14:22)

But perhaps the more important aspect was what they chose to eat. Pulse refers to all kinds of grains and plants, not strictly vegetables. Basically, this was a vegetarian diet, chosen because none of the Babylonian meat was butchered in a kosher manner or it was sacrificed to idols. There are many good commentary explanations for their choice that relate to kosher standards, but we are looking more at the pictorial lessons and thus will consider their food from that angle. Now, depending upon your translation, they asked to eat “pulse” or “vegetables” but the original word is derived from the verb that literally means, “to sow, scatter seed” and as such reminds us of the parable that Jesus told in Matthew 13 wherein he declared that the scattered seed was the Word of God.

So, in figure or type, the boys, i.e. the believers, were purposing to dine upon the Word of God as opposed to the ‘king’s food’ and were confident that their appearance would be fairer because of it. Of course, in a spiritual sense, the ‘king’s food’ today is pumped at us continually through the media. But, like these fellows, if we purpose to take into our minds the Word of God instead – our spiritual appearance will indeed be “fairer and fatter” so to speak.

“As for these four children, God gave them knowledge and skill in all learning and wisdom: and Daniel had understanding in all visions and dreams. Now at the end of the days that the king had said he should bring them in, then the prince of the eunuchs brought them in before Nebuchadnezzar.”

“And the king communed with them; and among them all was found none like Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah: therefore stood they before the king.”

“And in all matters of wisdom [and] understanding, that the king enquired of them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians [and] astrologers that [were] in all his realm. And Daniel continued [even] unto the first year of king Cyrus.” V17-21

The psalmist records, *“Oh, how I love Your law! It is my meditation all the day. You, through Your commandments, make me wiser than my enemies; Your testimonies are wonderful; Therefore, my soul keeps them. The entrance of Your words gives light; It gives understanding to the simple. The entirety of Your word is truth... my heart stands in awe of Your*

word... I rejoice at Your Word As one who finds great treasure.” (Psa 119:97,98,129,130,160,161,162)

I submit that God did not give those guys knowledge and skill by way of the veggies they ate, but He will give such understanding as we dine upon His Word.

Finally, there is likely some prophetic significance in that Daniel continued to be in a powerful position from Nebuchadnezzar all the way to Cyrus. That means his influence upon the world's governing powers transcended empires. In fact, it was under Cyrus' rule that Daniel came to understand the prophecies of Jeremiah concerning the 70 years of being cast out of the land of Israel. His influence was important in convincing Cyrus the Persian king to allow the Jews to return to their land. And then Daniel disappears – his ministry is over.

In like manner, the church has been influential in the world during the age of grace, transcending empires, and was a strong influence in promoting to the world community the return of the modern-day Jews to the land of Israel. In 1891, William Eugene Blackstone, a prominent tycoon, lobbied President Benjamin Harrison for the restoration of the Jews, in a petition signed by over 400 prominent Americans that became known as the Blackstone Memorial.

In the United States, the evangelical Cyrus Scofield, promoted the doctrine that Jesus could not return to reign on Earth until certain events occurred. In the interim, prior to these last days events, Scofield's system taught that the Christian church was primarily for the salvation of the Gentiles, and that according to God's plan the Jewish people are under a different dispensation of God's grace, which has been put out of gear so to speak, until the last days when the Christian Church will be removed from the earth by a miracle called the Rapture.

Scofield, writing in the 1900s said that, in the last days, the Bible predicts the return of the Jews to the Holy Land and particularly to Jerusalem. Scofield further predicted that the Temple in Jerusalem would be rebuilt - signaling the very end of the Church Age when the Antichrist would arise, and all who seek to keep the covenant with God will acknowledge Jesus as their Messiah in defiance of the Antichrist.

And thus, as with Daniel in the time of Cyrus, the ministry era of the mostly gentile church is drawing to a close quite soon.

First Fruit

Fruit. It seems like a lot of focus in scripture is upon it. God plants, He prunes, He provides nutrients, He waits, and He reaps. From the opening pages of the Bible to its closure, His word is resplendent with meaningful agricultural depictions. Israel has been pictured as a vine and as an olive tree. The righteous are pictured as fruitful palms, as wheat and as good seed. Jesus spoke of God as the owner of a vineyard, a farmer whose crop has been infested with bad seed and as a harvester.

At the beginning of man's relationship with his Creator, fruit was the instrument of both life and death. In disobedience to God, man ate the deadly fruit of the knowledge of good and evil. At the end of the age, in the book of Revelation, the angels of God are instructed to harvest the world.

It's quite evident that God's a farmer, a "husbandman" in the old King James lingo. It's a fundamental aspect of His being that bears consideration. The New Testament word for this simply means someone who works the land, and for our Father in heaven, this is true both physically as well as spiritually. Actually, Jesus described Him this way; He said, *"I am the true vine and my Father is the husbandman."* (John 15:1)

In fact, His first act on behalf of man was to plant Eden, a magnificent garden, and man's first job was to mimic God, if you would, in tending this paradise. His first command to man was to be fruitful. Now this isn't merely a nice word picture but basic to our understanding of His ways and applicable to our walk in these last days.

James wrote, *"Therefore be patient, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer (husbandman) waits for the precious fruit of the earth, waiting patiently for it until it receives the early and latter rain."* (James 5:7) Yes, God is indeed a farmer and He's 'into' fruit. In these last days, He is patiently waiting for it to mature. So, let's look into His husbandry techniques, consider the fruit that He's expecting, and examine our role in it all.

First of all, God plants. He planted Eden (Gen 2:8). He planted Israel in the Promised Land (Psa 80:8,15; Jer 2:21; 11:17; Mark 12:1). His Son plants seed in the heart of man. (Mat 13, Lu 8) Thus, His plantings are physical, pictorial and/or spiritual. Like a farmer, He is very practical in it all; none of His efforts are wasted. There are divine purposes and outcomes all according to His will. Though He scatters seed freely, it only produces a crop in the good, weed-free soil. Thus, it is very important for us to understand that, spiritually speaking, it is not the seed that God is looking for in our lives but that which the seed has produced to fruition.

Next, God tends His planting. Jesus spoke of His pruning or cleaning the vines and even allowing for fertilization and aeration. He sends the rain in its season as well as the sunshine. Each of these has spiritual application for us. Pruning speaks of taking away those things that rob the plant of strength but produce nothing in return. Cleaning speaks of removing the earthly coverings that impede the effective working of His light. Fertilization and aeration speak of improving the condition of His plants' environment. The rain speaks of His blessing and His Word while the sunlight speaks of His life and love. All of this, He does patiently but with an expectation in mind.

And with it, God waits. Most of us know we have so much to be thankful for, but we rarely consider how thankful we should be that God waits. Our society conditions us to rush everything, but one thing that simply cannot be accelerated is the bearing of good fruit. Why God waits as long as He does is a matter of His divine sovereignty and foreknowledge and certainly one of the greatest mysteries of His creation. Yet, no farmer in his right mind gets upset when he plants his crop in say April and finds no fruit in May. That's because he knows it will not come until August or September. God knows the soil, knows the plant, knows the seasons, knows the fruit... and thus, He waits.

But when He knows His fruit should be ready, His waiting is over. Then He harvests. Now, some fruit comes from shaking, some from cutting, some is plucked up. In any case, God is looking for fruit, lots of good fruit. Jesus said, *"He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit..."* and *"By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples."* and, *"You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain..."* (John 15:5,8,16) He also illustrated this in His parables saying, *"A certain man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it..."* (Luke 13:6) and *"Now at vintage-time he sent a servant to the vinedressers, that they might give him some of the fruit of the vineyard."* (Luke 20:10)

So, what exactly is good fruit in God's eyes? The Bible speaks of many types of fruit – the fruit of the tree(s), the ground, the womb, the land, your body, your labors, your vineyard, your works, their own way, their thoughts; there is also the fruit of the righteous, the fruit of his mouth, of her hands, of the lips, of lies, and of course, the fruit of the Spirit.

Fundamentally, fruit has two characteristics; first, it is something that is produced for use or consumption by another. Second, it identifies the fruit bearer. (Luke 6:44)

To the latter point, Jesus said, *"Do men gather grapes from thornbushes or figs from thistles? Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit."* (Mat 7:16,17) Righteous men and women are good trees in a spiritual sense. For instance:

“Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stands in the path of sinners, nor sits in the seat of the scornful; but his delight is in the law of the LORD, and in His law he meditates day and night. He shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water that brings forth its fruit in its season whose leaf also shall not wither and whatever he does shall prosper.” (Psa 1:1-3)

“The righteous shall flourish like a palm tree, he shall grow like a cedar in Lebanon. Those who are planted in the house of the LORD shall flourish in the courts of our God. They shall still bear fruit in old age; they shall be fresh and flourishing, to declare that the LORD is upright; He is my rock, and there is no unrighteousness in Him.” (Psa 92:12 – 15)

The righteous will bear good fruit in its season. The life of the sap will always flow but fruit comes ‘when it comes’. Oh, how we want ‘McFruit’! But it just doesn’t work that way.

So, when He comes, what will the heavenly Husbandman be seeking. What is the fruit that pleases Him? Surely the fruit of the Spirit is on His mind – *“love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control”* (Gal 5:22,23). However...

Paul wrote to the Colossian church, *“...Epaphras, our dear fellow servant, ...declared to us your love in the Spirit. For this reason we also, since the day we heard it, do not cease to pray for you, and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding; that you may walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing Him, being fruitful in every good work...”* (Col 1:7-10)

You see, there is one thing that the Bible tells us is required in order to please Him and it says He will come seeking it. Consider the following verses:

“But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.” (Heb 11:6)

And...

“... shall God not avenge His own elect who cry out day and night to Him, though He bears long with them? I tell you that He will avenge them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will He really find faith on the earth?” (Luke 18:7,8)

Quite simply, the Husbandman will come seeking loving faith in Jesus Christ both in our life and in the lives of those we’ve influenced. Many other types of good fruit will be gathered into His barn as well, but without this first fruit, the rest will not matter.

Strip away the shibboleths, remove the myriad doctrines that rise and fall, set aside the efforts of both the well intentioned and the self-glorifying, still every mouth and quiet every heart. If we lose the lyrics and empty the edifices, all of Christianity comes down to one and only one fundamental fruit – loving faith in Jesus Christ.

Obvious? Not so. We are tremendously distracted by things we are convinced are essential to our Christian life and culture but are really more a part of some other agenda be it political, social and/or otherwise. We have been brilliantly side-tracked by an astute enemy. As a result, the fundamental fruit has been buried in the race for attendance, celebrity and the sirens of the morally/politically offended.

You see, righteousness is never legislated – it is the delightful flavor of the fruit of a healthy tree. If the church corporate would turn the tide, we must first focus on the fundamental fruit – loving faith in Jesus. May we never take it for granted. (Psa 126:6)

It's a Must Do

I was seriously considering death. No, not suicide! Not yet, anyway – ha! Rather, I was reading in Revelation chapter six where many saints were found under the altar in Heaven and we are told that they are those who were slain because of their testimony in Christ and their trust in His Word.

As I pondered this scene, it struck me that not only do we all die eventually – that it is inevitable, but that it is also necessary. More accurately, it is necessary in its time.

In John chapter three, one of the grand teachers of Israel, Nicodemus, came to Jesus and the conversation quickly turned to the theme of Christ's message. John the Baptist had preached, "Repent!" Jesus taught "Be reborn." This latter teaching was what Nick needed to know so, *"Jesus answered and said to him, 'Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.'"*

When the flabbergasted teacher mentally stumbled over this, Christ continued, *"Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You **must** be born again.'*"

Of course, most of us understand that being spiritually born again is fundamental to being a Christian, but thinking that this simply means a sincere invitation to Jesus to come into our heart and be our Lord is missing the bigger and more beautiful message here.

To start with, this is one of those instances where the translation needs some clarification. You see, the words "born" and "again" in the original language actually mean "procreated" and "from on high" respectively.

Nick was indeed confused because he did not understand Jesus to be explaining a spiritual process. And it is this process that got me to musing. This is because procreation is not simply the delivery, is it. It's not what we call being born. There is a different Greek word used for that in the Bible. The word Jesus used and what He was referring to was a grander and more complete picture – procreation.

If you'll permit me, it includes:

- fascination
- insemination
- fertilization
- gestation and then, at the appropriate time,

- expulsion or as we commonly say, delivery.

As I was pondering it, it struck me that as a believer, I'm still in the "procreated from on high" process. Each step in the physical procreation process has a corresponding spiritual reality. Let me explain.

Fascination – this is really the first step. When God made Eve way back in Genesis and presented her to Adam, he said, and I paraphrase liberally, "this is Wowman." He was indeed impressed and attracted to her. Spiritually, we can liken this to the initial prompting of the Holy Spirit that attracts us to the Lord and His Word.

The following story from a new believer, Michael, highlights this:

"Although outwardly happy and content with every material need met, internally where no-one could see, I had an aching emptiness and longed to understand life's purpose. I remember even at seven years old considering what life was about while lying in bed and at eleven sitting in the garden alone on a summer's evening looking at the stars and being oppressed by melancholic thoughts about the vastness and anonymity of the universe and my place in it!"

"The turning point came when a Christian friend invited me to his church. The people were kind, genuine and loving and although I thought they were all slightly mad I was attracted to something I knew they had which I lacked which, although I didn't realize it, was inner peace. A few weeks later it was Easter and the leader of the church spoke on Jesus' Resurrection. At that moment I knew that I believed it, that it had actually happened and that therefore everything Jesus had said about himself was true."

Insemination – Sometime after His introduction, God told Adam and Eve to "be fruitful and multiply". As a man's seed is placed within his wife, so God's Spirit plants the seed of the Living Word within our hearts. The Bible says that we are to, *"...love one another fervently with a pure heart, having been born again, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, through the word of God which lives and abides forever"* (1 Pet 1:22, 23)

Fertilization – what a marvelous mystery! The female egg is surrounded by so many sperm cells and yet just one penetrates and joins to create a new life. So, it is that God's Spirit is deposited in our hearts – one thought, one word, one prayer triggers a whole new spiritual life. And as we all know, the timing must be right for both the 'divine encounter' as well as the physical.

Gestation – Of course, this new life (physical or spiritual) must grow. It must be prepared for what's ahead – a life outside the womb that it cannot even imagine. And so, it is

with fetus and believer. Every believer must grow spiritually within the womb of this earthly life. When the time is right – a time that God determines – the last step in the procreation process occurs...

Expulsion – Delivery is a painful event for mom and certainly a radical one for the new child. It's transformative. Yes, death is a 'delivery' that is necessary. As believers, we are then finally born again into the presence of our eternal family.

Jesus told Nick, *"Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit."* (John 3:7,8) With this, He clearly asserted that the culmination of the spiritual procreation process is a complete freedom – as wonderful and as mysterious to us as the wind (i.e. the Spirit) blowing wherever it desires. Jesus said, *"Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed."* (John 8:36) This spiritual delivery or birth into eternity frees us from the constraints of this earthly life and the sinful nature.

And for us who believe, it is all in God's hands, all in His time. For those without faith in Christ, death is the transition into an eternal separation from God - more isolated, painful and bitter than they can imagine.

You can follow Buddha, Mohammed, or just your own fanciful notions but unless you are born again, procreated from on high – by God through Christ's Spirit – life is pointless, and death is just death, eternally.

So, seek Him out and open your heart to His awesome loving message. Be born again, live with purpose and grow in grace. Then physical death will simply be deliverance, the fulfillment of being born again.

It's Time

It is one of the saddest, most tragic things Jesus ever said, yet it is fantastically important for us today.

He began by explaining to his disciples about how the Word of His Gospel would be spread and under which conditions it would be fruitful. Let's look at Mat 13 – *"Then He spoke many things to them in parables saying: 'Behold, a sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some [seed] fell by the wayside; and the birds came and devoured them. Some fell on stony places, where they did not have much earth; and they immediately sprang up because they had no depth of earth. But when the sun was up, they were scorched, and because they had no root they withered away. And some fell among thorns, and the thorns sprang up and choked them. But others fell on good ground and yielded a crop: some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.'*" (Mat 13:3-8)

Later, Jesus explained, *"When anyone hears the word of the kingdom, and does not understand [it], then the wicked [one] comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is he who received the seed by the wayside. But he who received the seed on stony places, this is he who hears the Word and immediately receives it with joy; yet he has no root in himself but endures only for a while. For when tribulation or persecution arises because of the Word, immediately he stumbles. Now he who received seed among the thorns is he who hears the word, and the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the Word, and he becomes unfruitful. But he who received seed on the good ground is he who hears the Word and understands [it], who indeed bears fruit and produces: some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty."* Mat 13:19-23

Now, you're all probably familiar with this passage known as the parable of the sower. In it, seed representing His word is scattered here and there – in some hearts it's stolen away, in some it's received but only superficially; in some it's choked out and ruined; and in some it's productive.

To be clear, this is not just a truth for all time, but is also a prophetic picture, that is, a description of how the church got started – by scattering seed. Jesus said to His disciples, *"Go into all the world and preach the Gospel..."* and indeed they did. In less than a generation, the Good News had spread to most of the civilized world and in only three centuries it was elevated to the proclaimed religion of the Roman Empire. Of course, this was historically a sad day for this status led to great compromise within the church and that very situation brings us to the next part of Christ's series prophetic parables.

Following the parable of the sower, Jesus spoke of what the enemy of the Kingdom would do in response to this growth. *“The Kingdom of Heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field; but while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat and went his way. But when the grain had sprouted and produced a crop, then the tares also appeared. So, the servants of the owner came and said to him, ‘Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have tares?’ He said to them, ‘An enemy has done this.’ The servants said to him, ‘Do you want us then to go and gather them up?’ But he said, ‘No, lest while you gather up the tares you also uproot the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest, and at the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, ‘First gather together the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them but gather the wheat into my barn.’”* Mat 13:24-30

Herein, it's clear that the tares represent unbelievers and deceivers in the church. You see, just as young sprouts of tares resemble young sprouts of wheat, so phony Christians can be hard to discern from the sincere. Yet given time to mature, they both become quite evident and distinctive. And, notice that this prophecy propels us forward all the way to the last days – the tribulation time. When Christ returns, the tares will be burned, and the wheat will be 'barned'. Now, this is not speaking of the rapture, for that is when the Bride of Christ, the assembly of honest believers still on earth, is taken up and brought, along with all the resurrected faithful (also part of the Bride), into the presence of the Lord. In the rapture, the wheat is separated first rather than the tares. So, this parable is pointing to the second coming of Christ to earth which will happen at the conclusion of the Tribulation.

So then, having moved us forward from the initial spreading of the Word and the consequent sowing of the enemy's tares unto the final days of the age, Jesus next describes the unnatural nature of the last days Kingdom of God on earth with the story of the mustard seed: *“The Kingdom of Heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field, which indeed is the least of all the seeds; but when it is grown it is greater than the herbs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and nest in its branches.”* Mat 13:31,32

Now, in another parable, Jesus used the mustard seed as a picture of faith. (See Mat 17:20) And indeed, the church began in faith. You see, the mustard seed is small and will naturally grow into a modest herbal plant, but Jesus said this kingdom would grow unnaturally large with branches that would be big enough for birds to perch upon and presumably nest.

So, what's the big deal? Of course, this is a well-known passage and many of you already know that as with the fowl in Christ's previous parable of the sower, birds represent the agents of Satan. So, this is a pretty scary and sobering truth – the final state of the church is that of being filled with evil agents. They are in its branches.

And that brings us to the tragically sad prophetic proclamation we first mentioned. Here it is – *“The Kingdom of Heaven is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal till it was all leavened.”* Mat 13:33,34

For those of you familiar with the meanings of prophetic imagery in scripture, this passage has some recognizable elements. We know from (John 6:31-35 and John 1:1) that bread or meal is symbolic of teaching or doctrine while leaven is always a picture of sin or sin-filled doctrine.

Jesus said, *“Take heed and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees.”* And in the following verses, it was said of his disciples, *“Then they understood that He did not tell them to beware of the leaven of (literal) bread but of the doctrine of the Pharisees and Sadducees.”* Mat 16:6,12

In this last parable, a woman is mixing leaven in specifically three measures of meal (flour). This is arresting, because again, Christ is speaking of the church, and from the chronological order derived from His sequence of parables, it's the last days condition of the Church. So, who is this woman and what do the three measures picture?

Because this is a prophetic parable, it's quite clear that this woman is not a specific person or historical figure; she pictures a spiritual force that is corrupting the doctrine of the church with sin and its close cousin, deception. The Bible says concerning the last days that, *“...evil men shall wax worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived.”* (2 Tim 3:13)

Now, as we let the Bible interpret itself, we refer to Rev 17 where we see another prophetic woman riding a beast. It is said of her, *“The woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and precious stones and pearls, having in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the filthiness of her fornication. And on her forehead a name was written: MYSTERY, BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND OF THE ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH. I saw the woman drunk with the blood of the saints and with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus.”* Rev 17:4-6

This woman, the great whore, pictures the false religious system that deceives the whole world. I refer you to our letter entitled, Pious Prostitution (which can be downloaded from www.Gracetruth.net/Essays/) for a more in-depth study on this. I suggest that she and the woman mixing leaven in Christ's parable may be one in the same or at least of the same spirit.

And as we continue to consider the book of Revelation, we see in chapters two and three that there are four churches out of the seven mentioned which will be active at the end of the age. Refer to our letters Fire Eyes, The Heeding Never Halts and Victory! (again, at www.Gracetruth.net/Essays/) for more on this. These four are Thyatira, representing the

Roman Catholic church system, Sardis, representing the mainline protestant denominational church system, Philadelphia, representing the weak but faithful believers whose beginnings are associated with genuine moves of the Holy Spirit beginning in the 1800's onward, and Laodicea, representing the last days, self-absorbed or narcissistic church system whose congregants carry many Christian-like names but fundamentally are not Christ-centered.

In Revelation, only one of these four is commended by Christ for holding on to the veracity of His Word – Philadelphia; and this is the one group that Jesus promises to guard or keep from the hour of temptation or testing (the Tribulation time) which He says shall come upon all the world to try them that dwell on the earth (see Revelation 3:10)

For that reason, we are confident that the Philadelphian believers will be raptured before the wrath of God is poured out.

That leaves three remaining behind; three churches or church systems who like the three measures of meal in Christ's parable, have gotten their meal or doctrine mixed with sin. The entire church left behind at the rapture will be a corrupt and corrupting entity. Its doctrine will be filled with sinful error and its branches filled with Satan's agents. It is a horrible, sickening truth.

But, unlike the rapture, which will occur in a "blink of an eye", the infestation of the birds and the mixing in of leaven both take time and I'm firmly convinced have been going on for quite a while already. The contemporary church as a whole is filled with squawking, filthy fowl and rotting worldly doctrines dressed up to look and sound very Christian, very open minded and sensible. Therefore, if you are a Philadelphian believer, your guide and guard is the unaltered, unembellished Word of God.

The one world religion of the last days that will be the result of 'leaven in the meal' and 'birds in the branches' is very ecumenical. There will be an increasing equality among the faiths and even a mixing. Take Christianity and add a bit of Islam, throw in some Buddhism and Mormonism and... even ancient Judaism – you get my drift. And that is indeed happening even now – the birds are squawking, and the leaven is rotting, and it's time for sincere believers to stand up against it radically or get out of it entirely!

Open Book

Everyone who had condemned her to death was gone. But there was Jesus, writing on the ground. Surely a stillness permeated the place so completely that no one dared to break it. The disciples probably looked on from the background, mouths agape.

Did she dare approach? She was guilty, and everyone knew it. She knew it.

The mob had departed, but incredibly, she remained. Nothing prevented her from running away. No one forced her to face the Teacher.

Did her feet shuffle? Was her mouth dry? Did her heart race? Just one word from the man before her and she would have been brutally executed earlier.

He had not defended her or dismissed her guilt but rather put it in the proper perspective. What would he do now that the threatening crowd had dispersed? (See the story in John chapter 8)

How many would come that close to death and then stick around to face the conclusion of the matter? Yet, this woman waited. Why?

Faced with the painful humiliating reality of personal sin, people react in different ways:

- Peter wept bitterly. (Mat 26:75)
- The humble worshiper in Christ's parable, *"standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner."* (Luke 18)
- Paul exclaimed, *"Oh, wretched man that I am. Who shall deliver me from this body of death?"* (Rom 7:24)
- Isaiah cried, *"Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips,"* (Isa 6:5)
- Cain barked, *"Am I my brother's keeper?"* (Gen 4:9)
- Judas hung himself. (Acts 1:18)
- Adam 'passed the buck'. (Gen 3:12)
- David confessed. (2 Sam 12:7-13)
- Saul made excuses. (1 Sam 13:11)

Basically though, our reactions show that we all fall into one of two camps -- children of light or children of darkness. You see, men love darkness. *"And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil."* (John 3:19)

On the other hand, the children of God love light for they are the children of light:

“For you are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus.” (Gal 3:26)

“You are all the children of light, and the children of the day: we are not of the night, nor of darkness.” (1Th 5:5)

In this life however, both camps fall short – some less than others. Nevertheless, both miss the mark.

Now, wherever the Light of Life shines it exposes. (Eph 5:13) When it exposes sin in our lives, we react to it based upon how we perceive God. And we perceive God based upon our relationship to Him.

So how does the light shine? Most of us as believers are not confronted with sin directly by other people because our contemporary concepts of church participation focus us on teaching/preaching and musical worship to the exclusion of sanctification and authentic pastoring, that is, caring for the ‘flock.’

We so much want to be in unity that we can tend to dismiss the notion of loving correction as an endangerment to that goal. And it’s true that high-minded criticality will drive wedges between people, but in some cases, we’ve swung the pendulum so far to the extreme that wayward believers are rarely confronted lovingly with their error on a personal basis.

Consequently, we need to listen individually even more closely to the voice of the Holy Spirit within as He brings conviction of sin. Notice, I did not say condemnation. For the believer, there is no condemnation from God but rather conviction and correction. Now all of this is important to us because we live in the Christian culture characteristic of Laodicea. (See Rev 3)

Observably, the large majority in this culture are spiritually “*neither cold nor hot*” and by comparison to the church throughout the ages, have the sad distinction of acting like we are “*rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing*”. We are coddled in ‘country clubs’ we boast of as churches and experience the Christian life as not much more than a buffet of choices focused fundamentally on personal gratification. And the sad thing is that we are typically blind to it. The result is that many have left Jesus outside knocking and don’t even realize it.

When some audacious preacher has the temerity to tell us about our condition even in the most cautious terms, the ‘spiritually offended’ find another ‘buffet’ at which to dine, a more amiable ‘country club’, a more interesting devotional to read.

You may think I’m being harsh, unfair, overly this or that, but we are in this ‘soup’ together. Like Lot’s children when he tried to warn them, you may think I’m not to be taken

seriously. You may think, 'I'm not a sinner like this woman taken in adultery.' If so, you've missed the point for indeed you are – so am I.

On the other hand, you may be standing with me, and like the woman in our story above, before the Lord, ashamed, exposed, unworthy of His defense. If you are truly 'hanging with me' on this, it is likely because you know you're guilty, but you also sense that the One whom you're facing will not condemn. Oh, we could run away. We could try to hide from the awful truth.

This woman stayed to hear from her Savior. She stayed to look into His eyes and know His heart. When He said, "*Woman, where are those accusers of yours? Has no one condemned you?*" she may have been hanging her head. But, when she replied, "*No one, Lord.*" I'm very much inclined to envision her eyes finding His in hope. The light was shining, and she was bathing in it.

Jesus washed her with these words, "*Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more.*"

Several commentators note that the Greek word used earlier for "without sin" when Jesus answered the accusing mob, can mean without the same sin – whether it was the same type of sin or simply sin in general, the others knew they were guilty too. They had dropped their stones and walked away.

Confronted with the fact of their own personal sin, they did not stick around. The light was too much for them. They retreated into their beloved darkness.

Interestingly enough, this story was not read in the early churches generally. It was even left out of most early Greek manuscripts. "Augustine definitely stated that certain individuals had removed from their codices the section regarding the adulteress, because they feared women would appeal to this story as an excuse for infidelity ... asceticism played an important role in the sub-apostolic age." -- William Hendriksen

Most generally, contemporary commentators deal with John 8:1-11 even though the new paragraph mark begins with verse 13.

Now, divisions of paragraph magnitude were the first punctuation marks that were added into the New Testament texts so the assumption that this story ends with verse 11 is not based upon something provided by the author in the original language.

In fact, early manuscripts place John 7:53 – 8:11 in several places. Those placements, however, cannot be given any more legitimacy than the complete exclusion of the passage. I'm inclined to believe that the text in John 8 from verse 1 – 20 represents a single passage pertaining to what happened as Jesus was teaching in the temple treasury. Notice it begins and ends with those comments.

Having said that, it seems that to those who were watching this whole scene aghast, He continued, *"I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness but have the light of life."*

The word He used here for follow means to follow as a disciple. This was likely a general statement, but it could also be that this woman at one point previously had tried to follow Jesus. In addition, He addressed her kindly, using the general term, 'gune,' that denotes a woman, usually a married woman, the same word He used to address Mary his mother and other women who distinctively had faith in Him.

Clearly, we do not know for sure whether that is the case or not, however she found not only a temporary reprieve from her accusers but grace. And that is because, contrary to the rest of the sinful crowd, she stuck around. She welcomed the Light.

In some Christian circles there is a tendency to hide from the light not so much because of what the Lord will think but what we suspect men will think. We believe that men will usually want to 'stone us.'

But being 'salt and light' in this world has much more to do with honesty and humility than moral purity.

To "walk in the Light" does not mean to walk in such a way that everyone ooh's and ah's at your spiritual splendor or achievements but that under the guidance of the Spirit of God you are an open book – not pretending or disguised but rather transparent and on display.

You see, this is the only way people can really see Jesus Christ working in you and through you. This is how they see your good works and glorify God. (Mat 5:16)

John wrote, *"If we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."* (1 John 1:7-9)

Paul wrote, *"Brethren, if any person is overtaken in misconduct or sin of any sort, you who are spiritual [who are responsive to and controlled by the Spirit] should set him right and restore and reinstate him, without any sense of superiority and with all gentleness, keeping an attentive eye on yourself, lest you should be tempted also."*

"Bear (endure, carry) one another's burdens and troublesome moral faults, and in this way fulfill and observe perfectly the law of Christ (the Messiah) and complete what is lacking [in your obedience to it]."

“For if any person thinks himself to be somebody [too important to condescend to shoulder another's load] when he is nobody ..., he deceives and deludes and cheats himself.”
(Gal 6:1-3 Amplified Version)

Do you love the Light even though it exposes? You will if you're born again. When you know your Father and your Savior as you should, His light is wonderfully welcome. It is truthful, but it is Life. Don't hide from it. Don't just drop your rock and retreat. Don't follow the crowd. Walk in the Light – the shining Light of the bright Morning Star. Hang in there and discover the grace that is in the face of our Savior Jesus (See Mat 17:2 and 2 Cor 4:6).

Selah!

(Think About It!)

Dateline: May, 445 BC [Jerusalem]

They surveyed the surrounding wreckage with weeping and a deep sense of hopelessness. The older men knew they didn't have enough strength any more to make a difference and the younger ones who were usually ready for anything just stared blankly. It was a disaster.

Nothing was left standing; crumbled stone and brick was strewn everywhere in huge mounds. At the same time, their 'neighbors' hissed and mocked with surreal voices which rose and fell amid the 'din' of the silent reality.

Dateline: May, 445 BC [Shushan]

It was a beautiful day: The splendid courts of the palace were alive with brilliant colors – dazzling gardens in full bloom, courtiers in festive gowns and everywhere paintings, tapestries and fountains dancing playfully with sparkling mist and bubbles. Melodious singing filled the air and laughter seemed to play in the breeze.

Here in the court, Nehemiah was a trusted servant of King Artaxerxes I, who ruled the vast Medio-Persian empire. The beloved capital of his people, Jerusalem, had been in ruins for some 70 years when the first group of faithful Jews returned to the land and it was now about 92 years later. Having learned that the wall of the city was still broken down and its gates burned with fire, he wept and mourned. In those days, a city without walls and gates was not governable – it was an open prey to any and all who chose to abuse it.

Likewise, we as Christians need walls – NOT walls between one another but walls of defense against the spiritual enemies we face. Without them, we too are easy prey – the 'world' and/or our own sin nature then has too much freedom to bother, bully and oppress. This idea of physical wall building around a city is rather foreign to us because military weaponry has made it obsolete.

However, this isn't the case with the spiritual so let's consider this well-known wall-building story in scripture to see what we can glean. (Refer to the book of Nehemiah.)

Now, Nehemiah, whose name means "Jehovah has comforted" has long been considered by Bible scholars to be a type or picture, both in name and action, of the Holy Spirit.

And although this picture is evident in many ways, herein we'll limit our consideration to his main effort – building the wall surrounding Jerusalem.

To begin, it's interesting to note that those who were oppressing the inhabitants of the area weren't concerned about them until someone arrived who wanted to help them (Neh 2:9, 10). That's how it is in the spirit as well – you'll generally discover spiritual opposition when you demonstrate a desire to be separate from the world so to speak. As long as you blend in, the opposition isn't concerned.

Sanballat and Tobiah, who epitomize this opposition, are interesting pictures as well. They vociferously challenged the wall building knowing that it would end their corrupt domination. Sanballat's name means "sin (or the moon god) has given life". As such, he is clearly representative of the sinful world and the lusts thereof. Tobiah, on the other hand, means "goodness of Jehovah" and thus is a representation of the traitorous compromiser or compromising sin nature. Both these enemies – the ungodly world around us and our own sin-natures, are menaces to our own wall building in the spirit. In Nehemiah, chapters two through six, we see that their tactics are:

- **Accusation** (Neh 2:29). Just as they accused Nehemiah of rebelling against the king, a tactic that had worked before (see Ezra 4), we are often reminded of our own sin and rebellious failings as we seek to 'build'.
- **Mockery** (Neh 4:1,2). This is intended to belittle, to make us believe that we are not up to the task of building, to disbelieve the scripture that says, *"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."* (Phi 4:13)
- **Doubts and degrading** (Neh 4:3). This is used to set us up to believe that our work in obedience to the Lord is worthless and meaningless which is absolutely not true. (1 Cor 15:58)
- **Anger, threatened attacks and confusion** (Neh 4:7,8). This is for intimidation. However, we must remember that there's a BIG difference between what the enemies threaten or plan and what they can actually do. Always remember, our Father is on the throne. (Col 2:14,15)
- **Fear** (Neh 4:10-12). When our faith fails, fear becomes an effective weapon. This is when we need to be reminded that, *"God has not given us a spirit of fear but of power, love and a strong mind."* (1Tim 1:7) Also, Jesus said, *"Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell."* (Mat 10:28)

- **Distractions** (Neh 6:1-4). This is a powerful strategy – if our enemy can just get us in a dialog... whoa! Remember, that's what happened to Eve. (Eph 5:11)
- **Lies and character assassination** (Neh 6:5-9, 10-13). These are saved until the end because they're the big guns so to speak. By this point, the work of wall building is nearly complete, and this is used to focus attention upon the wall builder – to accuse him of self-righteousness, self-promotion – to get people to believe that the motive and thus the character of the wall builder is suspect. Our motives must always be LOVING OBEDIENCE to our Lord – never self-satisfaction or elevation.

However, in submission to Nehemiah's guidance, the people who built displayed:

- **Courage** (Neh 4:14). *"Watch, stand fast in the faith, be brave, be strong. Let all that you do be done with love."* (1Cor 16:13,14)
- **Guarding** (Neh 4:13). This is alertness. (2Tim4:5, Eph 6:18)
- **Readiness** (Neh 4:16-18). By laboring with weapons in hand, they were an example of diligence and preparedness. The Bible tells us that the weapons of our warfare are spiritual and that we are to be at the ready as well. (2Cor 10:4, Eph 6:1113)
- **Honesty and cooperation** (Neh 4:19,20). Truthfulness about our 'wall-building' especially in prayer is paramount. It can be a big task. As my pastor says, "We're all 'projects.'" It doesn't help to pretend you're 'together' when you know you're not.
- **A mind to work** (Neh 4:6). This pictures faith and perseverance.
- **Clothed** (Neh 4:23). Clothed? Yes, this pictures putting full confidence in the robe of Christ's righteousness – wearing it and never putting it aside.

As a consequence, the wall surrounding Jerusalem was completed in just 52 days.

Now, this is radical, for that's the exact time between Christ's death on the cross and the outpouring of His Spirit on Pentecost. That is, it's the period between when the veil or barrier between God and man was torn open and the separation or barrier between the redeemed and the world was made obvious through the anointing of the Holy Spirit. Selah!

Now, it's important to understand, as we're discussing wall-building that we aren't talking about erecting some fortress mentality – individually or corporately – with respect to evangelism or our call to be salt and light in this world. Rather, we're dealing with the real, pragmatic need for spiritual defenses and personal holiness.

So, what do these walls represent? I'll suggest that they picture the strength or integrity of our mind or soul. You see, that's where the battles are really fought, aren't they? And the

gates represent our reasoning, reckoning or judgments – entry points so to speak. In fact, the Hebrew word for gate is derived from the verb meaning to reason, think or reckon.

David, in Psalm 51, after confessing his sin with Bathsheba, the failing of his character, prays, *“Do good in Thy good pleasure unto Zion: build the walls of Jerusalem.”*

In Psalm 122, we read, *“Peace be within thy walls.”* and are reminded of the scripture, *“Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on Thee because he trusts in Thee.”* (Isa 26:3)

So how then are my walls built? I know the Bible says to *“Gird up the loins of your mind.”* (1Pet 1:13) Practically, what does that mean? Hypnosis? Psycho-therapy? Primal scream?? No.

To answer that, let's look at who built the wall with Nehemiah. There are exactly 52 named individuals or groups who labored on the wall (again the number 52). Some commentators try to create some pretty exotic interpretations of this, and others are almost cynical in countering that there's nothing symbolic to be derived. I'll tell what I believe, and you can decide for yourself.

I've studied each individual and group and something consistent and powerful emerges – all of them have names that speak clearly of a condition or attitude of the redeemed. I won't cover them all – you can as you have opportunity – but let's look at a representative few (See Neh 3):

- Eliashib means 'God restores'
- Zaccur and the sons of Hassenaah combine to mean [He's] 'mindful [that we're] sons of thorny', that is, sons of Adam if you would.
- Jehoida means 'Jehovah knows'
- Meshullam means 'friend'
- Melatiah means 'Jehovah delivered'
- Jadon means 'thankful'
- Uzziel means 'my strength is God'
- Hannaniah means 'God has favored'
- Rephaiah means 'healed of Jehovah'
- Jedaiah means 'praised of Jehovah'
- Malchijah means 'my King is Jehovah'
- Hashabiah and Bevai combined to mean 'Jehovah has considered my goings'
- Azariah means 'Jehovah has ransomed'
- Zadok means 'righteous'

-- Shemaiah means 'heard by Jehovah

On and on it goes. Each one amplifies the unified chorus of the redeemed and as such, I'll suggest that they pretty dramatically represent the attitudes that edify the saint individually and the church corporately. The scripture says, *"Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy – meditate on these things."* (Phi 4:8)

So, John, are you telling me that by adopting the attitude of the redeemed, by being heavenly minded, that I build my walls of spiritual defense, that I am sanctified, and I become a major threat to the enemy of my soul? **Yep.**

OK, but I feel like I'm in a continual building project! I get a wall up and then there's a breach to fill again. What's up?

Breaches are the consequences of sin. In this life, our walls crumble because they are made of 'stone or brick' so to speak – they're earthy and imperfect. However, we must rebuild them in faith – faith that believes the truths expressed in the names of Nehemiah's men and women.

And as long as we are here, we'll need to continue a maintenance schedule if you would – continue believing, really believing, that we're redeemed and forgiven. I don't mean believing because we prayed a specific prayer, said the right words, had the right attitude or read the right scriptures. That's all good, but we're not forgiven because Father God has to and therefore does so grudgingly. We're not forgiven because of some sort of legal technicality or loop-hole. But the enemies of our souls want us to believe exactly that – if they can't convince us that we're lost, they want us to believe our sins are bad enough to diminish God's love toward us – that the cross may atone for them BUT...

Now, you may have carried some baggage around with you for quite some time believing just that – I did. You know your own 'earthiness', your own character flaws and failures. You know your own breaches and that you've been careless in guarding the 'gates' at times. Oh, you know you're forgiven, but you subtly doubt you're still ravishing in God's sight, still loved as passionately. You know you're accepted but doubt that you'll be welcomed in.

Listen. You're accepted and forgiven IN Christ because God loves you furiously, relentlessly, unabashedly, inexhaustibly – read Ephesians 1:3-6. Believe it! And although your present walls consist of 'stone and brick' (it's our present portion), God sees the end result -- the walls of your New Jerusalem (Rev 21:12-21) – magnificent, clear, sparkling gems – they speak

of your heavenly wall, your heavenly character (1Jn 3:2, 1Cor 13:12). Huge, perfect pearls – they portray the endless covering of your grit by His grace.

A final thought -- Isaiah prophesied that one day, “... *you shall call your walls Salvation, and your gates Praise.*”

Heavenly-mindedness, Selah!

THE GOOD SHEPHERD

A famous actor was once the guest of honor at a social gathering where he received many requests to recite favorite excerpts from various literary works. An old preacher who happened to be there asked the actor to recite the twenty-third Psalm. The actor agreed on the condition that the preacher would also recite it. The actor's recitation was beautifully intoned with great dramatic emphasis for which he received lengthy applause. The preacher's voice was rough and broken from many years of preaching, and his diction was anything but polished. But when he finished there was not a dry eye in the room. When someone asked the actor what made the difference, he replied "I know the psalm, but he knows the Shepherd."—author unknown

Do you know the Shepherd? It amazes me how many commentaries say that Jesus portrayed Himself as a shepherd because that's what the people in the agrarian society of the time knew and understood. I don't think that's the real story. From the earliest days of man's interaction with God until the end of time as we know it, the interaction of our Lord with us has been characteristic of a Good Shepherd.

Sure, David was a shepherd as a youth, and he wrote Psalms that reflected that in his praise and worship. Moses was a shepherd as well. But I don't buy for a moment the notion that God is simply playing a make-shift picture game when He talks about us as sheep and Himself as a shepherd. In fact, I would be much more inclined to believe that He intentionally fore-ordained and created the role of shepherding, good shepherding, to help us know Him better.

In any event, let's consider our Shepherd, Jesus. As we do, may God's Spirit open our hearts to lessons and reminders that challenge, comfort and compel us onward, following Him to 'higher ground', in fact, the highest.

First, we must understand that the words Pastor and Shepherd are synonymous. Pastors can of course be teachers of the Word, knee-deep in church administration, 24/7 counselors and worship leaders, etc.

A recent survey resulted in the attributes of the perfect pastor. Here are the results. A perfect pastor:

- Preaches his sermons in exactly 12 minutes
- Frequently condemns sin but never upsets anyone
- Works from 8:00 a.m. until midnight
- Serves as the church janitor and lawn keeper

- Makes \$100 per week, wears good clothes, buys good books, drives a nice car, and gives \$50 per week to the church.
- Is 28 years of age, and he's been preaching for 30 years
- Is wonderfully gentle and handsome
- Gives of himself completely but never gets too close to anyone lest he be criticized
- Speaks boldly on social issues, but must never become politically involved
- Has a burning desire to work with teenagers, and spends all his time with senior citizens
- Makes 15 calls daily to visit church members, visits the shut-ins and those in the hospital, spends all his time evangelizing the unchurched, and is always in his office when needed
- Prepares three or four inspiring lessons weekly from his lengthy hours in the study.

But, contrary to our 'crazy' expectations, first and foremost, the Word of God links the ministry of pastoring to that of being a shepherd – one who like the Good Shepherd, Jesus, cares for the sheep. Christ said, *"I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd gives his life for the sheep."* (Jn 10:11)

"The faithful pastor will, as an under-shepherd, display the same characteristics as the Good Shepherd. He will sacrifice for the sheep... He will be a shepherd and not a hireling who does not care about the sheep. The title pastor translates the same ancient Greek word used...for shepherd. It is a title that is only rightfully earned, not granted or assumed." – Guzik

"According to Jewish religious law, shepherds were unclean. Their line of work prevented them from participating in the feasts and holy days that made up the Jewish religious calendar. Why? Well, somebody had to watch the sheep. When everyone else was making the trip to Jerusalem to make sacrifices at the temple, or to participate in one of the annual feasts, they were out in the fields, watching over the sheep. A modern-day example might be a trucker or a shift worker, whose job keeps them from regularly attending church. It wasn't really their fault. But they were looked down on, from a religious point of view. Whatever might have been in their hearts, they weren't able to participate fully in the religious life of the community."

"Not only that, but shepherds were borderline social outcasts. Since they were constantly on the move to find new pasture for their flocks, they were looked on with suspicion. Kind of the way people today might look at gypsies, or carnival workers. They were often accused of being thieves. If something came up missing – it must have been those shepherds.

They were not permitted to give testimony in a legal proceeding, because their word wasn't considered trustworthy."

"Most of the time, they were living out in the fields. This was not a 40-hour a week job. They didn't come home at night. They were with the sheep 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. During the day, they led the sheep to grass and water. They watched while the sheep grazed. They kept an eye out for predators like wolves. And at night, they actually slept in the sheep pen with the sheep to guard against theft and animal attack. A good shepherd could identify each one of his sheep by sight." – Alan Perkins

As you might expect, the world and worldly religionists abhor this role – oh, not the honored title but the 'job description'. In fact, this is typified clearly in the first mention of shepherds in the Bible. In the book of Genesis, when Jacob brought all his family to Egypt to escape the famine, Joseph, his son, arranged for them to live separately in the land of Goshen saying that they should make it clear to Pharaoh that they were keepers of livestock, "...for every shepherd is an abomination unto the Egyptians." (Gen 46:34)

Now consider this in concert with the fact that Jesus Himself is referred to in scripture not only as a shepherd but as the Good Shepherd, the Great Shepherd and the Chief Shepherd. These adjectives can also be translated Beautiful, Mega-, and Original. Get the picture? Christ is the real deal, the original, the only and authentic standard as a shepherd. Is it any wonder Jesus said, "*If the world [Egypt] hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you.*" (John 15:18)

So, what kind of shepherd is He? First, He's the kind that goes before the flock – Num 27:17. Now, if you're a 'gung-ho' kind of person, you may think He'll just be getting in your way. You would rather that He follow behind like a cowboy yippin' and yappin', driving you onward or on the sidelines like a cheerleader jumping and shouting, motivating you to win. In reality, whether aggressive or timid, most of us try to take the lead in our own lives most of the day, most every day. Yet, He goes before us because He knows the way. He knows it all! If you really want Him in the background or on the sidelines, you don't yet know Him as your Shepherd.

Next, He's the kind of shepherd that provides for His flock – Psa 23:1. Of course, spiritual provision – feeding of the Word, comfort, encouragement, counsel, faith, hope and love, etc. are the most important provisions He gives, but this is inclusive of physical provision as well. The old KJV says, "*The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want.*" That does not mean He fulfills the lusts of our greedy little hearts. The word "want" means lack. In other words, the Good Shepherd will take care of your needs. And for many if not most of us, this is where the

rub is – we think we know what our needs are. Yet, because we rarely if ever see the big picture of what God is doing in our lives, we can be misled in this. Usually, however, our desperation is simply God's preparation. Along with me, I'm sure you've discovered that He is faithful.

Next, He's the kind of shepherd who leads His flock to still waters – Psa 23:2. At first, this may not seem like such a big deal, but you should understand that sheep need still waters to drink. Typically, rushing waters are intimidating to them. Sure, rushing, gushing, bubbling rapids are pretty to look at, but it's the still waters from which the sheep will drink deeply. The Good Shepherd knows His flock. He does not lead them to risky waters even if they look pretty or exciting. The Good Shepherd is discerning and loves His flock. Sheep don't swim.

Next, He's the kind of shepherd who makes the flock lie down in green pastures – Psa 23:2. He's not in a hurry. Many of us think of life as consisting of nothing more than a series of getting from points A to points B. Yet, these words are poetic in nature – this place of rest is where the grass is fresh, tender new sprouts – tasty, easy chewing. Also, the word pasture here comes from the word meaning comely or beautiful. So, of course, there are both spiritual and physical applications.

Sheep will not rest until they are free from hunger. A hungry sheep is always on its feet, searching for another mouth of food, trying to satisfy its gnawing hunger. In Israel, green pastures didn't just happen by chance. Shepherds had to search hard for green areas or cultivate them themselves. But when a sheep had eaten enough, when it was free from fear, tension and aggravation, it would lie down.

Next, He's the kind of shepherd who restores our souls – Psa 23:3. Now, restore means to return or bring back and the word used for soul here, according to Strong, means "soul, self, life, creature, person, appetite, mind, living being, desire, emotion, passion". This Shepherd doesn't give up on you when you're in the muck and mire of the world or when your character is filled with fault. His heart is bent on restoring you, the real you. Yes, there's an unreal you as well that's about to be discarded because it is temporal, carnal and corrupted by sin. It is dead in Christ while the real, eternal you is God's restoration project. It is the Good Shepherd's good work. (See Phi 1:6 and Heb 13:21)

"There is an Old English shepherd's term called a "cast" sheep. This is a sheep that has turned over on its back and can't get back up again. It happens frequently. And when it happens, all the sheep can do is lie on its back, with its feet flaying frantically in the air. Sometimes it will bleat, but usually it will just kick."

“If the shepherd doesn’t arrive within a short time, the sheep will die. That’s one of the reasons why a shepherd is always looking over its flock, counting them to see if they are all on their feet. If one is missing, he thinks, “One of my sheep is cast and I’ve got to find it.””

“This is the thought behind the parable of the 99 sheep and the one that went astray. Many times, a shepherd will search for hours for a single sheep, only to find it on its back, lying helpless. He will turn the sheep over on its side, rub its legs to restore circulation, then lift it to its feet. After a while the sheep will stumble and stagger, and then eventually walk steadily and surely.”

“That’s probably what David had in mind when he said, *“He restoreth my soul”* because that’s how our Lord treats us. We stumble and fall, we become so helpless. And yet our shepherd is patient and tender and helpful in getting us back on our feet.” – Alan Smith

Next, He’s the kind of Shepherd who leads the flock in paths of righteousness – Psa 23:3. Oh, how I love this about my Shepherd. The picture here is not one of the shepherd wading through some overgrown jungle with machete in hand, chopping away, clearing a barely negotiable opening through uncharted territory. Rather, the words speak clearly of a well-worn pathway, one well-traveled. Why is this?

Simply because He’s been there many times before and many sheep like you have followed His footsteps securely. In similar fashion, Paul wrote, *“Finally, my brethren, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things to you, to me indeed is not grievous, but for you it is safe.”* – Phi 3:1

Contrary to the conditioning of our culture, we would be better served to appreciate more what’s right and true spiritually than what’s bright and new.

Next, He’s the kind of Shepherd who comforts, protects and disciplines the flock – Psa 23:4. In fact, His comfort comes specifically from His protection and discipline. You see, the Good Shepherd carries a rod and a staff. With the former, He smacks attackers; with the latter, He pulls me out of the predicaments I’ve stumbled into and even adjusts my course now and then with a merciful ‘swat’. Now, you may think, ‘protecting me from an enemy is certainly comforting but how does this disciplinary ‘course correction’ work? How is it comforting?’

Simply put, the Lord only disciplines His children (Heb 12:6-8). The very fact that He deals with you when you need it (and you know you need it now and then) assures you that He loves you too much to let you continue in that way you’ve taken. You can enjoy the comfort of knowing He sees you and treats you as His child.

Next, He’s the kind of Shepherd who gathers the lambs in His arm and carries them in His bosom – Isa 40:11. Some shepherds minister very much ‘at arm’s length’, but the Good

Shepherd carries those who are young in the faith very close to His heart. Their burdens are His burdens. He knows their weakness and vulnerability. But, once they know His loving voice and strong affectionate arms, they'll not leave His side.

Next, He's the kind of Shepherd who gently leads those who are with young – Isa 40:11. He knows our limitations. As He leads us onward, we can rest assured that He knows our condition and has adjusted the pace. Spiritual progress for some of us simply has to come gently.

Next, He's the kind of Shepherd who searches out the lost – Luk 15:1-6. Invitations from the pulpit are beautiful, but the picture here is of the One who sets everything aside to go looking for His lost lamb. His utter dedication to each and every one in the flock is obvious.

From the time He called out to Adam and Eve in the Garden, "Where are you?" to His death on Calvary and even unto today, His mind has been dedicated to recovering all. Quite simply, He knows the pain of losing loved ones. How or why they ended up lost is never the main point with Him. As with the prodigal son, He wants us to learn from our errors, but no mistake, no sin is so grievous that His loving grace is insufficient. He knows the lost cannot find their way back into His arms on their own. And because each one means the whole universe to Him, He cannot settle for 99 out of 100. He searches them out.

But the most emphatic statements from Jesus about being a shepherd are found in John 10 and the most obvious conclusion we draw from studying them is that, above all, the shepherd knows his sheep. And his sheep know him. *"I am the good shepherd, and know my sheep, and am known of mine."* (Jn 10:14)

At the risk of seeming simplistic, I believe that the great preponderance of problems in the church, both in the pulpit and the pew, are traceable to this fundamental issue. Knowing the sheep and knowing the Shepherd. There are many, and quite plausible, excuses for shepherds not knowing the sheep, but if you're a shepherd and you don't, you're missing a fundamental point in the role. In imitating Christ, it is the principle point.

On the other hand, knowing the Shepherd is requisite to being a part of His flock. You can know everything about Him and yet never know Him. To know Him is to love Him is to Know Him is to Love Him is to KNOW Him is to LOVE Him... Do you want to know Him more?

Jesus often leads us out of our comfort zone so He can reveal something to us about Himself.

He tells us to launch out into the deep so He can reveal something to us about Himself (Luk 8:22-25).

He takes us by the hand and leads us out of the city blind so He can reveal something to us about Himself (Mar 8:22-25).

He calls us up into a high mountain apart so He can reveal something to us about Himself (Mat 17:1-8).

The problem is that most people won't follow Him up or out or over, because they don't really want to know Jesus. There is something interesting about the word "know" in Philippians 3:10. It is the Greek word "Ginosko" which is a Jewish idiom for the word "intercourse". The same way Adam knew Eve and Eve conceived -- it implies intimacy.

To know Jesus requires such intimacy where we want to do something for Him because He was willing to do something for us. Some people want to know the blessings, but they don't want to know Jesus. Some people want to know the power of His resurrection, but they don't want to experience His resurrection. For you see, experiencing His resurrection requires a dying process, dying to self.

But there is no better Shepherd and no better fold than His.

The Pastor Posture

John 21:1 - 19

Seven disciples and an all-nighter. Nothing to show for it. Almost like their nets were broken.

After Jesus' resurrection, after He had spoken with His followers but before His ascension, these fellows were back in their old stomping grounds and turning to their old trade.

"Simon Peter said to them, 'I am going fishing.'"

"They said to him, 'We are going with you also.' They went out and immediately got into the boat, and that night they caught nothing."

In order to appreciate what's happening in this chapter, we need to take a look at the previous chapter of John's gospel. There, he concludes with,

"And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name."

In the first 20 chapters, he spelled out his version of the good news to lead people to faith in Christ. But then, in the last chapter of his book, he launched into something different. It is not directed to those just coming to faith in Jesus; it rather speaks to those who have known Him and yet are in need. In need of what? Glad you asked.

You see, as awed and overjoyed as these ragamuffins were with their risen Savior, they were surely discouraged and down on themselves for their own behavior – Peter, as you recall, not many days earlier dished out some satanic advice to Jesus concerning the cross and then denied vigorously ever knowing Him at His trial. After the resurrection, Thomas was filled with an almost defiant doubt that Jesus was alive again. James and John certainly remembered disputing with the others when they desired thrones on the left and right of Christ's. Nathanael and the others deserted Jesus, leaving Him in the garden like a bunch of scared cats. Surely, it was on their minds and they must have pondered just how do you face such glorious majesty when your life includes such a travesty of failures? Peter had once told Jesus, *"Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!"* (Luke 5:8)

Even a relatively righteous man is confronted with his short comings before a perfect holy Lord. Isaiah the prophet, beholding the glory of God said, *“Woe is me, for I am undone!”* (Isa 6:5)

I suggest that these guys weren’t fishing for enjoyment. They were in the retreat of guilt and condemnation. And they caught nothing. You recall Jesus told them,

“Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing.”
(John 15:4,5)

Yes, indeed, their ‘nets’ if you would, were broken.

“But when the morning had now come, Jesus stood on the shore; yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. Then Jesus said to them, ‘Children, have you any food?’ They answered Him, ‘No.’”

Now, everyone knows that it’s rare to find an honest fisherman. (ha) But, these guys didn’t even have a story about the one that got away. Their two-letter answer said volumes.

”And He said to them, ‘Cast the net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some.’ So, they cast, and now they were not able to draw it in because of the multitude of fish. Therefore, that disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, ‘It is the Lord!’”

John recognized the handiwork of the Lord and perhaps that’s one reason why this story was special to him. Undoubtedly, he remembered a similar event that had marked the beginning of his own discipleship. (See Luke 5:1-11)

“Now when Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on his outer garment (for he had removed it) and plunged into the sea.”

Fascinating! How many of you know that if you want to swim well, you don’t drape yourself in a coat or cloak. Clearly, this was something that stuck out in John’s memory as well. What was Peter thinking?

Was he trying to prove something to the Lord? Why was his outer garment necessary? Obviously, he was so thrilled that he didn’t want to wait for the boat to get to shore and the fish were the last thing on his mind. But he wanted that covering. He didn’t want to approach his Lord ‘in the buff’ so to speak. He was zealous to come to Jesus but careful to be covered. I suggest that it was another indication of the self-consciousness born from the awareness of his sin. Adam and Eve did the same thing back in the garden of Eden. (See Gen 3:7)

“But the other disciples came in the little boat (for they were not far from land, but about two hundred cubits), dragging the net with fish. Then, as soon as they had come to land, they saw a fire of coals there, and fish laid on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, ‘Bring some of the fish which you have just caught.’”

Many good sermons have used these verses to affirm God’s ability to provide the things we need – that we inevitably wind up tired, hungry and empty handed when we launch out on our own. If we will but turn to Christ, He will provide.

But that is not what I think the primary message is here. Jesus was clearly inviting fellowship. Isn’t His grace and love obvious. Rather than a lecture or rebuke, a breakfast is prepared – a welcome back meal. Jesus is the same yesterday, today and forever! These guys probably thought the Lord was bitterly disappointed with them and on the lookout for others who would be more faithful and less bumbling.

But of Jesus, it is written, *“A bruised reed He will not break, and smoking flax He will not quench;”* (Isa 42:3) He even credits them with catching the fish! Ha!

“Simon Peter went up and dragged the net to land, full of large fish, one hundred and fifty-three; and although there were so many, the net was not broken.”

Don’t you just love this guy? First, he leaves the others to drag this haul of fish so large that they couldn’t take it in the little boat. And now, when he notes the Lord’s interest in the fish, he jumps up and single-handedly drags the whole catch to shore.

“Why do you suppose the number of fishes is recorded? And why are we told the net was not broken? Earlier, in a similar miracle, Luke says when they took in a haul miraculously, the net broke (5:6).”

“This speaks of evangelism. In the amphitheater, in ‘crusades’, the Gospel is preached, and a haul is taken in, but not all who respond will continue on. In the Parable of the Soils, only one in four goes on to bear abundant fruit (Matthew 13). Consequently, when we baptize 60 or 80 people on a Sunday morning, I know not everyone is going to go on and bring forth fruit abundantly. But of those who are truly in the Kingdom, of those who are brought to shore, not one will be lost. Each one will be accounted for exactly. Thus, as this scenario unfolds, Jesus shows Peter and John that they are not only fishers of men, but tenders of sheep.”

“You see, in the arena of evangelism, we cannot deal with statistics because we can’t see men’s hearts. But in shepherding ministry — in pastoring, in discipling, in parenting — we must account for every sheep. We must be aware of the brother or sister in need of tending, of touch, of care. Whose job is this? Yours and mine together. Those of us who love the Lord have the joint responsibility of saying, ‘Where is #151? I gotta go find him.’” (Jon Courson)

Yes, the net did not break and that caught John's attention. You see, John was a net mender. Jesus found him doing just that when He called him to follow (See Matt 4:21) and we know from both scripture as well as church history that John was a mender of 'nets' within the body of Christ. Also, there's nothing like a friendly meal to help mend a discouraged heart. So...

"Jesus said to them, 'Come and eat breakfast.' Yet none of the disciples dared ask Him, 'Who are You?'--knowing that it was the Lord."

Surely, they recognized the miraculous haul of fish just as John did. But there was more -- His manner, His kindness and then... His servant-heart --

"Jesus then came and took the bread and gave it to them, and likewise the fish. This is now the third time Jesus showed Himself to His disciples after He was raised from the dead. "

This gives me such hope. These guys had physically witnessed the resurrected Savior twice before (all right -- just once for you Thomas) and they still wound up in a dumpy, fishless, all night boon-doggie. How often I've mused, 'If I could just see Jesus, just once, I'd be so faithful, so obedient, so...' but it wasn't just seeing the Savior that changed these guys, that drew them on and motivated them to give their all for Jesus. It was loving Him. *"For the love of Christ compels us..."* (2 Cor 5:14)

"So, when they had eaten breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, 'Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me more than these?'"

"He said to Him, 'Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.'"

"He said to him, 'Feed My lambs.'"

OK, all of you net-menders -- take note. Jesus referred to either the fish or the fishermen when He said, "...more than these", but that's not the most important issue. Peter was addressed as Simon which connotes the opposite of Peter. Simon implies wishy-washy or go-with-the-flow. Peter means rock. This is relevant but not the key for our lesson either.

The word for love He used was 'agapao' which means to love dearly. With this, the target was revealed. The question was perfect. The issue is, always has been and always will be -- love. Loving God supremely.

Simon searched his heart. He was on the spot. His honest answer was, "Lord, you know I 'phileo' You." Or "I like you." Phileo means love, but it is not at all the caliber of 'agapao'. It is more akin to friendship.

"He said to him again a second time, 'Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me?'"

“He said to Him, ‘Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.’”

“He said to him, ‘Tend My sheep.’”

In this second question, there was no comparison. Jesus simply asked, “Do you agapao Me?” It is interesting that, as with the first round, Peter said, “Yes” but qualified it by again saying that he ‘phileo’ed Jesus. Clearly, Peter was confessing that he did not have this agapao love for Christ. Consequently, Christ ‘notched’ it down again...

“He said to him the third time, ‘Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me?’ Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, ‘Do you love Me?’”

“And he said to Him, ‘Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You.’”

“Jesus said to him, ‘Feed My sheep.’”

This time, Jesus used ‘phileo’. He said, “Simon, do you phileo Me?” and Peter was grieved or literally ‘thrown into sorrow or sadness’ not because of three questions but because the third one was the one he had been so bitter about – he phileo’ed but he also failed.

Jesus started with “Do you agapao Me more than these?” or “Do you love Me supremely.” Then, He simply asked, “Do you agapao Me?” And then, He concluded with, “Do you phileo Me?”

Now, one good explanation for this is that Jesus was restoring Peter regarding his three denials. However, there is something more here to be understood. To love God supremely has been the foundation and essence of His desire for us from the beginning. (See Mat 22:37; Deut 13:3) Peter, who had spent some three years in the presence of Christ, had witnessed the crucifixion and then the resurrected Messiah could not confess to this kind of love. Yet, Christ was not surprised or disturbed. Rather, what John, the apostle of love observed and presented to us was a mending of Peter’s ‘net’ and a revelation of Christ’s heart for all who would minister to His people.

Jesus didn’t refer in this passage to the coming power of the Holy Spirit. That came later. He did however lay out a clear path to supreme love which of course is the fruit of the Spirit. In that, He gave Peter three charges, each associated with a degree of devotion. Beginning with the last one and moving backward chronologically, let’s examine them closely.

At entry level so to speak, (v17) in His third interchange with Peter, Jesus said to him, the transliteration “bosko mou probaton” which is translated “Feed My sheep.” Indeed, bosko means feed and mou means my or mine, but probaton more appropriately means any four-footed grazer. Jesus was saying, “OK, Simon, you phileo Me. Feed my four-footed grazers.”

This is the proverbial step in the right direction. Mending nets takes time, and the best thing to do is to get busy helping others – feed their souls – get out of your pit of self – leave the conundrum of your sin nature in the Lord's hands. Start feeding His grazers. At this point, that's probably all they look like to you – they belong to the Lord, but they're just grazers.

Now, for the second interchange -- progressing heavenward toward agapao love, to love Jesus dearly, there is the associated, "poimaino mou probaton" (v16). This is best translated as "Tend my grazers as a herdsman." At this point, it is more than feeding, it's tending. The typical Middle Eastern herdsman in tending his master's property would watch for enemies of the herd, defend the herd, heal the wounded, find and save the lost or trapped and love the herd so as to earn their trust. These herdsman, contrary to the way we do in the west, would walk before, and the animals would follow.

Deeper, holier love has associated with it, deeper commitment and involvement with those God loves. There is a greater giving out. Jesus said, "*By this shall all men know that you are my disciples, if you have love one to another.*" (John 13:35) Specifically, agape love. When feeding becomes tending, when phileo becomes agapao, that's when the world begins to recognize us as Christ's. Many dear people in ministry get stuck in the phileo and feeding. They teach, teach, teach but they don't reach out in compassion and real self-sacrificial tending of God's 'grazers'. (Ouch!)

OK, now for the first interchange -- the summit is heaven's love – a supreme love for God – to agapao Him "more than these". It makes no difference what the word "these" refers to; it's ambiguous because it simply means more than anything else. Associated with this, Jesus charges Peter to "bosko mou arnion". With "bosko", we're back to feeding, but the key is that we're no longer feeding just any four-footed grazers. "Arnion" means "little lambs". Little lambs are nursed. Nursing is feeding in close quarters. It's intimate. It's not just leading the way into green pastures or tossing some grain their way. The sustenance is coming from you, from your heart. And it might hurt a bit. It is when we have this kind of love that we see the herd as a flock and, by the way, not as a bunch of old ewes or rams but little lambs. We see God's children as He sees them. This is also important for it is how Jesus Himself is seen in heaven. In Revelation, He is described as such 24 times. You might say that when our love for Jesus is agapao and supreme, we see Him in His people.

Peter and the boys had gone fishing apart from Christ's direction. That's pretty clear because they came up empty, they caught 'nada'. They'd gone their own way. And recall, Peter had girded himself before diving into the water – the natural response of the self-willed

man or woman before a holy, loving God. It is because we are ashamed that we sense our loveless heart must be covered.

However, playing upon this circumstance, Jesus foretold that he would completely change, that he would one day give his life for his Lord.

“Most assuredly, I say to you, when you were younger (or until now and for some time), you girded yourself and walked where you wished; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish.’ This He spoke, signifying by what death he would glorify God. And when He had spoken this, He said to him, ‘Follow Me.’”

In closing, I submit that our church corporately is hurting for lack of pastors, not just in name or title but in truth. Oh, we have lots of wonderfully dedicated people in the pulpit teaching and preaching and most are there with a deeply sincere heart to love and tend God’s people. But our churches as a whole simply don’t model the life and ministry of Christ. Today’s churches are businesses with slogans and growth plans that mimic corporate business strategies. We have equated size with success while multitudes in our midst remain untended.

I suggest that there are manifold more pastors in our family than we would have ever believed. From our text we can see that while ‘nursing shepherds’ is the ministry associated with loving Christ supremely, in many places it’s nearly impossible to even get an appointment with the pastor. We’ve got it wrong in this approach.

Gifted oratory and good organization are not necessarily synonymous with spiritual health and growth even if multitudes attend. Someone once said, “A big church is like a battleship and a battleship can do a lot more damage to Satan than a rowboat.” That’s probably true, but that ship will surely sink if it’s holey rather than holy.

I humbly urge each of us to consider what Jesus said to Peter and how it may apply to us and to our family in Christ. And may God raise up in our midst many, many more with the gifting and grace to pastor – to feed, to tend and to nurse as He leads.

Turned Out of Eden

They were turned out of Eden - flaming swords at the entrance barring any return. For Adam and Eve, home was lost and what they faced outside the garden would never truly attract their souls again. Their new reality was horrendously challenging. He had to learn how to survive by growing food or searching for it. She faced monstrous insecurity, painful childbearing and they both endured bitter tragedies. Paradise became a pit, a sad parody of purpose.

He was turned out of Egypt - flaming tempers in Pharaoh's court barring any return. For Moses, home was lost and what he faced outside of Egypt was a desert wilderness. His new reality was humiliating. He learned to survive by chasing sheep and goats with a stick and fighting over precious water. Previous privilege became a parched corner of nowhere, a pitiful and constant reminder of his loss.

He was turned out of Jerusalem - flaming betrayals in his own family and inner circle of friends hot on his heels. For David, home was lost and what he faced in running away was disgrace, alienation and the threat of death from those he loved. He learned to survive by surrendering his own will to the Almighty. Potentate became a persecuted pawn, a pilgrim in his own land.

These and many other stories from the scripture, as well as our own experiences, affirm a powerful principle of God's plan for us in our earthly existence – pilgrimage. Someone once told me, "Everything, good or bad, is for a season." And that is terribly important for us to understand and embrace for at least two reasons.

First, ever since Eden, our hearts have longed for a real home, for the eternal security of God's presence and fellowship. We were created with that spiritual 'instinct'. However, everything in this life fights against and frustrates that God-given desire.

Second, our fleshly nature is always rooting itself in this world, thus drawing out from the soil of sin the deadness and dullness of Satan's desire. You see, both the spiritual and physical natures within us are ever intent upon their separate homes.

Thus, God's program for our preservation necessitates a pilgrimage, a sojourning, a constant trek of faith. And in this travel, He tells us that our inner man must look ahead in hope while our outer nature must repeatedly die. Neither one can truly satisfy its homeward goal in the here and now.

In fact, the “pot gets stirred”, so to speak, every once in a while, to remind us of this principle - loved ones die, jobs are lost, betrayal, bankruptcy and so on. Of course, that stirring up or turmoil that comes our way is part of the warfare in which we’ve been commissioned to engage. Generally, though, we are inclined in those times to dwell within the pain and discouragement of the moment and that’s understandable.

However, if as a child of God, we are endeavoring to be spiritually minded, these disasters can and should serve to ultimately refocus our hearts upon the temporal nature of life here and the promises of eternal realities ahead. We mustn’t let the trials of this life steal that hope away. Rather we must ever embrace the notion of pilgrimage.

When the patriarch Jacob was nearing the end of his tumultuous life, he stood before Pharaoh and said, *“The days of the years of my pilgrimage are one hundred and thirty years. Few and evil have been the days of the years of my life.”* (Gen 47:9)

In fact, all the saints before us have had this attitude. The scripture says, *“These all died in faith, not having received the promises but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For those who say such things declare plainly that they seek a heavenly home.”* (Heb 11:13,14)

And there’s the key; did you catch it? They saw the promises afar off and were thus assured. Friend, what are you looking forward to? A heavenly home? Like the faithful who have preceded us, can you see it? The promises are for pilgrims. Uttered by our Shepherd, they draw us on through the storms and trials, leading us home - back into the presence of God.

Like a bride’s dreams of sharing a home with her groom, our love for heaven should be overflowing and contagious, just as our love for God should be (Revelation 19:7). Our passion for God and our passion for heaven should be inseparable.

The more I learn about God, the more excited I get about heaven. The more I learn about heaven, the more excited I get about God.

How it must wound the heart of our bridegroom to see us clinging to this roach-infested hovel called earth, dreading the thought of leaving it, when he has hand-built a magnificent estate for us, a place beautiful and wondrous beyond measure.

“What’s your attitude toward heaven, your theology of heaven? Does it fill you with joy and excitement? How much thought do you give to heaven? How often do you and your church and your family talk about it?”

“If you lack a passion for heaven, I can almost guarantee it’s because you have a weak, deficient, and distorted theology of heaven. (Or you’re making choices that conflict with

heaven's agenda.) A robust, accurate, and biblically energized view of heaven will bring you a new spiritual passion." (Randy Alcorn)

Now, the Bible does give us some clues about heaven. Let's consider them.

At the beginning, Eden itself was an earthly type or picture of heaven – God created it specifically as a place of wondrous fellowship with Him. Man didn't earn it or discover it – God placed him in it when it was complete. It was a place of innocence and beauty. In like manner, Jesus said,

"I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also. And where I go you know, and the way you know." (John 14:2,3)

When we are in heaven we will be like Jesus in many ways – David praised with confidence saying,

"I will behold your face in righteousness; I shall be satisfied when I awake with your likeness." (Psa 17:15)

John the apostle wrote, "...we shall be like Him." (1 John 3:2)

In fact, in the course of receiving the Revelation, he twice mistakenly took a fellow believer in heaven to be Jesus and was corrected for worshipping in error. (Rev 19:10, 22:9)

We will also have new bodies – clothing, if you would, for our spirits that is made for eternity, and on top of that, new characters or natures. In fact, the scriptures promise that we shall know even as we are known. How wonderful that both of these gifts will be completely free from sin and death. (Phi 3:20,21; 1 Cor 15:42-44, Rom 8:23 and 1 John 3:2)

One famous author put it this way:

"Think of perfect obedience to the Ten Commandments. Having no other gods before the Lord: Easy, we will be one with Him. I don't know about you, but I would love to tiptoe alongside the ranks of the seraphim and harmonize as they constantly proclaim day and night, 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty.'"

"Jealousy? You and I will have nothing but admiration for whomever is selected to sit on the right and left hand of Christ."

"Keeping the Sabbath? We will have entered God's seventh and final day, the Sabbath-rest of peace and joy for eternity."

"Adultery? I will love everyone as perfectly as Christ loves, and I will never be grieved with the thought that I am slighted by those I love or that their love is not fully and fondly returned. I will find in every person that facet of the Lord's loveliness that only he or

she can uniquely reflect – I'm going to be in love with a mountain of people, both men and women!"

"Coveting? We will be joint-heirs with Christ. We'll have everything."

"Bearing false witness: The father of lies will be dead. The flesh will no longer entice us to lie. Only truth will spring from our heart."

"Misusing the name of the Lord? Only praise will be on our lips. Never a hurtful thought."

"Oh, happy day, we shall have the mind of Christ! And with the mind of Christ we shall 'know fully.'" (Joni Eareckson Tada)

There will be no more pain or sorrow but rather fullness of joy. In all our existence, we have nothing to compare this with. We simply cannot imagine it. It's like asking a blind man to visualize the colors in a rainbow. Regarding this heavenly condition, we have all been born blind. Nevertheless, the promise will be fulfilled. God cannot lie and cannot fail.

The joyfulness, love and awe of heaven is not momentary or temporary but rather complete and yet ever expanding. We can see this modeled in the book of Revelation wherein those extraordinary beings (described simply as "living") who are closest to the throne of God and of the Lamb are continually overwhelmed with awe and thus are ever proclaiming the holiness of our Lord. Again, our earthly mind cannot truly conceive of this dynamic and thus we tend to trivialize it.

In C.S. Lewis' Narnia stories, one of Aslan's creatures is departing that land for heaven and declares, "I have come home at last! This is the land I have been looking for all my life, though I never knew it till now."

That's simply because it is God who makes heaven what it is – paradise. It is His presence, His divine nature, His life, light, love, grace and goodness. All our pilgrimage here is a passage from death and darkness unto the glorious presence of our living and life-giving Savior. It is a journey of faith in Christ. He is true. He will come. You will see.

Wising Up

It was Satan's first and best shot.

Remember the old Indiana Jones movie where Jones and the bad guys get to the cave in search of the Holy Grail? They had to choose wisely to get the cup which brought life. In Eden, to be like God was the temptation, specifically, to have His wisdom. You see, when Eve looked at the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, she saw “...*that the tree was good for food, that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree desirable to make one wise...*”

Yet, as for nutritional value and visual beauty – these things could most assuredly have been attributed to many, many trees in the garden, so the first two observations she made were not really ‘the hook’. Satan had told her that if she ate of the fruit, she would be like God, knowing good and evil. And, this is what she desired, this wisdom – this was the bait and the hook so to speak. As you know, when she ate of it, her eyes were opened, but the wisdom she received was not God's.

And this is the real problem, isn't it? Ever since, man in his egocentric nature has always considered himself as wiser than God. That's because the source of this worldly wisdom is a dark, deceptive enemy bent on our destruction.

Now, the third thing that Jesus is proclaimed to be worthy of in heaven (see Rev 5:12) is wisdom. If we are among those gathered around the throne proclaiming His worthiness, we will be praising Him all the more sincerely if we know why He is worthy of each of the seven things mentioned. We've looked at power and riches in two earlier essays. Herein, we'll consider wisdom – why is Jesus in particular worthy of it?

To answer that, we will look at what the scriptures have to say about wisdom, its characteristics and fruit and then finally its part in the overall plan of God.

The nature of wisdom is directly attributable to its source. In the garden of Eden, there wasn't yet an economic system so a lust for mammon (i.e. material goods) was not a valid temptation. Neither was nicer clothing tempting, nor finer food. Fame couldn't be used since there weren't any other people. In fact, virtually all the things we would consider as temptations to our own sinful hearts were simply non-starters for Satan – so how do you tempt true innocence?

The only thing Adam and Eve could recognize as a deficiency, if you would, in their existence was linked to their desire to be more like the One who made them. In their sinless situation, I submit that it was a perfectly natural desire and one that we as believers share.

Perhaps the time they spent in direct fellowship with God left them with such inspiration and awe that they truly wanted to be like their Maker.

Now, we all know the Genesis story. Satan deceived them while fostering the notion that God did not want them to be like Him – that is, to have His wisdom. Of course, we have the benefit of the scriptures that tell us just the opposite.

1 John 3:2 says, *“Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.”*

While, 1 John 4:17 says, *“Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness in the day of judgment; because as He is, so are we in this world.”*

And James wrote in James 1:5, *“If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him.”*

So, we now know that the very things which the devil said were not in God’s heart have been revealed in Christ Jesus to be His sincere intentions after all.

Nevertheless, Satan offered ‘wisdom’ and in doing so he enticed Eve with the ‘method’, but he didn’t specify the source – himself. Yes, our enemy has his own brand of wisdom – one that insanely perceives the wisdom of God as foolishness. Keep in mind that mankind did not originally have a desire to rebel against God but rather a desire to be more like God. The devil used that to snare and enslave us in the same way demented cult leaders use it to create their own followings.

In speaking to the Prince of Tyre (the son of the King of Tyre who is the picture of Satan- thus, potentially a picture of the Antichrist), the Bible says,

*“Because your heart is lifted up,
And you say, ‘I am a god,
I sit in the seat of gods,
In the midst of the seas,’
Yet you are a man, and not a god,
Though you set your heart as the heart of a god
(Behold, you are wiser than Daniel!
There is no secret that can be hidden from you!
With your wisdom and your understanding
You have gained riches for yourself,
And gathered gold and silver into your treasuries;
By your great wisdom in trade you have increased your riches,*

And your heart is lifted up because of your riches),” (Eze 28:2-5)
And to the King of Tyre (Satan) it says,
“You were in Eden, the garden of God; ...
Your heart was lifted up because of your beauty;
You corrupted your wisdom for the sake of your splendor;” (Eze 28:13,17)

Thus, Satan’s wisdom, though corrupted, became mankind’s. As such, it is the wisdom of this corrupted world. Here’s what the scriptures have to say about it:

“Where is the wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the disputer of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world through [Satan’s] wisdom did not know God, it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe.” 1 Cor 1:20,21

“However, we speak wisdom among those who are mature, yet not the wisdom of this age, nor of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing. But we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God ordained before the ages for our glory,” 1 Cor 2:6,7

“Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you seems to be wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God.” 1 Cor 3:18, 19

As for Satan’s wisdom, it says, “This wisdom does not descend from above, but is earthly, sensual, demonic.” And it adds, “But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy.” Jam 3:15, 17

Yes, God’s wisdom is entirely different from the devil’s. And, He has spoken of it plainly throughout the Bible. For instance:

“And God gave Solomon wisdom and exceedingly great understanding, and largeness of heart like the sand on the seashore.” 1 Kings 4:29

*“Behold, You desire truth in the inward parts,
And in the hidden part You will make me to know wisdom.” Psalms 51:6*

“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom;” Psalms 111:10

*“Happy is the man who finds wisdom,
And the man who gains understanding;” Proverbs 3:13*

*“For wisdom is better than rubies,
And all the things one may desire cannot be compared with her.” Proverbs 8:11*

Now, as we saw above, Satan and his servants, mankind, have used his wisdom to gain material prosperity and a false sense of security. This has always led to great pride which is the fundamental sin of the devil. (See Isa 14:12-15)

Conversely, God has consistently used His wisdom to create blessings for others –

“Oh, give thanks to the LORD, for He is good!...

To Him who by wisdom made the heavens,” Psa 136:1,5

“The LORD by wisdom founded the earth;

By understanding He established the heavens;” Pro 3:19

Basically, **Satan’s wisdom is self-centered whereas God’s is others centered**. And this point is what brings us to Jesus. Isaiah the prophet wrote of Him,

“The Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon Him,

The Spirit of wisdom and understanding,

The Spirit of counsel and might,

The Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD.” Isa 11:2

Luke recorded concerning the child Jesus,

“And the Child grew and became strong in spirit, filled with wisdom; and the grace of God was upon Him.” Luk 2:40

Never was there a life so oriented toward humble submission to the Father. Never was anyone so oriented to saving and serving others. Never was such purity, peace, and gentleness lived out. Jesus had a godly wisdom that Adam and Eve could have had – wisdom that you and I as believers can now have for the asking.

This wisdom He is indeed worthy of, because He was true to it and He has passed it along liberally to His followers who desire it.

“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.” Col 3:16

“Therefore, settle it in your hearts not to meditate beforehand on what you will answer; for I will give you a mouth and wisdom which all your adversaries will not be able to contradict or resist.” Luk 21:14,15

Satan indeed suckered man into following his insidious wisdom and I suspect that he did the same thing long ago in the spiritual realm to some of the principalities and powers therein. But Jesus the Lamb of God is worthy of wisdom because in obeying Father God – coming to

planet earth, living a humble, others-oriented life, following God's will all the way to the cross --
He created the church

"...the mystery, which from the beginning of the ages has been hidden in God who created all things through Jesus Christ..." Eph 3:9

And why did He do that? Because contrary to the devil's grand deception, his implied claim that God doesn't want to impart His wisdom, the whole of man's dilemma and salvation is, among other things, a grand impartation. It's a demonstration, if you would

"...to the intent that now the manifold wisdom of God might be made known by the church to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places, according to the eternal purpose which He accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord," Eph 3:10,11

Yes, all the cosmos in the unseen spiritual creation is learning the many faceted and wondrous nature of God's wisdom. Through the church, they are observing the glorious truth of it – that which was hidden from Satan and sinful man, ordained from before the ages even began! That wisdom is embodied in our dear Savior Jesus Christ forever! Col 2:3.

Worthy is the Lamb!