



Artwork by Nathan Greene

Artistry of the Almighty

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Table of Contents

Introduction

1. Big Deal
2. Double Time
3. Eye on the Ball
4. First Fruit
5. The Character of Faith
6. It's Time
7. Open Book
8. Remember!
9. Re-reminded
10. Ruthless
11. The One
12. Wrong Questions, Right Answer
13. Turn Again
14. Gulp!

Introduction

One of the most interesting 'artistic' lessons we can learn from scripture is its basis for classical Hebrew poetry, for it is quite different from our contemporary forms. Whereas we tend to express ourselves in meaningful rhyme - words that sound the same or similar, the writers of scripture, moved by the Spirit of God wrote poetry that was based upon the association of stark contrasts and/or similitudes in meaning.

As an example, this is the poetry we can see in Genesis and the Gospels:

- The first Adam was rebellious to His Loving Father; the Last Adam (Christ) was obedient -- both died as a result.
- For love, the first Adam died with his bride; for love, the Last Adam died for His bride.
- Burdened with sin, the first Adam was shown the door out of paradise; burdened with sin, the Last Adam became the door into Paradise.
- The first ark (Noah's) was covered with 'atonement' (the literal meaning of the word for pitch); the 'last ark' (the cross) was covered with the atoning blood of the Lamb. Both mean(t) salvation for every kind of creature -- Jew and Gentile.

On and on the poetry of God continues. And surprise, it includes you and me. *"For we are His workmanship (literally 'poema' or poetry) created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them."* Eph 2:10

And in addition to His poetry, His Word portrays His truth both in the 'plain sense' of its reading and in amazing illustrations of deep and prophetic messages to His children – revelations of His Son, Jesus. Indeed, the entire cosmos is the Artistry of the Almighty.

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.”

(Mat 18:1-5)

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 face would remain frozen in his memory and the conviction it birthed angered him – so much so, that he made it his priority to crush these ‘little people’.

From house to house, he harassed and imprisoned Christ’s little lambs. You see, he thought 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?”

(1 Sam 9:20b)

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?"

(1 Sam 9:21)

Little did he know that he was called to be the first king of Israel. He couldn't imagine it. He didn't really want it. 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, 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."

(1 Sam 10:22)

OK, fast forward to the time of the Apostles: 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.

(Acts 9:3-9)

If you've read the story, you know, 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."

(Acts 5:12,13)

Nevertheless, as he was used to doing, Saul went straight to the top – the Apostles. Barnabas brought him. Perhaps it was on his mind that Saul had been influential, after all, with the Jews, and 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 Christian brethren sent him back to Tarsus, his home. With his departure, the church had a measure of peace.

As with us all, even after a radical salvation, 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, as you can imagine, to the 'natural' man. He even changed his name to Paul which means 'little'.

Now step back again to the times of the prophet Samuel. 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?’”

(1 Sam 13:5-11)

Saul’s excuse 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?”*

(1 Sam 15:17)

You 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.

New Testament: 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. Though he esteemed himself as the ‘chief’ – it was now as the chief of sinners (1 Tim 1:15). Full of faith, he looked forward to a crown of glory.

Old Testament: 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”

(1 Sam 28:6)

...so he sought advice from a medium instead. Shortly afterward, he committed suicide and His crown passed to another.

Do you see the pattern? 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 a grave. They started and grew in opposite directions. 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' we perceive Him in comparison and vice versa. This is an important understanding in today's Christian culture. The 'bigness' we're conditioned to value and run after simply strokes the ego. Those chasing that serve up very spiritual sounding justifications but wind up 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:

"... 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."

(1 Cor 1:26-29)

God chooses heart-attitudes that are '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. As a consequence, many simply rotate in and out of churches like trying a buffet. In effect, the individual believer's growth in Christ is lost in favor of amassing 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."

(Luk 12:32)

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 been accompanied by 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."

(Luk 19:17)

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."

(Luk 18:16)

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 today?

May the love of Christ compel us to minister effectively but without regard for earthly values. (See Phil 2:3-8) His Word tells us that His ways are not our ways. As we embrace what Jesus said:

"Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls,"

(Mat 11:29)

...the bride He returns for will be truly pleasing to Him. Selah.

Double Time

It is probably the oldest written account of scripture; at least that's what many Bible scholars think. No, it's not the story of creation but rather of destruction. It's the journey of Job – a trek that most of us can only faintly fathom. And though it is ancient in its origin, it is thoroughly contemporary in its applicability.

Though its language is poetic, it is not simply an allegory or a parable but a painfully accurate account of one man's tragedy and ultimate triumph. Yet, in that one man is the universal burden of humanity. And so, among the many lessons we could ponder we will consider herein the mystery of unexplainable misery as well as the pain and peace of patience.

Job 'had it all', or so it would appear. The scripture describes his circumstances as far beyond abundant. His riches in livestock alone made him *"the greatest of the men of the east"*. His family was totally 'together' in loving unity – so much so that his children gathered together regularly to celebrate with feasts. On top of that, Job himself was known on earth and in the heavenly kingdom of God as an extremely righteous man, a man of prayer and confession, of godly counsel and encouragement to all who were in need. Ah, but Job didn't really 'have it all'...not yet.

You may remember the story – God had 'bragging rights' **so to speak**, and as he was declaring the exemplary life of Job to Satan, the first shoe dropped. The devil claimed that Job was only living a righteous life because God had hedged him in and protected him from all trouble. It is here that some people have a hard time for it appears that God allowed incredible evil to come into his servant's life simply to prove a point to Satan.

Indeed, God did permit the destroyer to have his way with all that Job had – in one fell swoop, the devil devastated Job's fortune and family. It seems that only his wife was left.

It was at this point however that Job showed a heretofore hidden aspect of his character – his utter submission to God's authority. After his terrible loss, he proclaimed what is perhaps the most powerful praise of the Old Testament when he confessed:

"Naked I came from my mother's womb and naked shall I return there. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD."

(Job 1:21)

Oh, it is far too easy to glibly pass over this story with simply an intellectual assent to Job's losses. Who among us can comprehend the grief associated with losing ten children together with every form

of sustenance -- all in one horrific day? Apart from the sufferings of Christ, this is perhaps the greatest account of individual grief and suffering in scripture. Nevertheless, the 'other shoe was about to drop'.

Again, Satan approached God and again he obtained permission to take the test even further – he could plague Job personally in any way he desired short of taking his life. As if his holocaust-like tribulation hadn't been crushing enough, Job himself was then pulverized by poisonous and painful boils from **head to toe** – he became unrecognizable even to his friends. Scraping the puss from the infections with broken pottery, he lamented in a pile of ashes – what a sight! What a horrendous plague!

Still, Job did not let the intense misery corrupt his respect for the Almighty. He did curse the day he was born and wished it out of existence. He longed for death and was clearly near the end of his rope.

Consequently, Satan brought along some 'lubricant' – enter, three of Job's 'friends' with their 'slick' counsel on the reasons behind his condition. As if it were even possible, they made Job's trial worse. But Job, though he did not understand the reason for or purpose behind his plight, did not cave in to their slippery words nor to his wife who advised him to "curse God and die."

Wow! How could a man be more isolated, more desolate, more devastated, more broken? Only one way...I'll get to that.

Satan had done his worst, yet when God threatened to bring judgment upon Job's miserable counselors, Job prayed for them. How could a man be more generous, more forgiving, more overcoming? Only one way... I'll get to that too.

The misery of the righteous is indeed a mystery. And it can seem like God's 'tuned out' somehow or angry. Nevertheless, these trials work out to far, far more blessedness and ultimate good than mere mortal minds can appreciate. No, God is not far away in our times of tempest. No, He is not indifferent to our turmoil. No, He is not taking out His anger with sin on us. This is exactly what our enemy wants us to believe.

There is in the overall process a glorious and purposeful result – patient perseverance, godly character and the hope of heaven.

"Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God. And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope."

(Rom 5:1-4)

Now, in reading the last chapter of Job, you might get the impression that Job's perseverance in the trial paid off so to speak. We read:

*"And the LORD restored Job's losses **when he prayed for his friends**. Indeed, the LORD gave Job **twice** as much as he had before. Then all his brothers, all his sisters, and all those who had been his acquaintances before, came to him and ate food with him in his house; and they consoled him and comforted him for all the adversity that the LORD had brought upon him. Each one gave him a piece of silver and each a ring of gold." "Now the LORD blessed the **latter days** of Job more than his beginning; for he had fourteen thousand sheep, six thousand camels, one thousand yoke of oxen, and one thousand female donkeys. He also had seven sons and three daughters."*

(Job 42:10-13)

Yes, his self-righteousness was exposed, and he repented of it, but there is more to this story than that. Job, though he may have found out **what** happened in the heavenlies to cause his calamity, it's not evident that he ever understood **why**. It remained a mystery. But, in allowing it, God produced in him a far greater **capacity**. You see, his perseverance wasn't limited to the time in which Satan had license to lay on heavy trials. He also obtained the capacity to persevere an additional 140 years! Do you think he came by the latter-days blessings in the course of a day? a month? a year? How about decades? At least several decades!

The capacity to **persevere** only prospers when it is planted in persecution or trial. By definition, it cannot come about suddenly. To persevere -- in Greek the word is HUPOMONE.

"In Classical Greece it described the ability of a plant to thrive in a harsh environment - literally in the deserts and rocky slopes. In later Greek and Jewish literature, it was used to refer to the 'spiritual staying power' which enabled the faithful to die for their God." -- Scott Coltrain

And next, there was **character**. Perseverance in turn produced in Job a character capacity -- that is **godliness**, which most of us can only faintly imagine. Did you know that he is alluded to in scripture as one of the three most righteous men, apart from Christ, who ever lived (Eze 14:14,20) -- **not** in spite of the trials but **because** of them! Understand -- this was, is and will be to his benefit for all eternity.

And next, there was **hope** -- specifically the **hope of heaven**. Why do I say that? First, because the Bible tells us that like the Colossians, the way we live is:

"Because of the hope [of experiencing what is] laid up (reserved and waiting) for you in heaven."

(Col 1:5 Amplified Version).

Second, Job indeed, had treasure laid up in heaven. You see, as we look at **how** God blessed his latter days, we can specifically note that in all his **possessions** he received **double** – twice as many sheep, twice as many camels, twice as many oxen and twice as many donkeys. What does that have to do with heaven? Hang with me.

Now, we all know that **these** things, these earthly possessions don't go with us. When the incredibly wealthy J.D. Rockefeller died, someone asked, "How much did he leave behind?" The answer came tersely, "All of it!"

With that in mind, it may at first seem odd that after doubling of all his earlier possessions, the Word then goes on to say that God gave him another seven sons and three daughters – the same as before. Hey, you might wonder, why not 14 sons and 6 daughters? 'I thought this was double-time?' But think with me – this was indeed a doubling as well. See, he **already** had seven sons and three daughters -- **waiting in heaven**.

Yes, some misery is a mystery, but in the pain of **patient perseverance** there can also be **peace** – peace with God. It, in turn, will bring forth the capacity for **godly character** and the **hope of heaven** – NOT suddenly, not like a 'Mc-blessing', but in God's good time.

Job understood this – he specifically named his latter three daughters in such a way as to make that evident. They were called Jemima meaning "day by day" or "warmth and affection", Kezia which means "cassia" the cinnamon-like spice so lovely it was part of the recipe for the holy anointing oil, and finally, Keren-happuch which means "a striking mascara that beautifies the eyes."

Job undoubtedly learned that this terrible, troubling and mysterious work of God, **day by day**, brought, in the end, **warmth, affection**, the **beauty of a holy anointing** and a **strikingly beautiful countenance** before the Lord -- not only of benefit in this short earthly life but throughout eternity.

"For the Christian, perseverance is not an unbearable burden. It's not a matter of just trudging along, day after day, bowed down by grief and sorrow. On the contrary, by faith, our hearts can always be lifted up, because we're not bearing our burdens alone; Christ is bearing them with us and for us. As Paul prays for the Roman Christians, 'May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in Him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.' (Romans 15:13)"

-- Alan Perkins

In closing, how could a man be more isolated, more desolate, more devastated, more broken than Job? How could a man be more generous, more forgiving, more overcoming?

Only One way – only one person can make that claim in truth – only our God and Savior Jesus Christ. Job is a picture of Jesus – in suffering, in patience, in gracious intercession, in ultimate blessing and with children both in heaven and on earth one day to be united in Him forever.

You know, Job thought in the beginning that he was a pretty together guy. But at the end of the book when he actually saw the Lord (undoubtedly Christ) he said that he abhorred himself by comparison. It's kind of like Isaiah in Isaiah chapter six. Just seeing Him made all the difference – no more justifications, no more pity parties, no more self-centeredness. Simply beholding the King of kings settled the whole issue.

God never gave him answers to his tragedies, never explained a thing to Job. Yet his life turned around, his head was lifted up, his perspective on everything changed when He saw the Lord Jesus. That's frankly because in Christ everything is right, redeemed and restored. Such is heaven and the heavenly minded. **Now**, Job truly has it all. Someday, so will you.

*“Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be **mature and complete, not lacking anything.**”*

(James 1:2-4)

He's coming soon – so persevere dear friend.

Eye on the Ball

I felt cheated! The man I hired to simply move an electrical line overcharged me by some \$8,000. Like an emotional eruption, as I gazed at the invoice, I began imagining all sorts of mean and vengeful things I could do in response – not just for a moment but pretty much the whole day! And of course, I was miserable as a result. Perhaps that gives you an idea of the depth of my pitiful spirituality. But God, in His mercy, dealt with me.

Not many of us have the luxury of being able to chuck out the window eight grand and carelessly continue on, but that wasn't the point at all. Yes, I thought I was robbed, but that wasn't the point either. God knew I needed a reminder, for my wicked heart had strayed from a foundational need. I'll illustrate this need with a story you know well...

Abram was a little perturbed. After seriously risking his life to rescue his nephew Lot, he returned to the Kings Valley where he tithed to the King of Salem and refused the reward of the king of Sodom. Now, his refusal of this wicked king's booty was truly commendable but... there was a weight on his shoulder – a chip so to speak.

“After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, saying, “Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your exceedingly great reward.” But Abram said, “Lord GOD, what will You give me, seeing I go childless, ...” (Gen 15:1,2)

Now, don't get me wrong – Abram wasn't ticked with God like I was with the electrician. However, the Lord was putting forth a magnificent point and that was the lesson Abram as well as all believers need to know and be reminded of periodically.

OK, Abram received the vision but not the message, not yet. Do you see his misunderstanding? God said to him, *“I (am) ... your exceedingly great reward.”* Yet, Abram replied, *“Lord GOD, what will you give me...?”*

Abram missed it. Maybe it was because of the mental 'noise' of his disappointment or self-pity. (I can sure relate to that, sad to say.) God didn't say, “I have a reward for you.” Or, “I'll send you something special.” God said, *“I (am) your exceedingly great reward.”* It wasn't something He had with which to enrich Abram – more sheep or goats, more gold or servants. It was God Himself.

Now, the Hebrew word translated “reward” is quite interesting. This passage is its first mention in scripture. Its basic meaning is “wages” and it is derived from the word meaning “to hire”. In essence, God said, *“I (am) your exceedingly great wages.”*

Of course, your mind immediately reacts with the question, 'Wages? How could Abram work to earn anything from God? Doesn't this fly in the face of grace?' To answer this, let's listen to what Jesus said on the subject...

He had just fed these folks an all you can eat feast – bread and fish, but they wanted more. Consequently, Jesus said to them, *"Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to everlasting life, which the Son of Man will give you, because God the Father has set His seal on Him."* Then they said to Him, *"What shall we do, that we may work the works of God?"* Jesus answered and said to them, *"This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He sent."* (John 6:27:29)

Herein, Jesus made it clear that God's fundamental work is faith, specifically, saving faith. This type of earning is essentially different than physical work. It is, in a manner of speaking, an effortless earning - wages that aren't labored for literally but acquired by believing.

Back to our story – Abram had believed in God and obeyed Him by departing from Ur and then Haran. He had followed the Lord to the Promised Land. But this wasn't necessarily the kind of belief that resulted in righteousness. That's because it was really more an issue of obedience. (Like keeping the Law, if you would.) One leads to the other but not necessarily the other way around. Obedience, on its own, is known as religious observance. Faith, 'on its own', however, leads to righteousness. Of course, the scripture points out that it doesn't remain on its own but also leads to obedience out of a grateful heart. (see Jam 2:20)

So, at this point, God presented Abram with a crisis of faith. He had to believe God and not simply obey Him. He had to believe Him for something beyond his own ability – for something only God could do.

You see, simply believing that God exists does not give one salvation. James wrote, *"you believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe— and tremble!"* (Jam 2:19) and the writer of Hebrews tells us, *"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)

So, God said that He Himself was Abram's exceedingly great wages – wages 'earned by faith' in God yet...

"...Abram said, "Look, You have given me no offspring; indeed one born in my house is my heir!"

Abram didn't have this saving faith just yet. This kind of faith in the Old Testament is referred to as righteousness. In fact, Paul used this very passage in Romans 4 to illustrate that Abraham was saved by faith and that's the faith that was about to be born – *"And behold, the word of the LORD came to him,*

saying, *"This one shall not be your heir, but one who will come from your own body shall be your heir."* Then He brought him outside and said, *"Look now toward heaven, and count the stars if you are able to number them."* And He said to him, *"So shall your descendants be."* And he believed in the LORD, and He accounted it to him for righteousness." (Gen 15:4-6)

Now, you may be thinking, 'How wonderful for God to bless Abram like this. To be his "exceedingly great reward" He must have meant that Abram would have a close intimate relationship with Him.' And indeed, He did. But, there was/is much, exceedingly much, more to this promise. For like all of us who believe, Abram was also a mortal man, prone to sin, and the wages of sin is death. For an intimate relationship with God to exist, sin must be dealt with; its wages must be paid.

So, God also meant that He Himself was Abram's exceedingly great wages – wages earned by Abram's sin... In this, He was saying prophetically that He would pay the exceedingly great wages of sin by dying in Abram's place. Jesus Christ became our sin, if you would, on the cross – the Word says, *"For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him."* (2 Cor 5:21) Now, I'm convinced that Abram didn't understand that at this point, but it is recorded for our profit who look to the blessed cross of Calvary for our salvation.

Jesus Christ is Abram's exceedingly great reward; He's ours too, who believe. As a matter of fact, God confirmed that this was the primary point of His promise through the covenant He made with Abram which immediately follows this passage (see Gen 15:9, 10). In it, Abram was told to bring a three-year-old heifer, a three-year-old female goat, a three-year-old ram, a turtledove, and a young pigeon. When he brought all these to the Lord, he cut them in two, down the middle, and placed each piece opposite the other; but he did not cut the birds in two. This was known as 'cutting covenant' and the practice of making a covenant in such a grizzly manner was not uncommon in that day. However, the specifics of this particular set up all speak very prophetically of Jesus and His sacrifice on Golgotha.

In the law, which was to come, the heifer was the sacrificial animal of dedication; the goat was the animal upon which the people's sins were laid vicariously and sent out to be slaughtered outside the camp; the ram was the sacrificial animal of substitution. The dove is a symbol of the Holy Spirit and the nestling represents innocence and purity.

Three years speaks of the length of the Lord's earthly ministry which was terminated by His sacrifice on the cross. You see, there is no greater wage, no greater reward than Jesus Christ and yet along with Him, there's even more.

Paul wrote, *"He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?"* (Rom 8:32)

Wow! Eternal life, heaven's bliss, endless love, pleasures forevermore, an enormous happy family, a sinless character, indescribable joy and peace ... on and on it goes ... all things, ALL things. We are mind-numbingly blessed.

In heaven. It's in heaven. It's in heaven and it's forever.

It's so easy to get wrapped up in the "affairs of this life". I'm not advocating a mindless ignorance of our daily challenges but rather the need for a frequent realignment of our priorities. We so easily get enticed by the rewards/wages available in this life don't we. But our true rewards are in heaven. By comparison, all that we could possess in the here and now is only a vapor, dust in the wind.

For this reason, our Savior said, *"Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal."* (Mat 6:19,20)

The Bible is full of promises, but perhaps the most wonderful of all is this: *"No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him"* (1 Corinthians 2:9). There are many things we do not know about heaven, but what we can be sure of is that it will fulfill our greatest longings, it will dazzle us with its beauty, it will obliterate our greatest problems with its power and splendor, it will be greater than anything we could imagine or dream, it will be a place where love and joy will reign unspoiled.

Joni Eareckson who became a quadriplegic as a result of a diving accident nearly 30 years ago has experienced more than her share of pain and heartache. She says that "heaven has become my heart's home, the place where I will finally belong. The place where I will get a brand new body." She continues, "In the world's finale something so glorious is going to happen that it will atone for every single tear we've ever cried. God is going to give us the key that will make sense out of what now seems to be such senseless suffering. Heaven is going to be a place of no more disappointment, no more grief but joy. Heaven's joy."

In a manner of speaking, Heaven will be Eden restored. You could say we have been living east of Eden since Adam and Eve sinned, but the day will come when the original paradise God intended us to be a part of will be restored. The Bible gives this promise concerning the earth: *"The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God"* (Romans 8:19-21).

Heaven will be right. It will be a place of righteousness, or right-ness. All the wrongs of the world will be made right. It will be a place where everything evil is absent, and everything good is present; everything sad will be gone, and only joy will exist; everything disappointing will disappear, and everything exciting will appear; everything depressing will be gone, and everything hopeful will come; everything violent and hateful will be gone, and everything born of love will prevail; every unfaithfulness will be gone, and steadfast loyalty will be ever-present; everything detestable will be absent, and everything desirable will abide with us; every sickness will be 'out-of-mind', and complete wholeness will take over our lives; every struggle, frustration and failure will be over, and learning will take their place.

Every wrong done to you in this world will be made right. Every injustice will meet with justice. Every sorrow will be reversed, and joy will wash over you like a waterfall. (thank you R Buchanan)

In addition, Heaven will be fantastically relational. As a matter of fact, you will be reunited again with those you may think you have lost who have known Christ and lived for him — if you belong to Christ. You see, as believers, our relationships are not lost; to the contrary, they will be regained and renewed. We will experience them at a level we have never known before. Deep, rewarding and fulfilling relationships are the essence of heaven. On earth, we let each other down and disappoint each other. Many times, without knowing it, we hurt each other and fail one another. But there, *"we will all be changed — in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed"* (1 Corinthians 15:51-52).

In addition, our love for God and our relationship with him will be unspoiled. There will be nothing between us at all — no separation. Our sinful nature will be taken away, and we will no longer struggle with sin and temptation. Our relationship with God will be so intimate that the book of Revelation describes it as a bride coming to her husband — full of love and passion, with arms open wide.

Dear friends in Christ, home is on its way, but it is not here yet. Don't make the mistake of thinking it is. And when it gets here, He will make "everything new." Jesus said, *"Behold, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to everyone according to what he has done"* (Revelation 22:12). Every sacrifice you have made will be remembered. Every sorrow you have experienced will be dispelled with countless joys. Every rejection will be overcome by an explosion of love. Every work will be rewarded. Far from every mistake being brought out, every good thing you have done will be honored and recompensed.

In C. S. Lewis' wonderful books, The Chronicles of Narnia, the characters who have lived in Narnia have completed their time and work there. In a closing chapter entitled "Further Up and Further In," Aslan, the lion who represents Christ, has come for them in order to take them home. They are headed away from Narnia and are about to enter Aslan's land. But they are met with familiar scenes. One of the characters cries out: "I have come home at last! This is my real country! I belong here. This is the land I have been looking for all my life, though I never knew it till now. The reason why we loved the old Narnia is that it sometimes looked a little like this." -- Buchanan

May your vision and desire for the King of heaven be renewed. Keep your eye on the ball! Our time here is short. Live for Jesus then *"Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven..."* (Mat 5:12)

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 appears to be a fundamental aspect of His character 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.

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)

The Character of Faith

The conclusion of the Old Testament is actually found in the New. The Baptist was preaching repentance upon the shores of the Jordan and multitudes came to hear his message. A new testament was opening on the horizon; with it, a new message and a new beginning. And John prepared the new way before our Lord as a moral firebrand -- attitudes and behavior acceptable to God were the foci of his forceful proclamations.

*"Then he said to the multitudes that came out to be baptized by him, 'Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore, bear fruits worthy of repentance, ... every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.' So, the people asked him, saying, '**What shall we do then?**' He answered and said to them, 'He who has two tunics, let him give to him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise.' Then tax collectors also came to be baptized, and said to him, 'Teacher, **what shall we do?**' And he said to them, 'Collect no more than what is appointed for you.' Likewise, the soldiers asked him, saying, 'And **what shall we do?**' So, he said to them, 'Do not intimidate anyone or accuse falsely, and be content with your wages.'" Luke 8:7-14*

The vast majority of what the people understood relative to pleasing Jehovah was 'do-oriented'. The greatest misunderstanding of the people, having been schooled by the law of Moses, was that heaven was reserved for those who **lived** righteously meaning they **did** the 'right things', **made** the 'right moves'.

Enter Jesus. And...

*"...they said to Him, "What shall we **do**, that we may **work the works** of God?" Jesus answered and said to them, "This is the **work** of God, that you **believe** in Him whom He sent."'" John 6:28,29*

A new day had dawned and with it came a new message.

*"...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*

In fact, you will only find 101 mentions of faith or belief and their related words in the Old Testament compared to some 582 mentions in the New. In spite of this, there is arguably no other foundational issue in the contemporary church that is so misunderstood, contentious and unfortunately used so inappropriately as faith. Knowing this, Jesus posed the question to those living in the last days before His return, *"...when the Son of Man comes, will He really find faith on the earth?"* Luke 18:8

Let's examine some of what the scriptures have to say about faith and we will note 12 foundational aspects of it. (Admittedly, this will be much too brief and much less than the subject demands. Therefore, in Berean fashion, see if these things be so through your own study!)

OK, here we go.

1. **Saving Faith:** We are saved by faith in the finished work of the Lord Jesus on Calvary's cross. (see Eph 2:8,9) For nearly 2000 years, the gospel has proclaimed this loudly and yet there are multitudes attending church who are still trying to work their way up to heaven, to earn God's grace.

Even father Abraham was deemed righteous by God because of belief (see Gen 15:6). Of course, there's clearly a time for faith-initiated works but they have nothing to do with 'meriting' eternal life.

2. **'Binary and Analog' Faith:** Faith is a bit like pregnancy – you are, or you aren't. With faith, you have it or you don't. However, beyond that, there are definitely degrees in strength of faith. The scripture uses such descriptors as great, strong, weak and lacking regarding believers' faith. (see Rom 14:23; Mat 21:21; Mark 4:40; Mat 6:30; Mat 8:26; Mat 8:10; Mat 14:31; Acts 6:5; 1 Cor 13:2; Rom 12:3, 6; Rom 14:1)

3. **Growing Faith:** Faith can increase or decrease. The deeper the roots of God's planting grow in your heart-soil, the stronger your spiritual life will be. These roots tap into reservoirs not seen on the surface to feed and strengthen the plant even in times of distress. (see 2 Thes 1:3 Luke 22:32; Heb 10:23; Jam 1:6; 1 Cor 10:15)

4. **Gracious Faith:** Faith is a gift of the Holy Spirit. It is also described as part of His fruit. It is fundamental to understand that this applies to both the initial saving faith and all points of faith thereafter. (see 1 Cor 12:9; Gal 5:22)

5. **Origins of Faith:** Faith comes from hearing God's Word. This may be in the course of prayer, study of the written Word, from preaching, teaching or by revelation. The point is – it's God speaking to you. It was God's speaking that formed all of creation and it is the agency, if you would, by which faith exerts divine power over it. (see Rom 10:17; Gal 3:2)

6. **'Touch-point' Faith:** Faith can indeed be 'triggered'. For some, this may appear superstitious, but we should not dismiss it. Faith cannot exist apart from the working of the Holy Spirit. Clearly, the Lord does not seem to prefer such means, but we see it in the gospels, in the book of Acts and many of us have witnessed it. Unfortunately, deceivers have also used 'faith tricks' to beguile the weak for the purposes of power, prestige and monetary gain. (see Mat 9:20-22; Acts 5:15,16; Acts 19:11,12)

7. **Honest Faith:** Faith has an object. Faith in faith is meaningless. Faith in yourself or some other person is a recipe for eventual disappointment. God is always the object of true faith – it is He in whom

we trust. Many charlatans are selling schemes to succeeding in faith none of which keep God Himself as the object. Even when you are honestly trusting in what He has said, you are fundamentally trusting Him. Trusting Him leads to knowing Him, leads to trusting Him, leads to knowing Him, leads to ... (see Mar 11:22; Rom 4:19,20; 1 Cor 2:5; Heb 10:23)

8. Pleasing Faith: There are two specific kinds of faith required to please God. You must believe that He is or more accurately WHO He is, and you must believe that He rewards your sincere search for Him. This Who He is cannot be overstated. Even the devils believe THAT He is, however, Who He is implies the knowledge derived by intimate acquaintance. All the way from the Garden of Eden, Satan has sought to corrupt our trust in Who He is. In the original language, seeking diligently carries with it the underlying motive of desiring or craving. To believe that your deep desire and dogged search for Him will be rewarded is faith that pleases God. (see Heb 11:6)

9. Unfeigned Faith: Real faith always leads to a response. It may be “work”, or it may be “wait”. When faith motivates work, it will inevitably be opposed by evil. The same is true when faith says, “wait”. However, both working and waiting can mask an absence of faith and/or an abundance of fear. Spiritual opposition and good spiritual fruit are indications of faith in either event. (see 1 Thes 1:3; Heb 11:13; Heb 11:8,9,11, 17, 20,21, 22,23, 30, 39; Jam 2:17)

10. Defending/Overcoming Faith: Faith is the most important part of the Christian’s spiritual armor. Faith quenches the enemy’s attacks upon us. Satan has no power to overcome true faith. In fact, it is our faith that overcomes him and the evil in this world. (see Eph 6:16; 1 John 4:4; 5:4; Rom 12:2; Rev 2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5,12)

11. Glorifying Faith: “All things are possible” to the one who has specific faith. ‘All-things-possible’ faith however never glorifies the receiver. It always glorifies the Giver – God. We see this in the Man who said it – Jesus. Check it out – every time He did a miracle, people glorified God.

Now, Jesus wasn’t exaggerating. His declaration wasn’t some rabbinical teaching allegory. ALL things are absolutely possible to the one who has faith. The emphasis however is not upon the ‘all things’ but rather upon believing. Though they are sometimes enormous in our limited view, from God’s perspective, the ‘all things’ are comparatively insignificant because they are generally temporal at best. Faith, though, trains up the soul of the believer, and that lasts forever. (see Mat 9:29; Mark 11:23,24; Num 20:12, 1 Cor 13:13)

12. Humble Faith: Faith is not presumptuous of God’s will but rather submitted to it. Material ‘blessings’ are never an accurate indicator of faith. In fact, the Bible says that it is the poor who are rich

in faith. The Father said to the Son, *"Concerning the works of My hands, command me."* However, Jesus' heart was, *"...not my will but yours be done."* (see Jam 2:5; Isa 45:11-13; Luke 22:42)

So, at the end of this age, when Jesus comes, will He really find faith on the earth? If we will sit like Mary at His feet to listen and then like Martha, take action, the answer can be, "YES". May we cease all the silly church games and religious rigmarole in which faith is absent or feigned and get serious about it – true, effective, God-glorifying, loving, humble faith. John prepared the way with moral imperatives. Jesus is the Way and He told us to believe. God bless you with faith!

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. 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. Jesus said to His disciples, *“Go into all the world and preach the Gospel...”* and indeed they did – the seed was sown in all types of heart-soil. 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 next 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 ‘fast-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 – what He’s saying is that 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; rather, 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 suggest that she and 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. 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 both 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 worldly focus on 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.

You have to wonder - 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 have come that close to death and then stuck 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)

Now this is important because 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 ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus.” (Gal 3:26)

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

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.

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. Of course, 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 'milquetoast' extreme that wayward believers are rarely counselled lovingly concerning 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 today because we live in the lukewarm 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 consider 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 its glaring inadequacies. 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’, this situation, 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 too, 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.

But you got to love this woman's humility; she 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; it may be humiliating, 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).

Remember!

She put up with a 'lot' you know. He was a such a loser sometimes, ... but then there were times she was proud of him. After all, he'd made a lot of money, and they were comfortable. Well, she was anyway. He was such a whiner though. How many times had she listened to his mournful tirades about the immoral conduct of the neighborhood. Why couldn't he just give it a rest? She'd move if he really wanted to, but then what about the girls? She'd miss them and their families. Everything was just so comfortable, so easy compared to those early days. She finally had her home together – the way she wanted it. God had truly blessed them she thought.

But this was the limit! These two men with their story of impending doom. How could he believe them? Now, here he was out in the middle of the night, running around town, upsetting the neighbors and trying to wake our kids up. Surely, they're going to think he's out of his mind or that he's joking. He's such a jokester you know. He'd already caused such a commotion earlier just outside the door. She really had to talk some sense into him. Everything was going pretty well – there's no way God was going to do what these strangers said – doom and gloom – really! At least not anytime soon.

You know, of all that Jesus said, of all that He taught, besides the general admonishment to hold to it dearly, there was only one person, place or thing that He specifically warned his disciples to remember. And, we don't even know her name. Yet, her example is so important for us to consider that Christ made it a point to use her in describing the most sober, serious warning he gave his disciples.

"Remember Lot's wife."

Why? What happened? What is it about her that we should keep in mind? Recall, Jesus was speaking this warning to His disciples, not the Pharisees or any other antagonists. This admonition was and is for those who follow Him and look for His return. Let's consider it more closely:

In Luke 17, Jesus said, *"And as it was in the days of Noah, so it will be also in the days of the Son of man."* Then, he specified that, *"they ate, drank, married and were given in marriage until the day that Noah entered the ark."* After this, He continued, *"Likewise, as it was also in the days of Lot, they ate, they drank, they bought, they sold, they planted, they built, but on the day Lot went out of Sodom..."* You may recall, in both cases, God's judgment came suddenly.

Many good Bible teachers point to the symbolism of Noah prophetically representing the Jewish believers during the Tribulation who will be preserved in the midst of God's judgment as well as Lot representing the mostly gentile Church who are taken out of the path of judgment.

In both cases, the people were engaged in purely 'worldly' activities so to speak. In Noah's day they basically fed their flocks and followed their passions. In Lot's day, they fed their flocks and expanded their earthly treasures. They were doing what we'd generally consider to be routine activities. However, there's no sense of awareness portrayed about what was impending.

But Lot's wife was different – different from the indifferent. She knew! She knew what was coming.

Back to our story - Lot returned to his house distraught. He wasn't able to get his children to believe him. Was it because of the way he'd raised them? Were they so into their own little lives that his voice had lost its authority? Had they never understood his desire for God because of his compromises? Would God really destroy this place? Maybe he was over-reacting. Maybe this was another of his 'hyper spirituality fits' that his wife disdained so much. Maybe...

The men in his house stressed that he had to leave anyway. Maybe they'd change their minds... How could this be?! He knew they were right... He knew he was compromising in being here, but... but... He putz'ed around, pacing the floor while his wife gave him 'that look.' Could this really be happening NOW?? God was warning them. Yes..... he knew that was surely true.

Just then, the men grabbed him and the others by the hand and pulled them out of the house and beyond the city gates. "Head for the mountains!" they exclaimed.

Lot whimpered and argued, persuading them to spare the little town of Zoar where they finally headed off to. Just as they arrived, fire rained out of the sky behind them upon the whole plain. The noise was deafening. The ground shook violently, and the blaze nearly seared their backs.

It is at this point in the story that Christ's admonition focuses our attention. The original Hebrew uses some interesting words to describe what happened to Lot's wife. Of course, you all recall that she looked back at Sodom and turned into a pillar of salt, at least that's what the translators have given us. That may indeed be the case. However, there is another viewpoint that is worthy of presenting.

She was following behind the others. The language implies a reluctance, even a resistance to going forward. She evidently lingered behind. When she looked back, the word 'nabat' is used in the imperfect tense and is causative. That's just a fancy way of saying that her looking back was not just a

glance or sudden action. There was something going on in her for which looking back was simply part -- an ongoing process if you would.

The imperfect adds color and movement by suggesting the “process” preliminary to its completion -- it implies a ‘condition’ versus a single occasion. Causative means that when the fire hit, it was like a switch -- almost like she had to look.

Here, the translators have made the Hebrew word pronounced ‘natsib’, which comes from the word pronounced ‘natsab’, that is, pillar. It literally means to stand, to station oneself, or to take a stand. Because of this, some have asserted that she finally stopped following and ‘made her stand’. It would imply that she had been reluctant all along and finally got fed up or hard hearted about the situation.

The word for salt is pronounced ‘melach’ and comes from the word pronounced ‘malach’ which means to tear away or to vanish. Some teachers argue that this is a better translation than salt since Jesus in describing the last days events in Luke 17:34-36 follows His warning to remember this woman by three examples of people being taken or potentially vanishing. The potential problem with this is that the implication in Christ’s teaching is that the godly vanish rather than the doubtful. (Though, it could be a matter of perspective.)

In any event, the alternative translation would be that she lingered behind until she finally stopped. The booming judgment caused her to turn and look longingly upon Sodom. As a result, she was taken away in the disaster, perhaps vaporized by flames. Whatever the case, we can be assured that Lot’s wife:

- Was in relationship with a vexed but sincere believer -- Lot
- Was clearly and divinely warned of the impending judgment
- Was initially delivered into safety but did not take advantage of it
- Was not in agreement inwardly with the escape
- Was inwardly attached to Sodom
- Was separated forever from her escaping loved ones when judgment came

So, what can this mean for us? Recall, Jesus was speaking to believers, not enemies when he warned us to remember her. Let’s consider the points just above.

First, we must understand that a relationship with a believer does not make one a believer. If you’ve been bringing your wife or hubby to church, that’s great, but they must understand -- that does not mean they’re ready for the Lord’s return.

Next, like Lot's wife, God is faithfully warning this generation of His coming. End time prophecies have been fulfilled before our very eyes. Meanwhile, many of God's messengers are faithfully proclaiming the time is at hand. You'd have to be deaf to the world around you to miss it. Christ is coming at any moment!

Next, the preaching and teaching of the gospel is what has set us outside the gate so to speak, but if we do not take heed to it, if we do not accept its truth and obey, we are only failing to take advantage of the deliverance God offers. Many times, and in many ways, He has taken us by the hand and led us out. At some point, some of us may need to **get it** and get going – living 'full-on' for Jesus.

Next, 'a man convinced against his will is of the same opinion still.' The change must be inward first and foremost. Going through the motions of Christianity won't save anyone. Even if you've been to seminary or are related to the minister -- at some point, like Lot's wife, the unconvinced will say, "Enough is enough. I'm not going any further with this." I believe it's quite possible that God will bring the whole church to this point soon – the decision point – i.e. what do we believe – really believe? Are you willing to "lose your life" for it? That's the point Jesus makes immediately after His warning about Lot's wife. *"Whoever seeks to save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life will preserve it."* (Luke 17:33)

Next, we must answer the question, "Where is our treasure?" Is it here? Just how important is that home or job or relationship to you? More than your affection for your Creator and Savior? What are we longing for inwardly? I can't tell you how many sincere Christian ministers have told me, "I'm not ready yet for the Lord to come." or "I don't think He'll come soon. Anyway, I've got too much at stake here and now to be thinking about that." or "The whole idea of the rapture and all just scares me." If our treasure is in this world and it in any way overshadows our treasure in heaven, our heart will 'long for Sodom' so to speak, just like Lot's wife.

Finally, Jesus told his disciples specifically to pray that they would be counted worthy to escape the judgments of the tribulation and to stand before Him in heaven. He said, *"But take heed to yourselves, lest your hearts be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness, and cares of this life, and that Day come on you unexpectedly. For it will come as a snare on all those who dwell on the face of the whole earth. Watch therefore and pray always that you may be counted worthy to escape all these things that will come to pass, and to stand before the Son of Man."* (Luke 21:34-36)

Yes, some will be left behind ... if they are like Lot's wife. True believers? – no, I don't believe that. But let's have our houses in order -- in truth, in confidence, in sincerity. These are the days. Even now, God's messengers are ushering people out by the hand. Let's not hang out inwardly in Sodom!

Remember!

Re-reminded

Nothing, absolutely nothing is impossible with God. In this situation, there was a dead child, a dead marriage, a dead husband and a dead testimony. Could anything be more desperate? She had been a temptress and he a retched letch. The consequences of their sin went on to wreak violation and violence for years and nearly destroyed the kingdom. But though it is easy to use David's affair with Bathsheba to exhort upon sin, we will instead take a look at a sometimes-overlooked aspect of it – the 're-ability' of our God. By this, I mean the power to re-deem, re-concile, re-store, re-establish, re-appear and re-ward. And I'll re-hearse this tragedy as well as two other stories from scripture to make my point.

First, we jump back in time to find a miserable, scared...no... freaked-out young man cowering in a dark pit screaming vainly for help. To his brothers, Joseph was a jerk. They were uncontrollably jealous of his cozy, highly preferential relationship with Jacob, their dad. You know the story – they first thought to kill him but then sold him into slavery. Afterward, with hearts of stone, they convinced their pop that Joe was laid-out by a lion, torn to shreds. Now, either they hated their father as much as they did Joseph, or they had no idea how this news would devastate him. It did. The deception bought far more suffering to Jacob than servitude did to Joseph. Later, Judah would confess that any more bad news like this would simply kill his dad.

A 'dead' son, a treacherous and wayward brood of children, then came a terrible famine – with not even a wife to console him. Could things get worse for Jacob? Yes. You remember – he seemingly lost another son to the dungeons of Egypt and feared even greater retribution from Pharaoh's apparently ruthless governor for the supposed theft of grain. Considering that he could also very well lose his youngest boy Benjamin to this angry ruler and scanning the horizon of his life, he cried, "*All these things are against me!*" Indeed, it was a sad re-port.

Now, let's consider King David. You recall how he ceased from fighting with his army and was found wandering idly on his lofty rooftop. There he espied an attractive lady bathing in clear view. Bathsheba, we understand from the grammar used in the story was not an unwilling woman. However, as we have already mentioned, the end result was a litany of destroyed lives. David took his faithful servant Uriah's wife and had him murdered. Consequently, God took the resultant baby home to paradise. Could it get any worse for David? Yes. Although He forgave David, the Lord sent a judgment upon his household. The king experienced the incestuous rape of his own daughter, the murder of his son Amnon, the

treachery and death of his son Absalom, the utter animosity of his dearest counselor Ahithophel, the rape of his concubines before all Israel and civil war.

Next, flash-forward to the scene of a stoning. Here, an angelic disciple died honorably while an angry obsessed man looked on, kicking against the 'pricks' of conviction in his own heart. This latter man, Saul, continued with a crazed persecution of every Christian he could find, searching them out and imprisoning them. His misguided zealotry destroyed the lives of many, many people, all whose crimes consisted only of loving Jesus Christ. Then, he was graciously and miraculously converted to the faith he had attempted to crush.

It was natural for him to think he was the perfect man to reach his countrymen with the gospel; after all, he had been the disciple of Gamaliel, a Pharisee of Pharisees, a well-known part of the religious club of his day. But likely for this very reason, he was all the more bitterly hated by the Jews as a traitor. They beat him, stoned him and plotted to kill him. The very people whom he loved enough to sacrifice his own soul, if it were possible, wanted to damn his soul with hateful vengeance. Could it get any worse? Yes. Primarily incited by the Jews, Paul endured imprisonment, scourging, starvation, the loss of friends, freedom, and loved ones.

Patriarchs in peril, a king in compromise, an apostle in persecution – all came to places of trying discouragement and defeat – or so it would seem. These weren't simply trivial inconveniences or minor setbacks. They were far beyond all human ability to deal with, to control or to change for the better. And that's exactly what God took advantage of – what He used. This is where He displayed with a grandeur that awes the saved, His 're-ability'.

Contrary to Jacob's expectation, his beloved son was alive and contrary to the brothers fears, Joseph not only reconciled with them but saved them out of their distress. The 'angry ruthless' governor was in fact an angel of mercy and God's instrument to redeem the young nation. It had been God's plan all along.

Bathsheba lost her baby but went on to have two other sons, both of whom were important to God's plan. Solomon became the next king, the wisest, wealthiest man to live on the planet, an author of two books of scripture and a part of the Messianic line. Nathan, his brother, was also a part of the Messianic line. You see, the legal or royal line flowed through Solomon and his descendants but was broken several generations later by the Lord's curse upon Jeconiah (Jer 22:28-30). Joseph, the adoptive dad of Jesus was from that line as recorded in Mat 1.

The blood line so to speak, however, came through Mary who, wouldn't you know it, was a descendant of Bathsheba's boy Nathan as recorded in Luke 3. The Messianic line was ultimately restored or reestablished through the very woman who participated in the sin that nearly destroyed it.

Paul was tenaciously set upon saving the Jews. In this he failed miserably, but in this he was also redirected. The persecution God permitted in his life was a complementary force that propelled Paul to reach the Gentiles. As a result, the gentile nations were reconciled to God through Christ and even now await His reappearing and reward. Again, all a part of God's divine plan.

God's re-ability is illustrated in these examples but is by no means constrained to them. Every one of you has either been brought to times insufficiency or will be. It's there that your own abilities are revealed to be next-to-nil. You look around at what's going down and find yourself going down along with it. Whether it's been done unto you or you've 'done unto' someone else – you may someday wonder what possible good could ever come from the mess you're in. You may even scoff at the scripture that says, 'all things work together for good to them that believe'. You may seem to have no hope, no light left in your torch, no grand purpose in life.

Re-consider just Who your God is.

Re-new your mind, your thoughts toward Him.

Re-frain from doubt and despair.

Re-peat the first works of your faith.

Re-trace the steps you walked with Christ when you walked in peaceful trust.

These are your responses to Him – your 're-abilities' so to speak.

You may or may not witness the end of God's plan and how He finally brings the good He has promised to bring – at least in this life. Jacob and the boys, David and Bathsheba, Paul – they all saw part of the plan and were undoubtedly greatly encouraged by God's graciousness. But they didn't see the fullness of it in their lifetimes.

That's why it's so important that you hold on and keep running the race. Heavenly mindedness includes a non-myopic view of the Lord's work. It often stretches beyond the horizon, even beyond the imagination. It's a marathon, not a sprint. But God is absolutely faithful and will indeed bring the good He has planned – the repentance, the reconciliation, the restoration, the revival, the resurrection, the reunion, the reward.

Ruthless

It wasn't long ago, as I gazed at the countryside once considered lovely, it now looked forsaken. The trees seemed tortured and tired; the colors of flowers were no longer attractive. All of creation seemed to illustrate vanity and futility and I knew it was all just a reflection of my own soul.

In such a place, why hang on? Why hold on to a hope that seems as vaporous as human life? Why go on when bitterness of grief makes all seem like ashes?

I can relate to Naomi.

Perhaps, you know her story (see the book of Ruth). Elimelech, her husband, brought the family from Bethlehem to Moab in search of sustenance. Famine was the motivation – ironic because Bethlehem means “house of bread.”

It wasn't long before Elimelech died. His name means “God is my King”, and it's spiritually significant that he died when he left the “house of bread” and went back across the Jordan, leaving the land of promise and coming to Moab – a place where only a generation earlier the Israelites had brought a catastrophic judgment upon themselves by engaging in sexual sin with the local women. And yet a local woman is what God had in mind.

Now, Naomi had two sons and they might have been sickly, for their names mean “sickly” and “pining.” Whatever the case may be, they took wives of the Moabite women and within ten years both sons were dead. Naomi was left destitute – no husband, no children, nothing to show and only one place to go – back home. What a journey that must have been!

Physically, it was an uphill climb, but inwardly it was probably more like scaling Mt. Everest. In her misery, she sent her two daughters-in-law home to their families. One departed but the other, Ruth, stayed on. This young woman's devotion was clearly supernatural and many, many fine sermons have focused upon her famous reply,

*“Entreat me not to leave you,
Or to turn back from following after you;
For wherever you go, I will go;
And wherever you lodge, I will lodge;
Your people shall be my people,
And your God, my God.
Where you die, I will die,
And there will I be buried.
The LORD do so to me, and more also,
If anything but death parts you and me.”*

Herein, however, let's consider Naomi. Sure, she had family land back in Bethlehem, but who would work it? Sure, she had some extended family there, but she was bitter in heart and frankly families are sometimes incapable of filling such voids.

I can conceive of only one reason Naomi would return to Bethlehem - hope in God. Back then, even more than today, a woman's life-purpose was wrapped up in her children. Without children, without a husband and with only a Moabite widow as her companion, what other hope could she have? Even if she dealt with her nihilistic grief, how could she survive? There was no social security. 'She could beg, but that would surely disgrace her relatives. She was too old to sell herself into service or prostitution.' This was a hostile world to an old childless widow.

But she and Ruth made the crossing of the Jordan – it didn't part for them – and made the climb back to Bethlehem. Clearly, she held on to the unseen, the illogical, the unexplainable. Leaving the pastures of Moab behind, trudging up what must have seemed like an exhausting path, she felt, I'm sure, judged, crushed and forsaken by God. Perhaps, she thought:

'After all, they had gone to Moab; they had left the land of Promise; they'd allowed their sons to marry the 'accursed women'; they'd done so much wrong, right? Perhaps she was just a 'statistic' like those of a couple of generations ago who died in the desert wilderness. Maybe they had angered God and this situation was the result. That was the sensible explanation.'

Yet, inexplicably, she held on while an invisible hand held hers and led her on back home.

These are the times when you can't see the horizon let alone a grand and glorious plan. If an angel from heaven had appeared before her, she might have missed him, and so God had an angel, of sorts, walking with her.

You see, it was all about Ruth – this tender woman encouraging her along the trek. But Naomi had no idea that her tragedy was God's prophetic masterpiece of the ages. She was clueless that Ruth, a woman from that treacherous land of Moab, a woman whose sickly husband God had brought to the grave, that she would be the great grandmother of Israel's greatest king and a fundamental part of the Messianic line – that she would masterfully picture the grace of God upon the gentile nations during the church age.

Dragging her feet along that dusty path up to Bethlehem, she couldn't see chapter two let alone Revelation 22! She undoubtedly loved her daughter-in-law, but she surely longed for the 'good ole days' – way before Ruth, when she was Ruthless so to speak. She had no way of knowing that her life was

really all about someone else's – Ruth's. She had no way of knowing that her own tumultuous life would grandly portray the Jewish people in God's perfect plan.

It was all a majestically beautiful painting and Naomi's life was God's canvas – her tears the background paint for the luminous joy that would highlight the breathtaking foreground of God's faithfulness and goodness in His time and way.

It's important for those of us who experience such times to continue in trust when circumstances seem to say God is untrustworthy. When Mary looked up at her divine child so mutilated on that cross as to be unrecognizable, she may have felt as though God was ruthless and untrustworthy. When Job lost all his children in a devastating and supernatural way, he may have pondered the same. Or consider Jacob when he learned that his dearest son Joseph was supposedly torn to shreds and "devoured by an evil beast."

But in all these cases as well as your own, God is not ruthless but indeed has a 'Ruth' there with you – an extraordinarily beautiful purpose in mind. He says, *"I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the LORD, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope."* (Jer 29:11)

It's also important for us who experience such times to continue in hope when history haunts our conscience. Undoubtedly, Naomi regarded her own with bitterness and regret. If anyone could feel like they wasted their life, that all opportunity was gone, it was surely this dear old woman trudging up that path. But through it all, she never lost hope in God. Even when she believed *"the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me"* she also recognized His kindness through Boaz (v2:20).

And you know the story – in the end, her companions, speaking to her while she holds Ruth's little baby Obed, say unto her, *"...may he be to you a restorer of life..."* – certainly a prophetic allusion to Christ as well as the child. As astounding and unreasonable as it may seem in your own 'Moab', Christ will restore life. He came to us serving just as Obed's name means "serving."

Have you left the 'house of Bread'? Maybe you thought it was necessary; maybe you were famished. Do you find yourself in 'Moab'? Bereaved? Lonely? Hanging by a thread? Perhaps it's time to get back to 'Bethlehem'. Need a helping hand?

I held my own son's right hand when he died. Since then, I asked the Lord to hold my own and in fact He said, *"For I, the LORD your God, will hold your right hand, Saying to you, 'Fear not, I will help you.'"* (Isa 41:13)

Returning to the Bethlehem of basic trust is a humbling and dusty road. For you see, as with Naomi, your life and mine are all about someone else – Jesus Christ. But you won't realize His purpose unless

you get back there. You won't find it in Moab. If Naomi hadn't made that journey back, we'd be looking at a whole different history.

She arrived there at the time of the barley harvest, the end of which is coincident with Pentecost. You remember from the book of Acts that this was the time at which the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples and the church was born. Likewise, as you make your way back to the house of bread, you'll find new life and an outpouring of God's Spirit.

Now, when we get to heaven, one person I truly want to meet is Naomi. Maybe you'll see her before me. If so, ask her if she still has any regrets and I'm confident you'll hear her laugh with an understanding joy as radiant as heaven itself. I bet she'll tell you that every step along the way, as much as it hurt then, is much more than worth it in eternity. (2 Cor 4:17)

For you see, our God is never 'Ruth-less'.

The One

God is intensely interested in and committed to the one. While man (and the contemporary church) values the multitude, God finds extreme value in the one.

John's disciples were disturbed and confused. He had been the rising star; multitudes were coming to him to hear the message of repentance and baptism. Then came Jesus. From their perspective, He just appeared on the scene and instantly caught the attention of the crowds. John's ministry was dwindling. His followers said to him, *"Rabbi, He who was with you beyond the Jordan, to whom you have testified – behold, He is baptizing, and all are coming to Him!"* Understanding the situation, John replied, *"He must increase, but I must decrease."*

Jesus was a hit everywhere. He had no problem with 'church growth'. Thousands of people turned out to hear him speak, to see or receive miraculous healings or to eat bread and fish. If it were our day, He would write books, speak at conferences, appear on TBN or be invited to the White House. Christianity today celebrates celebrity. Jesus, however, knew that such fame was ultimately fruitless. You NEED to touch the one. Oh, that's not to say that public preaching and teaching is totally fruitless – quite the opposite.

However, while people esteem celebrity and play to the crowd, God values far more the individual, the one. Broadcasting the message, if you would, is ultimately only as effective as the Holy Spirit's work on each person's heart individually. If you're an evangelist, you know this already.

Anyway, as a consequence of the crowds and the Pharisees, Christ headed out of Judea toward Galilee. *"But He needed to go through Samaria."* Now, Samaria, as most of you know, was kind of off-limits to the devout Jew. In fact, many would actually circumvent Samaria on their way north or south incurring a much longer journey. You see, to travel through this land of 'half-breeds' would defile them or so they thought.

But, Jesus NEEDED to go through it – why? - to minister to one poor woman who was 'unlucky at love' at least four or five times. Go figure...a Samaritan was really low on the totem pole to the religious Jew; beyond that, a Samaritan woman was even lower; and a Samaritan woman who'd had multiple lovers was basically untouchable, off the chart so to speak.

But Jesus trekked through the morning and into the heat of the day till He was tired. Arriving at the village of Sychar, He rested by a site known as Jacob's well. There, He encountered this woman and very contrary to custom, He asked her for a drink. You have to understand how socially up tight the religious elite were in those days to appreciate her amazement.

Now, as surprised as she was, there are many, many people today that are even less anticipatory of the Lord's interest or care for them individually. This is because, as ministers, our hearts are often more in tune with the oft-misguided disciples of Jesus than Jesus Himself. We esteem prestige, notoriety. As a consequence, our religious system today is sidetracked. Whole denominations are caught up in the glorification of prosperity, of ministerial 'clubs' and 'sanctified' celebrity, of feel-good entertainment, of doctrinal 'purity', of mass-market appeals to open-mindedness...on and on it goes. Even those that started well are now emulating the world's values.

Consequently, there's just no time for 'the one'.

If you and I along with the rest of the church as a whole are to be ready for His appearing, we must get away from this numbers game and notoriety attitude, this religious carnival ride, and re-embrace the heart of God – His intense love for each individual.

Remember the parable of the one lost coin or the one lost lamb? Therein, Jesus spoke of how deeply our Father cares to 'find' the ONE who is lost – not the multitude, the ONE. And He added that, *"...there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."* (Luke 15)

To love God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind is the greatest commandment, and the second is to love your neighbor as yourself. Note the singular – neighbor - each one, because each one is fantastically precious. Though Christ taught the multitude, He ministered otherwise to individuals. In fact, considering all the healings He performed, there is only one instance in the NT of Jesus doing this miracle for more than one person at a time. This clearly points to His priority.

One of the reasons we see the world around us devolving into greater and greater iniquity is because we as believers have allowed ourselves to be 'corralled into churchianity'. I submit that as long as we are clustered and corralled by this contemporary concept, we fail to truly influence the world around us. In fact, quite the opposite occurs, and the enemy of Christ is delighted.

Churchianity is the glorification of the man-made trappings and man-valued 'religiousities' that have hi-jacked many parts of the body of Christ. Corporate worship and teaching are not the issues. Rather, the mindset that makes them the ultimate goal is. Self-willed individualism is certainly not the target but love for and ministry to the individual is.

Pastors and pewsters, Jesus NEEDED to go through Samaria to minister to one dear woman and it led to a powerful impact upon a whole community. (See John 4) As counter intuitive as it seems, the world is more impacted by loving, sincere ministry to God's sheep one by one by one. It's His plan and Jesus demonstrated it. And you can be amazed by the results:

Edward Kimball taught a Bible class. One day, a young man named Dwight visited his class. It was clear Dwight didn't know the Bible. One Saturday as Ed was preparing his Sunday school lesson, the Lord put a burden on his heart to visit the shoe store where Dwight worked and share the gospel with that young man. That day a Boston shoe clerk surrendered his life to Jesus. The clerk, Dwight L. Moody, eventually became a powerfully effective evangelist.

Like Jesus, Ed NEEDED to go through Samaria...well, OK, Boston. In the same way, we today NEED to search our own 'Samaria' to find, feed and otherwise minister to the one -- one by one by one by one.

Wrong Questions, Right Answer

Wandering through the phenomenal collection of art in the Louvre museum you can get an odd sense of awe and futility. This former residence of Napoleon is just so packed full of mankind's creative treasures, it numbs the mind. Crowds gather around the Mona Lisa while the rooms of renaissance sculptures are virtually empty – there are definitely popular favorites. After several hours, I discovered mine. It grabbed me instantly and I had to sit down in a kind of surrender to its message. Let me take you to a story in John 20 to explain:

To say it was salting the wound would be a gross understatement. The only person who had truly loved her, the one who had freed her from slavery to sin and evil spirits, the one she called Lord and who held her heart – the rulers had mocked, tortured and sadistically killed him. And now, this...

She'd come to the tomb early. Stumbling her way through the dark garden, she'd found it open -- the stone covering rolled back! OPEN!?

"Why?!'" her heart cried out along with her lips. 'Why?!'' Searching for reasons in a storm of confusion and ever-deepening heartbreak, she grasped at an answer – 'they have taken his body!'

She ran to where she found Peter, still sulking, and John. "They have taken away the Lord out of the tomb and ..." she began.

Hearing this, Peter jumped to his feet and ran out – confused, angry, grieving. 'Oh, no! Why?!'' his heart lamented.

"...and we don't know where they've laid him!" she finished.

At that, John broke out of his own dismay and bounded after Peter. He caught up and passed him by, reaching the tomb first. 'Why?!'' his heart searched along with his eyes as he stooped and looked in, seeing just the strips of linen left behind.

Peter ambled past, breathing heavily, and entered the cave. Like his fellow disciple, he beheld the linen wrappings and the neatly folded face cloth.

Then John ventured in. For some reason, he saw, and something 'clicked' inwardly – he believed.

But Mary remained outside. After the two men had left, she continued weeping. Now convinced that she would never see her beloved again, she looked inside. A bit surprised, she beheld two men dressed in white sitting at either end of the now empty grave clothes.

“Dear woman, why are you weeping?” they asked.

She explained what seemed to be obvious, *“Because they have taken away my Lord... and I don’t know where they’ve laid Him.”*

‘How-did-it-happen’ questions were the last thing her heart could deal with now. She turned away with one more ‘Oh, why?!!’ echoing within her heart.

Just then, another gentle voice said, *“Dear woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?”* Inexplicably, this voice seemed to unlock a watershed of heartbroken love.

This man was the gardener, she thought, he would know... *“Sir, if You have carried Him away, tell me where You have laid Him, and I will take Him away.”*

A breathless moment passed... Then came a familiar voice and along with it, the scent of fresh rain, wild roses and joy.

“Mary,” He spoke softly.

And her heart exploded!

In dark and lonely times, a broken heart searches for answers. Even our Lord Jesus, on the cross, cried out a *“Why?”* (see Mat 27:46 or Mark 15:34). So, it’s easy for me to imagine the disciples of Christ doing the same thing.

But God generally doesn’t give us the answers we think we need. Not on our terms or timelines it seems. Oh, He answers our prayers, but if you spend some time in the Gospels, you quickly conclude that Jesus wasn’t trying to be anyone’s answer-man, not in the way his critics or insincere public desired.

You see, God knows that what our hearts and souls truly crave is rightness. But answers to the ‘whys’ or ‘wherefores’ cannot bring redemption, restoration, resurrection – rightness. At these times, what we need comes not from an intellectual or emotional explanation no matter how profound, but from our souls being wrapped in His loving heart.

For all things are or will be made right in Him. He, Himself, is the Answer – this is not just a play on words but rather the most awesome truth. (see John 14:6).

When Mary wanted simply to find the body of Jesus, her heart, engulfed in sorrow, was searching for an answer to the wrong question. She, in her mind, saw her Savior as in the painting before which I sat.

But while ‘whys’ and ‘wherefores’ within her earnestly desired answers, they were born out of false assumptions. There was Jesus just behind her and it only took one word from Him to make everything right – righter than right – better than right – exceedingly abundantly better than what she could imagine as right. In fact, it was already right – His word simply revealed it to her.

And we are in the same boat with Mary (or rather the disciples) bailing the same water so to speak, wondering if our God really cares. However, if He gave us just the answers to our whys, it would only be like handing us another bailing bucket. You remember the story. Jesus told his disciples, “Let’s go over to the other side” of the lake. And while He was asleep on a pillow in the stern of the boat, a sudden storm had filled it with water (see Mark 4). But with a single command, the raging storm was stilled.

And we are in the same room with Jairus. His mind first filled with hopes of prevention is now muddled by fear of his little girl’s death. (See Luke 8:41-56). Jesus didn’t just have an explanation but rather, with a single command – resurrection.

Now, sorrows will come, if they haven’t already, for we are living in treacherous days. As a result, many people are asking these same questions (or will be) and those who are dealing with tragedy will not generally be lifted up by some well-meaning teacher’s 10-point lesson on God’s righteous judgments, His sovereignty, His mercy, etc.

But what hurting people need most is Christ Himself. Not just theological answers to the whys or wherefores but an honest, intimate connection to the One who but speaks the word and makes it right or reveals that it is already right.

As the birth pangs of these last days get more intense, we must know how to answer, yes. But even more so, we must be those who display Christ, His love and compassion. We must lead His children to Him, guide them into His arms.

There, held close to His heart, the clay of our souls is fashioned in trust. It’s a tender place for He Who came to heal the broken hearted (Isa 61:1) died with a broken heart Himself (John 19:34).

And He rose again!

So, the tragedy wasn’t the end but the doorway into unexpected joy. Likewise, your hardship, your tragedy, as difficult as it is, is not the end of joy, the end of love. In Christ and only in Christ, it will one day soon be understood with a completely new perspective – a resurrection perspective.

Looking at that painting, it hit me – He’s not there in that grave, in that condition, even though everyone who knew and loved Him thought He was. He was in that grave – He probably looked much like that. His death was real, the pain was real, the sorrow real, the anguish real. But early on the third

day, Jesus – the Way the Truth and the Life, conquered sin and death and brought in the real reality – resurrection and eternal life in an indescribably wonderful place.

Mary, the disciples on the lake, Jairus and his family -- all discovered what we need to realize and hold on to – Jesus ends the whys and wherefores of our burdened hearts – not with explanations so much as with loving, perfect restoration – making all things right, maybe not here, but absolutely in heaven – a real place, a steadfast promise, a rock-solid guarantee for those who trust in Christ.

Meanwhile, let's look eagerly toward heaven and live in genuine expectation.

Turn Again

“And Abraham went early in the morning to the place where he had stood before the LORD. Then he looked toward Sodom and Gomorrah, and toward all the land of the plain; and he saw, and behold, the smoke of the land which went up like the smoke of a furnace.” (see Gen 19:27,28)

Surely, it was a long stare of despair and grief. The smoke and stench of death filled the entire sky as he looked down upon the plain where the lush pasture and busy cities had been just the day before. Never had he been so disappointed, so crushed in heart. What had, to this point, been an amazing walk of faith turned sour. Faith subsided in the wake of sadness. It would seem Abraham turned away.

“And Abraham journeyed from there to the South, and dwelt between Kadesh and Shur, and stayed in Gerar. Now Abraham said of Sarah his wife, ‘She is my sister.’ And Abimelech king of Gerar sent and took Sarah.” (see Gen 20:1,2)

Abraham left the land of promise heading south and west of the scene of this horrific disaster. We know where Kadesh was as well as Shur so if Gerar was between them as the scripture indicates this would place it in the northern Sinai. Many map makers erroneously place it further north between Gaza and Beersheba. This location is coincident with the Tell Abu Hurayrah or Tell Haror but there is no definitive agreement among archeologists and even the ancient Eusebius placed it further south. The point being that Abraham was headed back toward Egypt.

Now, many commentators assert that Abraham was simply falling into an old pattern in forsaking Sarah, but that doesn’t take into account what had happened just before this. You see, the Lord had just visited Abraham in person. Perhaps only a few days or weeks previously, He’d eaten a meal at Abraham’s camp and told him that Sarah would have his child in nine months or so. Sarah laughed in disbelief or amazement – remember? Yet, Abraham acted here in Gerar as if that promise meant nothing. It was as though he just didn’t care anymore.

But God protected Sarah, and Abimelech being warned, did not touch her. Though the king bestowed many gifts upon Abraham as recompense for the error, the patriarch was exposed as a ‘spinner’ of the truth. Yet, there was still seemingly no conviction. He simply made a lame excuse for his lie and in the process, indicted God as the one to blame – he said God made him a “wanderer” ...

"There is a terrible meaning in this verb wander which Abraham uses. The Hebrew word occurs exactly fifty times in Scripture and never in a good sense. It is used of animals going astray, of a drunken man reeling, or staggering, of sinful seduction, of a prophet's lies causing the people to err, of the path

of a lying heart. Six other words are translated wander, any one of which Abraham might have used, but he used the worst word available." (Barnhouse)

"Abraham is also, indirectly, blaming God for the problem; when God called me to wander from my father's house is a way of saying that God sent him out on this dangerous journey upon which Abraham had to protect himself." (Guzik)

This infers that he didn't believe God would protect him. "Also, it is interesting to see that Abraham "accepts" these gifts, when he had refused gifts from a pagan king previously (see Genesis 14:21-24) because he wanted no one to think that a man had made him rich. Here, because of Abraham's compromise, he finds it hard to re-claim that same high moral ground!" (Guzik)

Wow! The father of our faith acted as though he had none and furthermore, as though he was pointing the finger at God as being to blame for his poor attitude. Why??

No cell phones. What??

Bear with me. I'm not intending to treat this serious issue lightly. You see, Abraham dearly loved Lot. In fact, it's easy to imagine him thinking of Lot as the son he never had. It is evident that our hero of the faith took his nephew under wing after Lot's father died back in Ur. For years, they had roamed the unfamiliar land of promise together. Not long before, Abraham had risked everything to rescue his loved one from the hands of several hostile armies and just a few days or weeks ago, he had gone way out on a limb negotiating with God for Lot's preservation as the Lord was about to destroy Sodom.

God seemed intent on depriving Abraham of a parental relationship. He told Abraham to send his son Ishmael away and then in what was a seemingly crushing disappointment, God destroyed Sodom and Abraham's beloved Lot. Wait a minute, you may think. Lot was saved out of Sodom; God specifically saved him because of Abraham's intercession! (And Ishmael was fine as well.) That's right. But, I strongly believe that Abraham did not know about Lot until much later.

'No cell phones.' There was no way for him to know.

Recall, Lot headed like a banshee for the hills of Moab and hid out in a cave. Meanwhile, Abraham behaved, as we've discussed, like his heart was broken. He acted as though he felt that God was not Who he thought He was, perhaps He was just uncaring, perhaps untrustworthy.

You see, it's quite possible that he was misjudging the faithfulness and goodness of God based upon what he could see with the eyes and his limited understanding of God's plan. The Lord was in the process of stretching his faith big-time, but Abraham didn't know that. All he could see was that virtually all the people he loved were taken from him – his brother Nahor, his mother and father Terah, his son Ishmael, his nephew/son Lot and family.

And following God's leading seemed to be leading nowhere. Maybe you can identify with dear Abraham here. I can. But know this -- that God is absolutely faithful and good in spite of what your senses and feelings may press upon you. Abraham couldn't see it, but Lot was safe. So was Sarah. And just as He promised, she gave birth to Abraham's son Isaac just nine months later.

When our son, Gabe, went home to be with the Lord, a few of his friends, like Abraham, stumbled in their faith. Some felt they couldn't trust God like they'd once believed. A few were just so hurt they lost hope. But like Lot, Gabe is safe in God's care and one day they will know that.

The walk of faith is not without some stumbling along the way. We're not told how or why or when, but between this sad episode in his life and Genesis 22 father Abraham turned again toward heaven, toward the faith that brought him righteous standing with God. It likely took time, but eventually, his faith in God became so strong, the Lord could test him with the command to sacrifice Isaac on Mt. Moriah. And Abraham never flinched. He had complete trust in God. What a turnaround!

In 1993 Gerald Sittser, a professor at Whitworth College was driving home from a family outing. In the car was his mother, wife of 20 years and four children. A drunk driver swerved across the center line and hit them head on. In an instant he lost his wife, his two-year-old daughter and his mother. In his book, *A Grace Disguised*, Sittser shares some insights from his painful journey:

"The accident itself bewilders me today as much as it did three years ago. Much good has come out of it, but all the good in the world will never make the accident itself good. It remains a horrible, tragic and evil event to me. Yet the grief I feel is sweet as well as bitter. I still have a sorrowful soul; yet I wake up each morning joyful, eager for what the new day will bring. Never have I felt as much pain as I have in the last three years; yet never have I experienced as much pleasure in simply being alive ... never have I felt so broken; yet never have I felt so whole . . . Never have I been so aware of my weaknesses and vulnerability; yet never have I been so content and felt so strong ... Above all, I have become aware of the power of God's grace and my need for it. My soul has grown because it has been awakened to the goodness and love of God. God has been present in my life these past three years. God will continue to be present to the end of my life and through all eternity. God is growing my soul, making it bigger and filling it with himself. My life is being transformed." (Joel Smith)

Perhaps, some tragedy has impacted your walk with the Lord and you're reading this thinking, 'Maybe God's there but He's not there for me.' Perhaps, you've turned away from Him ever so slightly or even 180 degrees. You may know you're off course but agony has birthed apathy. If that's you or someone you know, take heart. Remember, you don't have a 'cell phone' either -- that is, you just don't have all the facts. If you'll turn again to your heavenly Father, what looks and feels like absolute disaster

will one day be known in a whole new light. Don't give up. One day soon, the heavens will open, and the Son of God will appear. He will make all things right.

If you've fallen away, don't be condemned. Turn again from Egypt. Do not sacrifice what God has promised in His Word upon the altar of disappointment.

Turn again and know that heaven will cheer you on, God will smile, and you will know that your Savior is indeed worthy to be trusted, to be loved and followed forever.

Gulp!

“I’m swamped! I’m in over my head!” – Ever feel that way? I took a job once (OK, or maybe twice...) in which I felt overwhelmed – just wearied and worn out by the circumstances. Know what I mean? No peace, no solitude, no time for devotion, for just sitting at the Lord’s feet. Instead, it was all running, all doing, tumbling from action to action – a busy, busy man – just too busy, man!

Anyway, as you know, it’s in those kinds of situations that we can get carried away by the descending current of this world’s priorities and the sand-castles of our good intentions get swept away.

So, that’s why I love reflective moments which for me are becoming increasingly more important and refreshing. Right now, I’m pondering Mark 1 - there’s Jesus being baptized by John in the Jordan river at the same place, many scholars think, where Joshua led the children of Israel across into the promised land (see Joshua 3). Now, John’s baptism was radical – the Jewish people had never used it before as John was doing. They did baptize converting gentiles, but never had it been used as a demonstration of repentance on the part of a Jew.

So, when Christ showed up, having no need for repentance, John said, *“I should be baptized by You!”* Nevertheless, Jesus insisted and was submerged by John to, in His own words, *“...fulfill all righteousness.”* So, that’s why my next reflection is Joshua chapter three. It’s awesome and I think it’s probably prophetic, pointing forward not only to Christ in the gospels but also to the days in which we are living. AND it speaks of life!

Here’s what happened – after some 40 years in the wilderness of Sinai, Joshua and the children of Israel were camped on the east side of the Jordan river; it was a time when the river overflowed its banks.

There, the heavenly message was given to Joshua – after three days, the captains were to go throughout the camp and tell all of Israel to follow the Ark of God. Now, you may already know that three days in the scripture points to the resurrection of Christ, and that the Ark is itself a fascinating picture of Jesus.

Anyway, Joshua then told the priests to carry the Ark into the Jordan river. And now, this gets interesting because the name Jordan means “descender” for it descends into the Dead Sea. As such, it is a picture of death or sin leading to death. Recall, as we just mentioned, Jesus was immersed there Himself foretelling His own death, and in the process, His taking on the sins of the whole world.

But here in Joshua's time, as the priests who are carrying the Ark, the type or picture of Christ, entered the river, something wildly supernatural happened – the river was immediately 'swallowed up' – the water stopped far upstream, all the way upstream at a place called Adam!

Can you see it? The picture is perfect. When Christ died for us on Calvary (typified as the Ark entered the Jordan's waters) sin and death (the Jordan itself) was "swallowed up" in victory (see 1Cor 15:54) all the way back to Adam! All the way back to the time when mankind first sinned and died.

As a consequence, all the people crossed over on dry ground – illustrating that death would lose its sting (see 1Cor 15:55) – and they entered the promised land of God's Kingdom. Isn't this beautiful?!

But there's more. Just as Jesus told His disciples to follow Him, Joshua told the Israelites to follow the Ark (see Mat 16:24-26 for example). But they were to follow it specifically from a distance of "*about 2000 cubits*". Now, I will suggest that this could be a prophetic illustration of the Jews following Christ in fulfillment of Romans 11:25-27 about 2000 years after Christ's death and resurrection. If that is the case, and I believe it could be, we are living in exciting times!

Finally, Joshua instructed 12 men to retrieve 12 stones from the dry riverbed and to build with them an altar to the Lord so that Israel would always remember. And, in like manner, we also need to be reminded:

- Of what Christ has done for us
- That the descending current of sin has been stopped for those who believe
- That death has been swallowed up by Life
- That we should follow Jesus and, as a consequence, walk in newness of life

"Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore, we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life." Romans 6:3,4

Yep, I love reflective moments!