

Things Above

Volume 1

2nd Edition

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Introduction

I confess – I’m a man so desperately in need of God’s grace, it just amazes me that He would shed His love upon me. There was a time that I thought I was ‘not so bad’ and yet it was during that very time my Redeemer grabbed my heart and saved my soul. Graciously, He chose me, and I embraced the truth about Him. But there was still much to learn of my own despicably wicked heart.

Later, when Abba Father took two of my own little boys home to heaven, I learned how shallow and shaky my faith and hope were but also how faithful, compassionate, merciful and gracious He is. These devotionals are offered in hope that those believers in Christ who have encountered the trials of grief or simply hunger for a more intimate relationship with God may be encouraged along the path of this pilgrimage.

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Things Above

“If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth. For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.” Col 3:1-3

About Face!

Pam's husband just disappeared one day. He'd been a good husband and father to his two small children and had been a sincere church attendee for several years. But in a seemingly radical change of heart, he just split.

Ted's wife had expressed some dissatisfaction with the women's group at church, but soon, it turned into a constant criticism. Then she got more and more into wanting stylish expensive clothes. Then came the sudden need for a new car, a new image (teeth, hair, and other things) and then an announcement – she had found some new friends that were more interesting. A few months later, she left Ted and her three children. She'd been a Christian since her teens, but now she was just 'way out there'. What happened?

Now, the term 'backslider' rightly or wrongly conjures up thoughts of Cain, King Saul, and even Judas Iscariot. Many of us don't understand the term or the dynamics associated with it. Nevertheless, the spiritual issues surrounding it are so important to us as believers that we cannot afford to ignore, to misunderstand or to deal wrongly with it.

That's because each of us faces it every day.

'What?!' you may think. 'That's crazy. I love the Lord. I would never do that – why, even if everyone else deserts Him, I never will! I'll never deny Him!'

Uh-huh. It's good that you are confident of your love, but Peter felt the same way, and if you asked them at the right time, so did many of those we consider backslidden. We face decisions, generally, every day that propel us in one direction or another.

"Direction?"

Yes, you see, it's no accident that faith in Christ produces what the Bible terms a "walk" or a "race" (Col 2:6, 1Ths 4:1, Hebrews 12:1, Jer 10:23). That is, at any given time, there's movement in a specific direction.

Randy Alcorn, in his book "Edge of Eternity", depicts his main character, Nick, as finding himself unexpectedly in a different world walking on the Red Road toward the heavenly city of Charis (a la Pilgrim's Progress). Now, Nick is not yet saved. He's discovering much about the Lord along the way, but he doesn't yet have a handle on why people in this place do the things they do. At one point during their trek, he, his friend Quon and their little group of pilgrims

encounter many people all headed in the opposite direction toward the city of Babel (hell). Nick recalls...

Just for the fun of it, I turned around and walked about fifty feet with the crowd. It felt great.

“Nick! What are you doing? Get back here.” It was Quon. I turned around, weaving my way back. What a pain.

“Don’t do that,” Quon said. “The GuideBook says once you retreat on the road you may not manage ever to turn around again.”

Now, even though he has not yet gotten saved in the story, his experience is consistent with the Bible’s description of backsliding. You see, the words used for back sliding in the Bible simply mean to turn from or to turn away. Its fundamentally means that the child of God begins to face a different direction than the Person and place to Whom and to which he/she is called – to Jesus Christ and His home, heaven.

Simply put, **you will proceed in the direction you ‘face’**. It’s no accident that on two occasions Jesus told Satan to “Get behind Me.” (See Mk 8:33 and Luke 4:8). If you’re spiritually facing anyone or anything other than Christ, you will begin to backslide. Now we don’t refer to someone who’s stumbled in a sin a backslider, but the direction and dynamic are the same. It’s a spiritual reality more sure than the meager law of gravity – you will gravitate to your ‘potentate’; you will embrace the one you choose to face. And you will become like him/it. (See 1Jn 3:2; 2Cor 3:18 and Psa 115:8).

Now, God desires that you draw close to Him (James 4:8) which is to ‘walk with Him’ as did Enoch, Noah, Abraham and others (Gen 5:22; 6:9; 17:1; 24:40; 48:15). But if you hang around with the wrong crowd physically and/or the wrong influences mentally you’ll find that your Christian walk loses momentum. As Psalm One describes it, walking slows to standing which, in turn, becomes sitting (Psa 1:1).

A bad choice, prompted not by God but by your own sin nature can take you way off course as with Alcorn’s character or it may be only one degree to the right or left. However, even one degree, when it repeats over and over can take you to the place where you’re walking contrary to the Lord. One degree, if not corrected can lead to a big problem. Imagine leaving San Francisco airport headed for Honolulu with a one-degree error in navigation – hope you brought your shark repellent!

So, what runs through the mind of the backslider? What takes him/her off course?

Temptation... We are all tempted, all of us. What you're tempted by is quite common no matter how 'unique' you may think you are, or it is. What you do with the temptation is key. Do you continue to face it, to entertain it, or do you turn from it back to the Lord? The backslider first 'toys' with temptation which inevitably leads to sin.

Denial... Generally, temptation works incrementally. Contrary to popular opinion, we don't 'fall' into sin, we walk into it step by step. Perhaps because of this, the sin nature is often successful in convincing us that we're still in control of the situation and thus we can play around the 'edge' of sin.

Now, thanks to belief in the atoning blood of Christ and the power of His Holy Spirit, we are no longer slaves to sin. Once saved, we are free not to sin. However, the wages of sin is death – sin still has its consequences even for the believer. As long as you deny your failure, you only allow it to increase its influence.

Guilt and Condemnation... At some point, the backslider in heart hits the threshold, and denial gives way to guilt. Sooner or later, the devil's tempting 'bait' turns to a terrible 'beating'. He will lure you to the snare and then will be the first to accuse you for stepping into it. This is a critical time though, for the goal of the enemy is then to condemn you in order to keep you from repenting. His lies are laced with reruns of your sins. He wants you to 'look' at him, to continually face your sin rather than looking to the Lord. *"If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear [me]:"* (Psa 66:18, also see Phil 3:13,14) Satan knows it hinders your fellowship with the Lord.

But LISTEN, Christ does NOT condemn you. He loves you – yes, even in your failure, even in your pit. The devil works very hard though to persuade you otherwise. Condemnation and the false perception of God's anger with you is a powerful weapon in Satan's arsenal.

Now, you may think, 'But what about all those stories in the Old Testament where God got so upset with sin? Isn't God still the same?'

Yes, He is. He never changes. But you see ALL of His righteous justified anger with your sin, He poured out on Himself – that is, on His only begotten Son, Jesus. When you are saved and are trying to follow the Lord, you need not ever again feel condemned (See Romans 8:1)

However, you may face a sense of condemnation if/when you walk after the flesh. In that circumstance, Satan often uses it as his 'hammer'. That's when you must turn and hold to the promises of God. *"If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to*

cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” (1John1:9) That’s when you come back into the light – you honestly confess your sin to Him. “O house of Jacob, come, and let us walk in the light of the LORD.” (Isa 2:5) “If we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship one with another and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin.” (1John1:7)

You see, at this point, God actually forgets about it – literally, truly, no jive. He’s already forgiven it at Calvary and as you confess it before Him, it’s GONE. In His mind, He’s chosen to cause it to have never happened. Now, you may still remember, but He doesn’t! *“For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their iniquities will I remember no more.” (Hebrews 8:12, 10:17) “He will turn again, He will have compassion upon us; He will subdue our iniquities; and You wilt cast all their sins into the depths of the sea.” (Micah 7:19) “As far as the east is from the west, [so] far has He removed our transgressions from us.” (Psa 103:12)* Wow! That’s unburdening, isn’t it?

Isolation and Rejection... As precious as God’s children are, we can sometimes treat the repentant or struggling backslider with recoil and this can lead him/her to a sense of isolation and rejection – not just by us but by God. Now, the word instructs us not to fellowship with the unrepentant for that only encourages their sin and can corrupt us as well (See 1 Cor 5 as an example).

However, the backslider who’s repented or wants to but is struggling must be treated as Galatians 6:1 says, *“Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, you who are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering yourself, lest you also be tempted.”*

About 30 years ago, shortly after coming to the Lord, I raced to the mission field of Europe. I was saved and loved the Lord genuinely and had a passion to serve Him. But though I memorized tons of scriptures, I had no real grounding in the Word nor any relationship with a godly pastor. While living in Greece, our second child was born and about a month and a half later went to be with the Lord. As you know or can imagine, it was very difficult.

Our shallow understanding and misguided counselors left us wandering. Deep inside was a sense of failure and futility – like bitter seeds, they infested our hearts. Thus, the next couple of years were filled with my own backsliding.

Hitting bottom, so to speak, spiritually and morally, I finally came to repentance and began again, under some excellent Bible teaching, to really follow after the Lord. However, just as this healing and restoration was coming about, I confessed my past situation to a leadership couple in

our church (James 5:16) – I was hoping they might be willing to help us ‘along the way’. Unfortunately, they abruptly recoiled, and it made me feel really ‘leprous’ and untouchable despite my repentance. Thankfully, my pastor and his kind assistant ‘caught’ me, in a sense, and helped me get going again.

Futility... The backslider loses his grip on the concept of grace. After trying to measure up to some standard and failing perhaps many times, he hears the devilish siren cry that his life is futile, that God doesn’t any longer accept him – he’s just too bad, too much of a basket case, so why even try? Many, many backsliders simply believe God doesn’t love them anymore and maybe never did. Sometimes, our behavior as believers reinforces that.

Self doubt... Now, you may have already observed that much if not all of this thinking is self-absorbed – very ‘me-oriented’. And it is. The backslider is consumed with himself. “*The backslider in heart shall be filled with his own ways.*” (Prov 14:14) (As we are ALL tempted to be.) Because of this, he can come to think of his salvation as related to some sort of a personal accomplishment rather than God’s accomplishment and free gift. Thus, he can doubt his salvation.

Of course, all of this is a downward trek away from God’s outstretched arms. But doom is NOT inevitable. It is NOT irreversible. It is NOT over. Too many are too quick to assert the scripture, “*They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would [no doubt] have continued with us...*” (1John 2:9) and forget the scriptures that say, “*Turn, O backsliding children, says the LORD; for I am married unto you.*” (Jer 3:14) and, “*Return, you backsliding children, [and] I will heal your backslidings.*” (Jer 3:22) and, “*I will never leave you, nor forsake you.*” (Heb 13:5) or the story of the prodigal son and many others that speak of God’s unfailing love and tender mercies.

You see, some of the most godly saints have been down this road. Consider King David as an example (See the Bathsheba affair in 2 Sam 11 & 12) or the Apostle Peter (See his great denial in Matthew 26). But love, agape love, never fails. It never, ever fails.

Friends, perhaps you know someone who’s turned to the ‘left or to the right’ or perhaps has turned away altogether. Jude writes, “*... beloved, remember the words which were spoken before of the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ; how that they told you there should be mockers in the last time, who should walk after their own ungodly lusts. These be they who separate themselves, sensual, **having not the Spirit.** But you, beloved, building up yourselves on your*

*most holy faith, praying in the Holy Ghost, keep yourselves in the love of God, looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life. **And of some have compassion, making a difference: And others save with fear, pulling [them] out of the fire**; hating even the garment spotted by the flesh. (Jude 1:18-23).*

We are called upon to keep ourselves in the love of God, looking for mercy because we are aware of our own failures, acting with discernment and compassion toward those who are saved but turned out of the way. God help us to reach out patiently and in love rather than write them off.

Or perhaps, you're slipping yourself. You're going through the motions outwardly, but you know what's going on inside. You're no longer facing your Father in heaven. You're not at all sure what He'd say if you turned back to Him. Listen to this paraphrased story originally told by Clement of Alexandria (153 - 217 AD) concerning John the Apostle:

One day toward the end of his life, John came to a city in western Turkey (some think it was Smyrna). There he met a young man zealous for the Lord whom he committed into the care of the local pastor to raise up and disciple. The pastor accepted the charge and promised to care for the youth and teach him all the ways of the Lord.

John then left for Ephesus. Meanwhile, this pastor endeavored to care for the young man. He reared, kept, and cherished him and finally baptized him. After this however he left off leading him in the Way believing the Lord would 'take it from there'.

The youth though became involved with a crowd of friends that truly corrupted his as yet unsteady heart. They enticed him with costly entertainment and eventually got him involved in vandalism and robbery. Each time they dared him to carry out something worse which he came to do with increasing enthusiasm.

At last, having entirely despaired of his salvation, he no longer plotted anything insignificant. After having committed what he considered to be the 'ultimate transgression', he made up his mind that he was now lost and resigned himself to the hellish path of his associates. In course, he formed them into a band of brutal robbers with himself the head and cruelest of all.

Time passed, and John returned to the Church. Upon inquiring about the young man placed into the pastor's care, the pastor said, "He is dead."

"How did it happen and what kind of death?" John asked.

“He is dead to God,” he answered. “He has turned out wicked and immoral, becoming a robber. He has now taken possession of the mountain in front of the church with a band of men like him.”

Tearing his clothes and crying with great lamentation, the apostle said to bring a horse and someone to guide him to the leader of thieves.

Upon reaching the hideout, he was taken prisoner. At once, he cried out for the men to take him to their captain who was standing afar off heavily armed. As John approached, the head bandit recognized the old saint and being ashamed, he turned to flee away.

John followed hard after him with all his might, forgetting his age (approx. 99) and cried out, “Why, my son, do you flee from me your father, your unarmed old father? Please son, have pity on me. Don’t be afraid. You still have hope for life. I will give an account to Christ for you. If necessary, I will willingly endure death for you as the Lord did for us. For you, I will surrender my life. Stop and stand still. Believe that Christ has sent me.”

When he heard this, he at first stood still, looking down. Then he threw his weapons down, trembling and weeping bitterly. When the old man approached, he embraced him, and was baptized, if it were possible, a second time with tears.

John led him back to the church where he prayed and fasted for him and cared for him tenderly. John did not leave until he had restored the youth who demonstrated a great example of repentance and evidence of regeneration in Christ.

Dear friend, if you perhaps have slid backward to any degree or turned away – hear this – God still loves you and He has not given up on you! You haven’t even surprised Him. On the contrary, He’s given all FOR you. You are incredibly precious and welcomed. Turn again to see His face. Do an ‘about face.’ Come into His light. And you will know His relentless love as He says, “I do not condemn you. I love you and it thrills Me that you’re home. Come, let’s fellowship together!”

No, it’s NOT too good to be true – it is the way of our God and Father Who is ALL good and ALL true. Face it, He loves you. Turn to Him now.

“For the turning away of the simple shall slay them, and the prosperity of fools shall destroy them. But whoso hearkens unto Me shall dwell safely, and shall be quiet from fear of evil” (Pro 1:32:33)

“I have blotted out, as a thick cloud, your transgressions, and, as a cloud, your sins: return unto Me; for I have redeemed you.” (Isa 44:22)

After the Deception

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

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

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

I immediately excused myself and promptly made my exit.

Clearly, this man's advice was at best misdirected. However, knowing about the enemy's devices is indeed an important part of our spiritual warfare.

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

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

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

Now, mankind is universally infected from conception. (See Rom 3:23 and 5:12) Nevertheless, sin displays degrees of magnitude within the individual and within a society. It is clearly constrained in this world by the Spirit of God, (2Thes2:7) but this is the topic of another discussion. Suffice it to say that the scriptures speak of trespasses, sins, great sin, besetting sins, iniquity and blasphemy of the Holy Spirit – the last being the only one that is not forgiven in Christ for it is the rejection of Christ.

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

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

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

And it is still true today. Sin crouches at the doorway of our hearts, (see Gen 4:7); it inhabits our flesh, and in stealth, in deception, it tries to lure us into its deadly jaws. When this happens, even ‘celebrity’ Christians publicly deny their former faith.

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

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

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

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

Leaven is yeast, a material that rots or corrodes its host. And such is sin; it hardens (Heb 3:13, Mat 19:8, Job 41:24, Eze 3:7, 2Chron 36:13) and it creates a callousness over our hearts. Meanwhile, it rots and grows by festering. One sin leads to another to another to another... and you know along with me that it's never satisfied. Like yeast, it breaks down the integrity of its host. It breaks down the mental, moral, physical processes and brings its subject to disintegration and death (Pro 14:30, Isa 5:24). It's a horrific sight.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Toleration of sin happens frequently when we listen to the thought that says, 'oh, it's not that bad' or when we use the wrong measuring stick – i.e. we compare ourselves to others. Now, I'm not trying to set a standard for you here, but as an illustration, I've had good friends tell me that they watch R-rated movies because "they're just a little violent" or because they know their pastor saw them. I know sincere Christians who've let sin absolutely ruin their marriage, their ministry and their memories, pastors that have deserted their families and ministries, missionaries that have returned self-righteous or bitter and angry from their mission field, the list goes on and on...all because they tolerated sin.

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

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

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

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

All Muddied Up

“Ouch! Wha-what are you doing?! Hey, I didn’t ask for this! Man, that stings!”

Here’s this guy, born blind. He’s never seen anything, anytime, anywhere. He’s probably been parked there on the street by parents or friends to beg for coins or handouts. But he’s not complaining; he knows nothing else really. And, then comes his time... an appointment with his Creator.

Along comes Jesus with His disciples and before you know it, they’re pursuing a perplexing issue – why was this man born blind?

Now, either they knew him, or someone filled them in because there’s no record of this fellow explaining his state of being born that way. In any event, the situation was theologically a ‘hot button’ for the rabbis taught that if such was the case, either the man sinned in the womb and thus deserved blindness or else his parents sinned such that the fruit of their folly was to pass blindness on to their child.

So, the disciples asked, “*Rabbi (a title used by the Jews to address their teachers), who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?*” (See John 9) You see, just as the only thing this blind fellow knew was darkness, all the disciples could fathom was what the rabbis opined. Either the man sinned or his parents – that’s all they knew, and it was a type of darkness as well – spiritual darkness. Now, they were curious, what would rabbi Jesus say?

Thus, what Christ Jesus replied must have just zapped them.

“Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but that the works of God should be revealed in him.”

‘Whoa, no one sinned!?’ Lord, you mean this guy’s been blind for his whole life, he’s begged in the streets, he’s been unwelcome in the synagogue ... so God’s works can be seen??’ If I were there, that’s probably what I would have thought; ‘You mean his pitiful state is somehow God’s work? That doesn’t add up, rabbi.’ What about cause and effect??

In some ways, the disciples were just as blind as this man but perhaps at a disadvantage for at least the blind man knew he was blind.

Now, the Old Testament scriptures contain promises that the Messiah would open the eyes of the blind and Jesus did that numerous times. But I submit that as great a miracle as it is to physically heal, spiritual blindness is far more consequential and to be healed of it far more noteworthy. Typically, though, we are so blind to the spiritual world, that we undervalue it and tend to interpret God's ways, His works and His wonders in the context of the here and now; it's all we know. We were born into it after all. In this way, we were born blind as well.

When God's word says, "...*exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think...*" our minds tend first to consider temporal blessings. When we read, "... *Who heals all our diseases...*" we first figure that it means now -- here in this life. We sometimes hear the pragmatists among us lightly referring to eternity as "the sweet by and by" or as "pie in the sky." Frankly, many of us only understand the Word of God in the context of the temporal – that is until we get mud in our eyes. And that's just what Christ did.

Like you, I've heard a lot of good guesses as to why Jesus made mud with His spit and rubbed it into this man's eyes. He could have spoken the command, "Now see!" Or gently touched him or used any other more 'dignified' way to do this miracle but no – for this guy, He made mud -- spit and dirt. Wow, that must have stung something awful! I mean, I get one speck of dust in my contacts and I know it right away.

But two points jump out – first, it was certainly a pragmatic way to ensure that this man who might not have done so otherwise would obey the command to go wash in the pool of Siloam.

And why spit? I'll suggest that as the spit came from Christ's mouth, so too do the situations that sometimes 'muddy our own eyes'. Now, I'm not talking about the situations that come to us solely as a consequence of our sin, but rather the troubles and difficulties He Himself has ordained for our ultimate benefit. Sometimes dirty deals, muddy messes yet spoken forth by His mouth.

(Prophetically, this is interesting for Jesus made "pelos" – mud or clay, which speaks expressly in the Bible of the Jewish people (Isa 64:8, Jer 18:6). You could say this could picture God using the Jews as an 'irritation' in the eyes of the blind world in order that they might come to see Christ.) Anyway, this man has got mud in his eyes.

And washing is just what the 'doctor' ordered in such a case – washing by the water of God's Word! (Eph 5:26) For His Word is truly enlightening (Psa 119:130). But such washing is not just the result of scholarship – rather, it's in receptivity and obedience. Let me repeat that –

washing isn't simply looking at the water, it isn't just learning about the water, it isn't even in just listening to the water – it is in contact with the water, emersion in the water – that is, receptivity and obedience.

Some folks think that because they simply read or listen to the Word, that, in and of itself, is taking care of this cleansing and that's not necessarily so. Oh, reading the scriptures diligently and listening to those speaking it are absolutely critical in the life of a believer! But it doesn't stop there. Whether in the pew or the pulpit, the heart that pleases God is the one that trembles at His word (Isaiah 66:2) and that takes heed to it (Psa 119:9).

Second, this gives us a wonderful illustration of how God gives sight to the eyes of our heart – spiritual sight. This fellow was the subject of God's attention; recall, Christ came to him. Not the other way around. Jesus knew his condition and his situation. In like manner, whether you've considered yourself a 'seeker' or no, if you're saved and a member of God's family, it's because God found you. And...

Mud works! It's God's way so often with those of us who are not only blind but satisfied with that blindness. Mud is not a healing balm, it's an irritant! So are the situations God puts us in sometimes to eventually open our eyes. Heartaches, heartbreaks, tribulation and sorrow – so often, they're 'mud in the eye'.

But in obedience to Jesus, this guy went to the pool of Siloam to wash. It was southeast of the old city, but who knows how far it was; perhaps he wondered along the way why this man Jesus did it this way. Have you wandered and wondered in tribulation? Seem like you're just feeling your way along sometimes? Impossible situation? Recall, no one had ever healed a person who'd been born blind before, and this guy knew it. He knew his situation was impossible. (John 9:32)

But he went anyway, in obedience; he washed, and he returned seeing. Dear friend, if you're in such a state, take courage that your own Siloam is reachable. God wouldn't send you there if it weren't. How far away is it? Not far. You'll make it. Wash in the water of His Word. Not only will you be clean, but you will see for the first time what you never saw before – not just physically but spiritually.

You see, as if to punctuate the point, the Holy Spirit demonstrates to us that this man who first only knew his Maker as someone called Jesus (John 9:11), came to see Him as a healer (John

9:15), then a prophet (John 9:17), then as the Son of God (John 9:38). The true healing was his salvation. He saw Christ for who He is and believed.

You see, while the disciples were still calling Jesus “rabbi” (John 9:2), this man, once doubly blind, now called Him Lord. He became ‘heavenly minded’ so to speak. One dear pastor friend of mine told me that since becoming devastatingly ill, he recognized the context of heaven and eternity in so much more of the scripture than ever before.

Mud does that. It leads to new eyesight as God opens our eyes to behold wondrous things (Psa 119:18), to recognize our Messiah, to better know our Father, to discern His Spirit, to set our minds on things above and thus to bear truly good fruit.

Can you relate to this guy? Stumbling in the darkness of grief and sorrow, I came to my own Siloam and began to wash and wash and wash and wash and wash. Gradually, the smoldering ember of my hope re-ignited and then as if by the nape of the neck, the Lord took me out of the pit and set my feet once again upon the Rock (Psa 40:2)

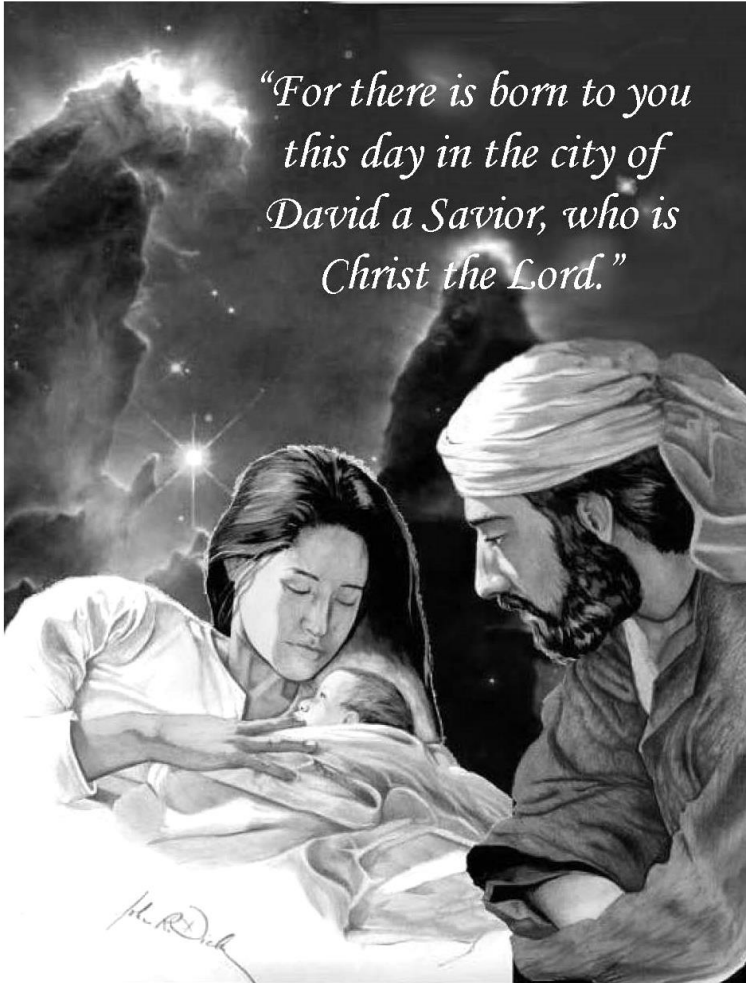
In the ‘trembling’ study of His Word, you will see Him and be reminded of what you know – God is good. Heaven is real. His promises are sure. Your heart will recognize your Savior afresh and much more clearly. You’ll realize that it was His hand that gently applied the mud if you would.

Certainly, we can appreciate the application of this passage to those who don’t know the Lord. But, we as Christians can also have much more to see concerning our triune Lord. By salvation, we know Him as Savior, we know Him as our Lord, our King, our Maker, our Bridegroom, our Father, our Comforter, our ... but can we still see more? Yes, resoundingly, yes. In fact, I’m convinced that we will spend eternity doing so.

In heaven the four living creatures (full of eyes) around God’s throne keep saying, “Holy, holy, holy!” each time they see Him. Clearly, they are continually astounded and awed!

But here in these ‘Shadowlands’, while we’re still in a tent of flesh, He will often muddy us up for that very same purpose – to see Him more clearly.

*"For there is born to you
this day in the city of
David a Savior, who is
Christ the Lord."*



All Truth

Inch by excruciating inch, he painfully chipped away with his tiny spoon at the solid rock wall. Hour after day after week after month...for eight years, he desperately tunneled his way toward freedom beneath the dungeon chambers of the Chateau d'If fortress only to fail and narrowly evade a disastrous cave-in. However, when his only friend, a priest, dies in the accident, he trades places with the corpse and thus makes an escape from the island prison after he is thrown into the ocean.

If you've seen the movie or read the book, *The Count of Monte Cristo*, you know that although he escaped the bondage of his cell, the Count was still imprisoned with passionate hatred.

And thus, is humanity – imprisoned. This planet earth is a 'Chateau d'If', if you would, amidst the cosmos and here mankind toils, scrapes and chips away at the meagerness of its existence, hoping to find 'escape.' Chipping away at their jobs, scraping at school, scheming for power, position and/or pleasure, hoping for a way out of the dungeon of life's vanity, to find answers, to fill a void within – hour after day after week after month...

Festering with suffering, hatred, death and every foul intention imaginable, it's often a brutal place, this prison. And what worsens it -- the 'jailer' takes pleasure by inflicting pain on the inmates as well as duping them into endless pointless pursuits. Meanwhile, he assures them there's no escape from this cosmic Alcatraz.

But that's not true.

For there is a key, an opening of the prison door, a freedom sublime and sure.

Yet understand, to have it can mean failure, disgrace, suffering, even death (John 16:33, 2 Tim 3:12). It can mean a humiliation which to many is abhorrent (1 Pet 5:5,6; Jam 4:10). To have it means realizing you're "undone" (Isa 6:5), (that's Bible-talk for a real mess, totally un-cool), that you're flat-out sinful, destitute of redeeming virtue. It means accepting that you can't dig your own way out to freedom.

"Hold it!" you say. "I'm not that bad." (chip, chip, scrape, scrape)

“I mean I help people and do good things.” (chip, chip) “I go to church and even counsel other people.” (scrape, scrape) “Hey, ...are you trying to ruin my self esteem?” (chip, scrape...chip, scrape)

OK, you just keep digging.

But there is a key, an opening of the prison door, a freedom sublime and sure.

As with the Count of Monte Cristo, it involves a ‘death’ and a trading of places. It involves a baptism, an emersion. Many of you understand Jesus Christ died in your place. And now, if you believe in that and that He rose from the dead, you know that after having chosen to follow Him, you get to lay your own life down (1 John 3:16), to die daily to your self-interests (1 Cor 15:31) and to be buried with Him in baptism (Col 2:11,12).

Satan says that’s fanatical and unnecessary. However, Satan, sin and self are all great deceivers. Jesus said concerning the devil, *“He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own resources for he is a liar and the father of it.”* (John 8:44) And so, Satan has no key. Though a jailer of sorts, he is the most desperate prisoner of all. His lies, doubts and seducements are all designed to deceive.

But truth is the key. Spoken by God, it is totally pure.

Look around. You’ll notice that we live in the age of deceit. People just can’t dig out. Paul wrote, *“But evil men and seducers shall wax worse and worse, deceiving, and being deceived.”* (2 Tim 3:13) As you observe today’s communication environment, it is steeped in deception.

“Wait a minute, John. That’s a bit extreme, don’t you think?” you may say. “I mean, I think newscasters are quite objective – they even say so themselves.” Surely not all we hear from the media is deceptive.

Please understand, I’m not insisting that these folks are trying to deceive – rather that their communications are inherently biased and thus they fall short of objective truth. They want you to hear their ‘story’ the way they understand it and to thus form your perspective. I’m not

dissing them -- the issue is that our mutual human condition causes us to nest the ‘truth’ in subjectivity.

Here are two points to consider concerning deception: first, by definition, deception appears truthful, and second, motive makes a difference. That is, a true statement made with any motive other than God’s is inherently a false witness. You may think those are overly radical statements but hear me out.

Satan knows that if a lie did not appear truthful, it would fool no one and be useless to the liar. This isn’t confined to the used car lot – it’s the principle behind modern advertising and media programming – to deceive and manipulate. It is the principle behind politics, the principle behind cults and false religions, and actually, it is even the principle behind way too many interpersonal relationships. What may look true can really be a sham.

Concerning motive, you may recall that when the religious elite of Jesus’ day were looking for an excuse to get rid of Him, they found a couple of false witnesses: “...*at last two false witnesses came forward and said, “This fellow said, ‘I am able to destroy the temple of God and to build it in three days.’” And the high priest arose and said to Him, “Do You answer nothing? What is it these men testify against You?”*

Now, Jesus had indeed said essentially what these false witnesses reported (see John 2:19-21) so why were they “false witnesses”? Context and Motive. Their motive was to do evil, and what they said was taken out of context.

But by contrast, everything God says is completely true. In fact, here’s something God can’t do – He can’t lie. (Num 23:19) That’s not just because He’s got all the facts, but also because His character and motive are absolutely pure. If you do a word study in the Old Testament on truth, you’ll find that it is strangely linked, when attributed to God, to something else. Between 35 and 40 times, truth is partnered with and mentioned subsequent to the Hebrew word – “checed”. Now, this word is mostly translated as “mercy” but is more accurately “**goodness, kindness or faithfulness**”.

That is, God prefaces, if you would, His truth with His goodness, kindness and faithfulness. When truth is given this way, it is “all truth”. (See John 16:13) This is one reason why Jesus could assert that He was the truth (see John 14:6)

In fact, the New Testament echoes with the Old on this point when it says that Jesus was “full of grace and truth” (See John 1:14,17). For you see, the Greek word for grace is Charis – which

literally means, “**that which affords joy, pleasure, delight; good will, loving-kindness, favour; merciful kindness**”. Jesus was ‘the truth packaged in grace’ so to speak. Like the Father -- perfect, pure motive – always.

Oh, how we need truth! This kind of truth! Not the so-called truth that deceives and then destroys. Not the so-called truth that spews forth from sin-tainted motives. We need Christ’s heavenly truth. It is this truth that sets us free! (John 8:32) It is this truth that sanctifies and sets us apart from the world. (John 17:17,19) It is this truth that purges iniquity. (Pro 16:6) It is this truth that preserves us. (Psa 40:11)

The principle fruit of the Holy Spirit is love (see Gal 5:22) and yet He is repeatedly called by Christ the “Spirit of Truth”. This is why Paul exhorted us to speak the truth in love, in other words, to speak it as God does. (see Eph 4:15) I submit that apart from this, it may not even be truth – at least not from heaven’s perspective.

If we as Christians could just get a handle on this, it would radically change us and the world around us. We are so quick to level people privately and publicly with “truth” and to think we’re justified because “all I said was the truth...” But if we want to learn the lingo of heaven, we need to understand that Father God’s ‘way’ is goodness, kindness and faithfulness with truth, Christ’s ‘way’ is grace and truth, and the Spirit’s ‘way’ is loving truth. As the psalmist writes, “‘Checed’ and truth are joined together” in God. (Psa 85:10)

Mankind fell through deception, is enslaved and imprisoned by deception and even when saved by grace, can be made ineffective because of deception. Soon, a grand deceiver, the son of perdition, will come on the scene. May we let the Holy Spirit lead us into “all truth” – not just more facts, more data, but into the place where we perceive and speak the truth as God does – with heavenly mindedness.

Appointed with Attitudes

“Then the Lord answered me and said:

Write the vision

And make [it] plain on tablets,

That he may run who reads it.

For the vision is yet for an appointed time;

But at the end it will speak, and it will not lie,

Though it tarries, wait for it;

Because it will surely come,

It will not tarry.” -- Hab 2:2,3

After nearly 2000 years of waiting, we are in appointed times. Sometimes, that just stuns me. Consider what an awesome deal it is to be appointed for these days!

Israel has been reborn as a nation, Jerusalem is under Jewish control, the rapture and the tribulation are approaching, the EU is a world power, knowledge is exploding, times are waxing worse and worse, an environment similar to the days of Noah and Lot (i.e. extreme violence, sexual perversion, self absorption, etc.) is becoming increasingly pervasive, Jerusalem is a ‘cup of trembling’ for all nations, on and on it goes, just as the scriptures foretold.

And here we are in the thick of it! What does that then mean? Unless our heads are stuck in the sand, we must ask, ‘What then are we called to?’ What attributes, what attitudes, what appointment must we hold? Fortunately, the Bible, as always, has the answers --

For nearly two thousand years, they had waited as a people – from Abraham’s time they had waited. In fact, if you went back to the first promise, the ‘proto-evangelicum’ in Gen 3:15, you could number perhaps as many as one and a half million days. Waiting for what? What promise? For the coming of the Messiah, specifically, his first coming.

And here was this young woman, probably in her early to mid teens – Mary. Think about it – how many millions of Hebrew women over nearly two thousand years had desired to bring forth the Anointed One? After so long, after so many, who in their right mind could dare to believe it would be her? Think of the cultural and mental pressure to reject such a notion as too special, too fantastic to be imparted to anyone ‘ordinary’.

Yet in Mary we can observe a character that I'll suggest is worthy of our own special consideration for like her, we've also waited nearly 2000 years and we are in great expectation of Christ's coming.

Turning to Luke chapter one, let's look at verses 34 to 53 and we'll note eight specific attributes and attitudes on Mary's part from which we can learn. First though, the angel Gabriel delivers the message of the immaculate conception – that is, the virgin birth, as well as the giving of the baby's name – Jesus. He says, *“He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David. And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end.”* (Luke 1:32,33)

Then Mary replies, *“How can this be since I do not know a man?”* Our first observation is her **purity**. God is looking for such purity in his children – *“Blessed [are] the **pure in heart**: for they shall see God.”* (Mat 5:8) However, as children of Adam, we are naturally impure in character. We are drawn by various lusts into vanity and depravity. But as Peter wrote, we should *“... gird up the loins of [our] mind, be sober, and hope to the end for the grace that is to be brought unto [us] at the revelation of Jesus Christ; As obedient children, not fashioning [ourselves] according to the former lusts in [our] ignorance: But as He which hath called [us] is holy, so [we should] be holy in all manner of conversation (conduct);”* (1Pet 1:13-15)

Yet, Satan, via Hollywood and the media in general is working overtime to push his filth our way and sad to say, it's working. If in all honesty, you consider the moral climate of the community of believers even a generation ago, what is accepted as 'not too bad' today is clear testimony to our decline. God grant that we change our ways.

In verse 38, Gabriel asserts, *“For with God nothing will be impossible,”* to which she replies, *“Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word.”*

What beautiful **submission** to God! Now, we talk submission to the will of God, but Mary here is opting for a life of real hardship – what will her betrothed husband say? What will the family and neighbors think? The old saint Simeon, in the temple told her later, *“...and a sword shall pierce through your own soul also”*. Submitting to God is far more than church attendance and giving; we all know that. The life of submission to God's will is at times a life of suffering, *“For unto you it is given in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for his sake;”* (Phi 1:29) May we be likewise willing.

In verse 45, Mary's cousin Elizabeth (who was pregnant at the same time with John The Baptist), in greeting her says, *"Blessed is she who **believed**, for there will be a fulfillment of those things which were told her from the Lord."*

Mary had **faith in God's word**. This is in contrast to the reaction of Elizabeth's own husband Zacharias, a priest who, when given a similar message from Gabriel, stumbled in faith. Mary believed!

Now, you can try to explain away her faith by thinking that the appearance of Gabriel must have been just awe inspiring or some such notion, but perhaps that's the very reason we see Zach's failure earlier in this chapter. (Gabriel spoke to him also.) Angel or no, it had been nearly two millennia! Let this sink in, she actually believed in her own virginal conception and that her child would be the Messiah. She didn't 'work it up' or 'talk herself into it'. Apart from the resurrection, this is arguably the most exceptional faith in all of scripture.

Today, the concept of faith has been so twisted and abused that many are simply afraid of it. We've been told to have faith for that new Mercedes or other material things that in no way further the kingdom of God. Devastatingly, we can come to think that faith in faith is what we need or faith in some televangelist's claims or faith in some repetitious prayer. But the Bible simply says, *"So then faith comes by hearing the word of God."* (Rom 10:17)

And God is looking for such faith – to simply take Him at His word. But with so much credence given today to knowledge and the myriad philosophies of man, to the politically correct and religiously aberrant, it's no wonder Christ, in speaking of His coming for the church asked, *"And shall not God avenge his own elect, which cry day and night unto him, though He bear long with them? I tell you that He will avenge them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of man comes, shall He find faith on the earth?"* (Luke 18:7,8) Oh, may we be found with faith!

In verse 46, Mary responds to Elizabeth, *"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior."* Here is the **worshipful heart** of the one who is in true relationship with God. Her focus is not on herself, but rather, she is just really into the goodness of God.

Today, Mary would be tempted to write a book or blog or to go on a speaking tour or appear on Focus on the Family. The church in general has become quite obsessed with self promotion – 'success' and size for the sake of size; being a stand-out as opposed to standing fast. But Mary magnified and rejoiced in her Savior, not herself. May God give us such a heart!

In verse 48, she says, *“For He has regarded the lowly state of His maidservant; for behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed.”* Mary was **humble**. Humble. At the very time, under the very circumstance in which our own character usually shouts, “Whoopee, look at me, ain’t I somethin’!” she is resplendent in her humility. This is the great danger for all whom God uses – missionaries, ministers, misters and misses -- to slip into the notion that because God used me, I must now be something, someone just a bit more spiritual and special than others – to let spiritual pride rot the good fruit God wants to bear. We forget that ‘God’s way up is down’ and that ‘the greatest shall be servant of all’ in His kingdom. This is not just a cliché, it’s truth!

In verse 49, she exudes, *“For He who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is His name.”* Contrary to our contemporary attitude of entitlement, Mary is genuinely **thankful and in awe** of God’s nature. You know, it just really kills the flesh to express thankfulness. Oh, we generally can render a “Thank you” when necessary, but to demonstrate on an on-going basis a true heart attitude of gratefulness is a fundamental part of godliness and it’s pretty rare.

Truth is, you and I are not entitled to anything good. The only reason any good comes into our lives is because God is good. For that reason alone, He causes all things to work together ultimately for our good, even the things we see as disastrous. God grant that we may recognize His hand at work in both our ‘hills and valleys’ and as a consequence be thankful.

In verse 50, she continues, *“and His mercy is on those who fear Him from generation to generation.”* Wow! Here’s the most blessed woman of scripture expressing that she **needs mercy**! And God has given it to her. Mary wasn’t perfect and she knew it!

It’s one thing to accept God’s grace – that is, to get what you haven’t earned, what you don’t deserve. It’s all together another matter to acknowledge your need for mercy – to know that you’re not getting what you do deserve – judgment, death and hell. Does that sound harsh? The mature Christian is the one who knows his/her desperate need for mercy. It’s good to be a seeker of truth, but an accepter of the truth is the one whom God seeks. We need mercy. We need a healthy understanding of our depravity apart from Him.

This is again, completely contrary to our nature which defends itself against all, that thinks it’s always the other guy’s fault somehow, that rushes down the road yet hates the one who cuts in front, that rarely sees the hand of God in any difficulty. ‘Mercy? That’s for the guy in next pew!’ we can presume.

In verse 53, she concludes, *“He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich He has sent away empty.”* Now we’re not talkin’ bacon-cheese burgers here! Nothing for the belly. This speaks of the Spirit of God – to be filled to overflowing with Him. Jesus added, *“Blessed are the **poor in spirit** for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” (Mat 5:3)* And, *“Blessed [are] they which do **hunger and thirst** after righteousness: for they shall be filled.” (Mat 5:6)*

Mary was **hungry**; she was **poor in spirit**. In contrast, the church of Revelation commonly known as typical of the last days church is criticized by the Lord for saying inwardly, *“... I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing”* to which Christ warns, *“... and know not that you are wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked:” (Rev 3:17)*

In the book of Daniel, the Antichrist is said to destroy many through “peace,” but the word is more appropriately translated “prosperity” or “ease”. The attraction to this worldly ease and prosperity is the mortal enemy of spiritual hunger. May God grant us a healthy desire for the things of His kingdom over what the world offers. Many a celebrity – media, sports or even ministerial – has denounced their former faith partly as a result of this ‘prosperity’.

So, these are eight attributes and attitudes appropriate for the great appointment – the great appearing of our heavenly Bridegroom. Purity, submission to God’s will, faith in His word, sincere worship, humility, thankfulness and awe, acknowledging a need for mercy, and true spiritual hunger -- these are the ways worthy of our Savior.

May we each catch the vision of this appointed time and day. May we look to and hasten the coming of our Lord (2 Pet 3:12). May we be ready and found worthy when His trumpet sounds (Luke 21:36). May a Sword (the Word of God) pierce our own souls, and may we follow the wonderful example He’s given us in dear Mary.

For though He was crucified in weakness, yet He lives by the power of God.



For we also are weak in Him, but we shall live with Him by the power of God.

Bleats and Roars

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

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

Today, we see that religiously motivated terrorists can be, and are, successfully brainwashed to the point of committing suicide in the name of their false deity. Among other things, they are convinced of receiving in their afterlife a blissful satiation of their fleshly lusts – especially if they destroy in the process lots of the deity's enemies. And thus, they voice with measured bravado, "We're not afraid to die!"

However, if they knew the truth, they would all appear as the man in the photo, and the sickening certainty is that they do – afterwards, when it's too late. But instead of an angry mob of men, they will face a much worse company.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And, once again, God shows us that we're upside down. For:

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

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

One reason for this is that sin misleads us with a false ID for strength and a false compass concerning its source. Yet Christ said that His followers would follow Him. (Mark 8:34) And

that inevitably means first, like Jesus, you are like a lamb – the epitome of weakness. At some point in your life as a believer, or at many points, the Lord will allow you to realize some portion of your weakness in order to find real strength.

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

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

‘Enjoy weakness??’

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

Now, they did not rush to leave the fire – in fact, the king had to command them to exit. You see, when you realize the presence of Christ in the flames, in the furnace of trial, hardship, brokenness – weakness, you’re just not in any hurry to leave.

This is NOT to say that you should look for hardship or the breaking of heart, mind or body – not at all. But, if you would identify with Jesus, you will understand that when these come, and they do come to everyone, that in them you will discover a strength the world does not know or value or comprehend. Yes, it is the Lord Himself (see Ex 15:2; Psa 18:32; 19:4; 27:1; 28:7; 29:11; 37:39; 73:26; Isa 41:10).

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

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

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

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

For now, remember:

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

- If you've been dashed about by a death, be encouraged -- you will one day 'roar' about life. *"For though He was crucified in weakness, yet He lives by the power of God. For we also are weak in Him, but we shall live with Him by the power of God toward you."* 2Cor 13:4

- If you're ill, be confident -- your illness is not an end -- only a means and God will heal you, perhaps temporarily in this life but for sure eternally in the real life of heaven. *"The body...is sown in weakness, it is raised in power."* 1Cor 15:42,43; Psalm 103:3

- If you're alone, be expectant -- your loneliness or forsakenness prepares your heart for an eternal spring of incredible relationships which will come. Psalm 68:6 and Genesis 2:18

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

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

And thus we shall always be with the Lord.



Therefore comfort one another with these words.

Comfort-able in Christ

Her incredibly cute and tender eyes became like steel and her normally playful face scowled menacingly at me. Meanwhile, my son in law was on the phone with me and as has become our tradition, we were tossing certain unsavory observations about each other's 'gene pool' back and forth in jest. It's all in fun.

However, my little two year old grand daughter who was with me didn't understand or appreciate the quality of this subtle humor and she sensed her daddy was on the losing end of it (as usual - ha) so she riveted her countenance upon me and barked, "You stop talking about my daddy like that!" and she just starred at me like an angry chihuahua!

Of course, we stopped, and I explained it all to her and we're still good friends, but I also fell more in love with her than ever for her loving defense. Her name is Comfort Joy and she surely is that. However, I'm more careful now because I value so much our relationship.

You see, it's the loss of relationships which produce our mourning and grief. These are natural reactions like the bleeding when a wound has been inflicted. And this 'bleeding' is initially healthy for it cleanses the wound so to speak. Now, it may come from the death of a loved one or a divorce or a break-down in friendship – any loss of relationship will produce it to varying degrees.

But any wound left unattended is dangerous. In severe cases, and especially when the wound is internal (i.e. covered up) a person can bleed to death. Thus, it is with grief and sorrow. Also, if it is exposed to the 'world's dirt and germs' it will become bitterly infected. Note, that I'm speaking figuratively.

That is, a grieving wounded soul needs attention, it needs a balm to stay the 'bleeding' and to protect the wound. When such is the case, the wound will heal. Now, it may leave a scar but scar tissue, though unsightly, is actually stronger.

Comfort is the 'balm of Gilead'.

Now, don't dismiss that as trivial – to the contrary, it's vital that we understand it. The words translated as 'comfort' in the Old Testament and New Testament combine to give a full rendition. In the Old Testament, the literal meaning is 'to sigh' implying empathy or a relating

to the one being comforted. In the New Testament, it is ‘to call near’ or ‘to call beside’ with the call being an urging or even imploring – very active and emphatic.

True comfort does consist of these two qualities – empathy and action. A well-meaning comforter can lack either one. That shouldn’t discourage anyone, but simply give insight to both givers and receivers.

And one day, you’ll need that balm – don’t deceive yourself. We all suffer from lost or damaged relationships at one time or another. If you let the wound bleed, you’ll get weaker and weaker until you perish. If you wrap it in the ‘world’s’ soiled rags, you’ll be poisoned. You’ll need the balm.

Psalm 23 says, *“Thy rod and Thy staff, they comfort me.”* That is, God’s power and protection are comforting. The picture is of the good shepherd who used his rod to drive off predators and lovingly discipline his wayward sheep while his staff rescued those who had fallen into a difficult or dangerous place.

Isaiah 51 says, *“For the Lord will comfort Zion, He will comfort all her waste places; He will make her wilderness like Eden, and her desert like the garden of the Lord. Joy and gladness will be found in it, thanksgiving and the voice of melody.”* That is, God’s comfort is transforming – from a wilderness to a wonder, from a pit to a paradise, from a desert to a delight – where joy and gladness abound. You see, true comfort, inspired comfort, changes us – I know that to be true and perhaps you do as well.

Jeremiah 31 says, *“I will turn their mourning to joy, will comfort them and make them rejoice rather than sorrow.”* That is, the fruit of comfort is joy. Though it may, it doesn’t always develop overnight as in Psalm 30:5. Often, it is the patient result of a well watered garden as in Jeremiah 31:12 – it grows. That which has died so to speak, emerges from the earth in which it was buried; it sprouts again, it grows and blossoms and then bears fruit. In this case, it’s a gradual patient process.

Comfort is so important to the Lord that it is a principle characteristic of His second coming. You see, at the beginning of His earthly ministry, Jesus was in his hometown synagogue. He read aloud from Isaiah the following, *“The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He has anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.”* (Luke 4:18,19)

Now, as He sat down, everyone was dumb-founded and then they became irate. His bold declaration that this part of the prophecy was fulfilled right in front of their eyes was an overload of truth.

And as staggering as the announcement was – what wasn't proclaimed is also very important. You see, Jesus stopped His reading in the middle of the prophetic passage. That's because the latter part is reserved for His second coming. It reads, "*...and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn, to comfort those who mourn in Zion, to give them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness; that they may be called trees of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that He may be glorified.*" (Isa 61:2,3)

Note that although vengeance is the 'first order of business', comfort follows closely and is then amplified by the rest of the passage. It's incredibly important. So, let's look at a few more scriptures to glean some additional insight on it.

In Genesis chapter 23, we find that Sarah dies. As a result, two people are in need of comfort – Abraham her husband and Isaac her son. In the very next chapter, Abraham sends his servant to obtain a bride for his son. This story is steeped in prophetic pictures of the work of the Holy Spirit in bringing a bride to Christ.

At the conclusion, we find Rebekah, the bride, seeing Isaac for the first time from afar; the servant tells her it is Isaac, the bridegroom for whom she has left her earthly home. At this, she runs to meet him, and he takes her in to his mother's tent. Then the scripture records, "*So Isaac was comforted after his mother's death.*"

Then, in the very next verse we see that Abraham takes another wife by the name of Keturah and eventually has six more sons by her.

Lesson One: New, godly relationships can bring comfort.

In Colossians 4:10, 11, Paul is writing from prison and he mentions Mark as one of the few people who have brought him comfort. This is poignant for it was Mark who, in abandoning Paul during his first missionary journey (see Acts 13:13) sparked a huge rift between Paul and his closest supporter Barnabas (see Acts 15:37-40). Mark had once topped Paul's people-who-let-you-down list. But later Mark was found valuable to Paul's ministry and indeed even penned the gospel of Mark.

Lesson Two: Reconciled relationships can bring comfort.

In Thessalonica, the saints were mourning the loss of loved ones and Paul wrote the most wonderful promise of the return of Christ and the rapture. *“For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus.” (1Thes 4:14)* Then he finished by saying, *“Therefore comfort one another with these words.”*

Lesson Three: The hope of restored, everlasting heavenly relationships brings comfort. (See also 2Thes 2:16, 17)

It is the one who has ‘been there’ who renders the comfort we need in our difficulties. This is precisely why our Father is the *“God of all comfort” (2Cor1:3)*. He experienced broken relationship with mankind in Eden. He experienced broken relationship with Israel as with an unfaithful spouse. He experienced broken relationship with His one and only begotten Son, Jesus on the cross.

The Lord Jesus also knows more personally and more deeply the pain of grief than any of us. He was *“a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.” (Isa 53:3,4)*. Christ was deserted by family and friends – by everyone. He knows perfectly your own heart and offers the only help that heals.

So, if you’ve suffered a broken or lost relationship with a loved one through death, through divorce, through discouragement or disappearance, the God of all comfort, wants you to know that when you seek Him, He will comfort powerfully. He will carry your sorrow; He understands it personally and will do what no one else can – fix it.

Why, even the Holy Spirit Himself is called by Jesus the ***Comforter*** or ***Helper***. (See John 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7) The same term is used to describe Christ in 1Jn2:1 and even the Rabbis call the Messiah the Consoler, the Comforter. You see, it’s an attribute of all three Persons of the Godhead.

Be of good comfort – our Father in heaven can take the most painful or disastrous circumstances and amaze you with His loving care. In fact, the time will come when you will find yourself able to help others as He has helped you (2Cor 1:4,5). You’ll be ‘comfort-able’ in Christ.

“Blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted.”

Crust-busters

Have you looked in a mirror recently? You should. What you'll see will shock you. At least, it would if you knew what you were supposed to look like. You see, what you're beholding is filled with and ravaged by sin. (Yeah, I know, Ouch.)

Now, if you are not born again by faith in the Messiah, Jesus, what you see is all you've got (and it's rapidly falling apart isn't it?). On the other hand, if you are saved by believing in what the Lord did on your behalf – dying on the cross for your sins and rising again – what you see in that mirror will one day soon be amazingly transformed.

And here's a question for you who know the Lord – why the wait? No, not weight – ha. Wait. Why does God wait to complete this promised transformation? I'm ready now! (I think...) I mean, I'm just sick and tired of the sinful old man – oh, not just this body's pitiful appearance but that old sin-nature that presents me with a nearly constant struggle to do what's good and right – and not to do what's bad and wrong.

Why not just completely transform me instantly when I believe? Now, I know there was definitely a difference when I got saved, there is for everyone! At the moment of salvation, we are finally set free from the penalty and power of sin; the eternal penalty and its former power over our lives.

But God doesn't remove that crusty 'old man' yet. I am forced to fight with him daily to break through his crustiness. (Now, admittedly, sometimes I don't deal with him and the results are really ugly!) But why the wait? Let's do it now, Lord! **Ever feel that way?**

Anyway, being the crazy nature-lover that I am, I can appreciate this answer and hope you can too. The Bible says that the firmament, that is nature, shows His handiwork (Psa 19:1). This is clearly evident in its beauty, its majesty and its intricacy, but also in the spiritual lessons God displays if we'll pay attention.

There's a wonderful parallel to observe – the lowly caterpillar. Here he goes, inching slowly towards a tasty leaf. And when he finally gets there, he just eats and eats – feeding himself seems to be the only goal in his pitifully limited life. From one leaf-binge to another, he slowly creeps.

But then, suddenly, he gets it into his little caterpillar mind that there's more to life than chlorophyll and he puts himself in a real predicament – dangling by a thread so to speak. You

see, he realizes he's 'out on a limb' and it's time to 'turn over a new leaf', to 'branch out' (sorry). Anyway, he takes this whole new course, this leap of faith – and there's a radical change.

Yet to those watching, it's a conundrum, a mystery, a seeming blunder because he's now living in a chrysalis – a very 'limited' life in the world's eyes – no leaf parties, no upward mobility. I mean, life is over, right?

Still, while his fat-cat(erpillar) buddies scorn or laugh or scratch their little caterpillar heads, a metamorphosis is taking place – a dramatic transformation. Within that shell, a whole new creature is being formed (2Cor 5:17). And when the time is right, a struggle begins inside.

At first, the shell – what's left of the old caterpillar resists. But then, there's a crack ... then another. Slowly, and with tremendous effort, this beautiful new creature emerges – fighting and struggling, then resting, then fighting and struggling. You almost feel sorry for him.

Finally, as he breaks free of the old caterpillar shell, he spreads forth his beautiful new wings. Drinking in the sunlight of a new world, he flies over the old world of leaves and twigs. On the breath of God's Spirit, so to speak, in the light of His Son, he now looks for flowers – a whole new diet, a new life, a new freedom – completely unimaginable to the old caterpillar. But the struggle to emerge was very important.

I heard of a scientist studying this phenomenon who cut open the chrysalis just as the butterfly began to emerge, and guess what happened? Instead of helping it, he actually impaired its ability to fly. He found that in the course of the struggle, the breaking loose (that is, dealing with the old caterpillar), the veins of the new butterfly's wings were filled with the fluid that caused them to stiffen and expand. No struggle, no flight – a new creature but no lift-off.

And so, it is with us who believe in Christ. Upon getting saved, we indeed change. Though the world perceives us as 'constrained', we are constrained by love (2 Cor 5:14) and an inward transformation now begins. As we grow in the Lord, we start to sense the hardness of the old man and the closer we come, by relationship, to the Lord, the more we detest its influence. We want to be free from it.

But the struggle is important and necessary for in it we learn to make good choices – to resist evil and to cling to good. Our eternal character is shaped. We are humbled by the honest assessment of our old nature and we are strengthened as the living waters of God's Spirit course through our spiritual 'veins', preparing us to fly. And fly we will!

So, don't be discouraged when the 'old man' rears its ugly head. Fight the good fight (1 Tim 6:12, 2 Tim 4:7).

You will emerge one day soon into a whole new world with a new body, a new perspective, a new life – that for which you were born!

DEFCON 1!

There were groanings no other man could fathom, sorrow intense enough to kill, sweat and blood mixed as the capillaries in his face burst. Perhaps all Satan's hellish demons assaulted his mind with lies, terrors and temptations. All it would take was one sin, one slight misstep, even just one thought pattern divergent from perfection and all would be lost – all mankind for all time.

You see, the Gethsemane trial was both a matter of whether or not Jesus would go to the cross and a matter of how, in what condition. Nothing less than a perfect, spotless and blameless man could or would be accepted by the Father.

When the stakes are high, the dynamics of the spiritual warfare are really intense. Consequently, Christ's first command to the three sleepy disciples with Him was, **"Watch..."**

But on they slept and often, so do we. Many wonderful messages, books, radio programs and other ministries have highlighted our Christian concerns on love, joy, evangelism, giving, social and moral attitudes, prayer, worship, etc. But like a much needed 'wake-up' call, I'm realizing the lack of emphasis within the last days church overall on this very key scriptural command. In fact, I searched through a database of 40,000 sermons and found only one on this topic.

Now, to put it in perspective, the New Testament contains a startling number of commands (not suggestions) to **watch** especially for the Lord – as many, if not more, as for loving, 2 ½ times more than for giving or praying, 10 times as many as for preaching or praising and 20 times as many as for worshipping. The Old Testament rarely deals with this concept of **watching**, but by contrast, nothing is commanded to the followers of Christ more often.

It is said by Bible scholars that when God repeats Himself, it is to make clear to us His emphatic intention or direction. In this case, we are given some 20 or so commands – how emphatic does the Lord need to be to get our attention?

Despite this, we are generally hard of hearing. It's as if these directives were never given or perhaps, they were a mistake or simply unreasonable. And unfortunately, I'd dare say that the vast majority of Christians in our country on any given day rarely give thought to them let alone obey them.

So why would the Lord leave us with a command which He knew we would find 'unfulfilled' for 2000 years or so? Why keep **watching** for someone Who doesn't seem to come? The

Thessalonian believers of the first century were so into it, they got very concerned when a false teacher led them to believe they'd missed Christ's appearing and the rapture.

Now, 2000 years of **watching** isn't much compared to eternity, but I'm convinced that the Lord is completely in tune with how long it seems to us. So, if the blessed event was to be considerably delayed from our perspective, why would he say, *"Assuredly, I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away till all these things take place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will by no means pass away. But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Take heed, watch and pray; for you do not know when the time is. It is like a man going to a far country who left his house and gave authority to his servants, and to each his work, and commanded the doorkeeper to watch. Watch therefore, for you do not know when the master of the house is coming – in the evening, at midnight, at the crowing of the rooster, or in the morning – lest, coming suddenly, he find you sleeping. And what I say to you, I say to all: Watch!"* (Mark 13:30-37) Wouldn't He know that some would become disheartened and some would even turn to mocking those who continued to obey?

Is God being unreasonable here? or just toying with us? Is He having trouble returning? Why should we continue to **watch**? (or why begin?)

There are at least three purposes for **watching**: first, God is really in to testing our hearts. Remember the story of Abraham and Isaac? God told Abraham to do the unthinkable, the totally unreasonable (from our perspective) – to sacrifice His son, Isaac, to place a knife in the heart of the one person he loved most of all. How could He require such a thing?

It was a test.

Of course, God stopped him. But even though Abraham believed God would raise Isaac from the dead, can you imagine the agony he was experiencing? And when the Lord put a halt on, He said to Abraham, *"...now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me."* (Genesis 22:12) A test.

In like manner, we have been given what some of us may think is an unreasonable command, yet God is examining our hearts. Will we **watch**?

Second, He not only tests, but He trains us to avoid evil. In Gethsemane, Jesus was accompanied most closely by Peter, James and John whom He instructed to pray. An hour later,

finding them asleep, He said, “Why do you sleep? **Watch** and pray lest you enter into temptation.”

You see, there is a definite spiritual strength associated with **watching** that trains our hearts to eschew sin. If or when we leave off **watching**, our relationship with Christ wanes and we can even find the world again becoming attractive and enticing. In His parable lesson of Matthew 24:45-51, Jesus warned that those who believe that the Master is delaying His coming can find themselves “beating” their brethren and drinking with drunkards.

Third, there’ll soon be transfiguration and translation for the command is indeed sincere – it’s no game, no toying and no difficulty for the Lord. The fulfillment is absolutely real. Yes, He’s coming friends! When we see Him, we will be changed (1Cor 15:52) and snatched up (1Thes 4:17). And those who have longed for Him, who have looked for Him to appear will have an exceedingly excellent reward. Paul wrote, “*...there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but to all who have loved His appearing.*” (2 Tim 4:7,8) You see, that’s the essence of **watching** for the Lord – love.

So, Christ gave the commands to test our hearts, to train them and ultimately to transfigure and translate us into His presence. Consequently, I want to **watch**, but how? Do I need to down lots of coffee? Clothespins for my eyelids? No, it’s not a physical deal, really. It’s spiritual.

Watching simply means to be spiritually circumspect, discerning and ALERT as opposed to sleepy and complacent. Furthermore, it means keeping ‘an eye on the sky’. But even though it’s straightforward, it goes against our grain.

Our sin nature is to sleep. Oh, not to cut Z’s in the physical sense - what I mean is that it is a delight to our flesh, for our sinful ‘inner man’ to sleep, to nod-off, to schnooze, that is, to let the sin-nature govern our thinking and conduct. In fact, it often seems that the fleshly part of our being is continually singing lullabies if you would.

But, **watching** is that condition in which we are on high alert – DEFCON 1. When we really care and really believe -- intensely so – we **watch**. It’s not an anxious thing, not at all. But it is eager. **Watching** reflects a state of readiness, desire and confidence.

*”And what I say, said Jesus, I say unto all: **Watch**. There is something very sobering in those words, something very pithy. The Lord says it all comes down to just one word. What is a Christian to do whose hope is on Christ? What is a Christian to do in every circumstance of his*

*life, in every age, and every day? **Watch!** Be alert! Be ready! Stand consciously before the Son of Man.*” –Rev. Carl Haak

Now, if you’re like me, you’ll probably realize that there have been times when you were really pretty ‘drowsy’. Much of the church has been sleeping and Christ knew it would happen. In Matthew 25, in speaking of the last days, He says, “*Then the kingdom of heaven shall be likened to ten virgins (you know the story)...but while the bridegroom was delayed, they all slumbered and slept. And at midnight a cry was heard: ‘Behold, the bridegroom is coming, go out to meet him!’*”

That’s what’s happening right now, folks. It’s midnight so to speak, and the signs of the times are proclaiming, “The Bridegroom is coming!” And, “*...now it is high time to awake out of sleep; for now our salvation is nearer than when we first believed.*” (Romans 13:11) Let’s discern the lying lullabies of the enemy, trim our lamps and arise.

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.' In response, 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. Here, 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."*

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 holocaustic 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 cursed 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 into 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 his later 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. 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. Of this [hope] you heard in the past in the message of the truth of the Gospel...”* (Col 1:5 Amplified Version).

Second, Job 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!” What was lost or stolen during Job’s trial was gone.

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 hold on, 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.

Dumbfounding Grace

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Faith for Your Family

On the edge of eternity, as we witness the fulfillment of events that signify the soon coming of Christ for His church, one of the most difficult issues many Christians face is having backslidden or non-believing children. This is such a struggle for some people that they try to ignore the discussions on ‘last days’ or hope the Lord tarries a good while longer. Certainly, the thought of eternity without the ones they love makes going to heaven something to let come ‘in its time’ rather than something to eagerly anticipate.

How can we live in that state of hopeful anticipation of the rapture if such is the case? Does the Lord want us to be cold-hearted toward our loved ones and warm-hearted toward Him? Or is this hoopla about the last days and His soon return overplayed?

When I’m asked about this, I frequently reflect upon a story in the Gospel of Mark that provides a huge degree of comfort. In Mark chapter two, we find Jesus in Peter’s house where a large crowd had gathered around. Now, not too far away was a group of five men. One of them was paralyzed and had to be carried on a litter by the other four.

They’d heard that Jesus was in town and as they approached the house, it was obvious that they would never get close to Him; the crowd was just too heavy. But one of them got an idea – it probably seemed pretty crazy, yet they loved their crippled companion too much not to try it. Carefully, they wound their way around the house and climbed the stairs to the roof. Now the roof was flat and probably made of timbers overlaid with branches and dirt about one to two feet thick.

Incredibly, they started tearing up the roof of the house and you can just imagine all the dirt and roofing material falling on the people inside below. Jesus may have smiled as these four guys then lowered their friend down by ropes into the midst of the crowd gathered in the house. What moxie these guys had – just wonderful faith expressed in this loving act.

Now, the Bible says, “*When Jesus saw their faith, He said to the paralytic, ‘Son, your sins are forgiven you.’*” and soon afterward, “*He said to the paralytic, ‘I say to you, arise, take up your bed, and go to your house.’ Immediately he arose, took up the bed, and went out in the presence of them all, ...*”

The point is, that when He saw THEIR faith – not just the faith of the crippled man, but the faith of his devoted friends – He responded in forgiving this man’s sins and healing his body.

This fellow had not asked for forgiveness but certainly he was elated at the pronouncement. And Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever. (Hebrews 13:8)

So, consider this, like those stretcher carriers, have faith for your kids, for your loved ones -- faith expressed in love. And TRUST the Lord. He is trustworthy! He'll not force anyone into His kingdom, but **He knows how to turn a heart and draw one near to Him.** (Proverbs 21:1, John 6:44) **He will not disappoint your hope** (Romans 5:5). You can rest in this – God loves your loved ones more than you and will honor your faith in Him for them. See also Mark 5:22-42 and Mark 9:17-27.

Fireworks

Rummaging through the old filing cabinet, I discovered a real treasure. It was a letter from Dad – something that was incredibly rare in and of itself. But its treasure wasn't so much in its uniqueness as in its precious content. Dad was almost never expressive to me in person; however, his note said something that touched my heart in a very powerful way.

You see, some years before his missive, at the age of 19, I had come to know Jesus as my Savior. The circumstances of my conversion, though, were such that he was skeptical – and with just cause! I had subsequently dropped out of school, given away everything I had, raved about the Lord without real compassion or understanding – in short, behaved in a way that though sincere, would have ‘short-circuited’ nearly any Dad.

But our Father in heaven is oh so faithful to change us, isn't He? And it's one aspect of His gracious transforming process that we'll consider herein – that is, the fire.

Fire? Yes, fire, flames, furnaces – real heat! From very early on, fire has been a key concept and picture of God's character and method. In fact, there are more than 600 mentions of it in scripture. We find a flaming sword guarding the way into paradise after Adam and Eve were sent out. We read that Abraham was to offer up Isaac as a burnt offering. We see God revealing Himself to Moses in a burning bush. We note that all the Old Testament sacrifices pertaining to sin and utter devotion were made by fire.

The Bible even says that our God is Himself a consuming fire (Deut 4:24, Heb 12:29) and that His surroundings are fiery. For example:

“Now Mount Sinai was completely in smoke, because the LORD descended upon it in fire. Its smoke ascended like the smoke of a furnace...” (Ex 19:18) and...

“I watched till thrones were put in place and the Ancient of Days was seated; His garment was white as snow, and the hair of His head was like pure wool. His throne was a fiery flame, its wheels a burning fire; a fiery stream issued and came forth from before Him...” (Dan 7: 9,10)

From Isaiah 43:2, we also see that it plays an important prophetic role for the Jewish people, *“When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow you. When you walk through the fire, you shall not be burned, nor shall the flame scorch you.”* In other words, God brought them through the Red Sea, the Jordan River and soon, the fire of the seven-year Tribulation period (literally and in type).

In fact, it is **these very fires** which will bring forth the believing remnant of Jews:

“So the Light of Israel will be for a fire, and his Holy One for a flame; it will burn and devour his thorns and his briers in one day...and it shall come to pass in that day that the remnant of Israel, and such as have escaped of the house of Jacob, will never again depend on him who defeated (or smote) them (trust in the Antichrist?); but will depend on the LORD, the Holy One of Israel, in truth. The remnant will return, the remnant of Jacob, to the Mighty God. For though your people, O Israel, be as the sand of the sea, a remnant of them will return; the destruction decreed shall overflow with righteousness. For the Lord GOD of hosts will make a determined end in the midst of all the land.” (Isa 10:17, 20-23)

“I will bring the one-third through the fire, will refine them as silver is refined, and test them as gold is tested. They will call on My name, and I will answer them. I will say, ‘This is My people’; and each one will say, ‘The LORD is my God.’” (Zech 13:9)

In addition, fire is often a part of God’s judgment (See Isa 66:15) – it rained down from heaven on Sodom and Gomorrah. It consumed Nadab and Abihu, the errant sons of Aaron. It came down upon the enemies of Elijah and will be the ultimate place of torment for Satan and his followers.

As for the coming of the LORD, the scripture says, *“For behold, the LORD will come with fire and with His chariots, like a whirlwind, to rend His anger with fury, and His rebuke with flames of fire. For by fire and by His sword the LORD will judge all flesh...”* (Isa 66:15, 16)

So, fire is somewhat of an enigma. It seems, at the same time, to be holy and yet terrible, a means of protection and of destruction, of inspiration and of perspiration. But then, as we look more closely, we realize that the fire is not really the one that is precocious – sometimes this way and sometimes that. Rather, it is we who are flippant, disjoint and askew. We note that fire is a terror to the flesh, the carnal, the proud, the sinful. But to the pure in heart, fire is not a threat; in fact, it is ‘friendly’.

In a frightening foreign land, three young men found themselves face to face with the most powerful man on earth. Far from home and families, they were being tested before all – it was ‘bow or burn.’ You know the story – they even made a ‘Veggie-tale’ on it (See Daniel 3).

The king had made a huge golden image and commanded all his subjects to bow and worship before it. Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, though, were the only ones who refused to do so. At the sound of the band, everyone else put the preservation of their life first and punctually

prostrated themselves. These three, however, would only worship Jehovah and stood alone, literally.

Then, in response to the king's angry threat to make them crispy-critters, they revealed a wonderful purity of heart. They said, "...*our God whom we serve is **able to deliver us** from the burning fiery furnace, and He will deliver [us] from your hand, O king. **But if not**, let it be known to you, O king, that we do not serve your gods, nor will we worship the gold image which you have set up.*" (Dan 3:17, 18)

Of course, the king was furious and commanded the furnace to be made seven times hotter than usual. The three men were then bound in their clothing and cast into the flames.

This story is so rich in prophetic implication regarding the Jewish people, Jesus Christ and the fires of "Jacob's trouble" (See Jeremiah 30:7) – the Tribulation which is fast approaching. But our topic herein is the fire's effect upon Christians.

The heat of the furnace instantly killed those who tossed the three Hebrew men into it – such is the work of the flame upon the flesh – it consumes. All that is of this earth is subject to its force. Nothing worldly survives it. Nothing.

But momentarily, the three Hebrews were free in the fire – walking around unbound in the furnace -- that which bound them reduced to ashes. So, it is for God's family, the faithful and pure in heart, redeemed not by works but by faith in Christ.

"It is precisely there, in the heat of the fire, we are to glorify Him. We do this by exercising perfect faith in His goodness and love that has permitted this trial to come upon us. Even more, we are to believe that out of the fire will arise something more worthy of praise to Him than had we never experienced it."

"This is the real triumph – triumphing over sickness in it, triumphing over death in dying, and triumphing over other adverse circumstances in them."

"Christ's triumph was in His humiliation. And perhaps our triumph will also be revealed through what others see as humiliation." – Margaret Bottome

Everyone's work will be tried by fire and the fire will reveal its true nature – what is carnal will be consumed, what is spiritual will be spared. If you are born again in Christ, you never need fear the furnace. Oh, the flame will come, it comes to all – both spiritually and one day physically (See 2 Pet 3:10-12). But in truth, only that which binds you will be consumed.

Now, we can so easily be misled in our endeavors – sheep are not noted for their IQ’s. This material world can become so important – even well-meaning ministers can be bound by misguided ministries or ministerees. Much that we can think of as ‘church’ just isn’t, and some that we think isn’t is. God knows and the fire is absolutely discerning.

And not only does it free, but it fascinates. The king was shocked – he was astonished. He said, “*Did not we cast three men bound into the midst of the fire? ...Look, I see four men loose, walking in the midst of the fire, and they are not hurt, and the form of the fourth is like the Son of God.*” (Dan 3:25)

The effect of the fire upon God’s children is mind-boggling to the world. The freedom is obvious, and they can perceive that although some things are burned up, we are not hurt. For right there with us is the Son of God; it is, after all, His fire – not the world’s.

“Isn’t there something captivating about the sight of a person burdened with many trials, yet who is as lighthearted as the sound of a bell? Isn’t there something contagious and valiant in seeing others who are greatly tempted but are “more than conquerors” (Rom 8:37)? Isn’t it heartening to see a fellow traveler whose body is broken, yet who retains the splendor of unbroken patience?” - John Henry Jowett

*“Glorify ye the Lord **in** the fires...”* (Isa 24:15)

Yes, the fire frees, it fascinates, and it fashions our fellowship for there in that furnace, when all that binds is burned, we find contentment – not resentment. You see, the king had to command them to come out – they were in no hurry to leave! When the flames unveil the ultimate friendship – Jesus Christ – no one wants the old dead world again. And sometimes it takes the fire to open our eyes.

Are you fighting fires? Let them burn! Oh, there’s no need to ‘fan the flames’, but do let them burn.

‘Oh, I can’t stand to lose this or that, him or her,’ you may think. (swat, swat, swat) Let it burn. Let God’s fire burn. And yet, that’s not to say do nothing. On the contrary, do all you know to do that is good – stand up to the king so to speak. Just don’t bow down to anything in this world in order to preserve that which is going to burn anyway. Don’t try to put out God’s fire.

Now the enemy of your soul has some fiery darts (See Eph 6:16) that he lobbs at you from a distance but the difference is obvious for his odorous hell-fire only serves to empower the flesh –

to enflame with hatred, bitterness, passion and pride. But faith extinguishes his pettiness and is itself purified unto praise by the fire God sends.

Anyway, Dad's letter read,

"In your search for the more important and meaningful things in life, you were most sorely tried and tested. Many weakened and lost touch with the true reality of the love of God and His Son, Jesus. And even though you had an experience that was truly a nightmare in many ways, you and Darlene won out in the end with great victories, both personally and through the Lord... [now] you live in the confidence of a renewed and more substantial commitment to the Lord Jesus... God grant that you can hold on this wonderful course... Always, you will have our love and prayers..."

Wow. Even now, 20 years later, thanks, Dad.

Yes, let God's fire burn. Consider that burning a blessing. You need not fear it nor fight it for God uses it only for His good purposes – to free you and to transform you in it (See Psalm 104:4). True, the way back into 'Eden' involves a flaming sword, but there is fellowship in the fire like no other and joy is set before you. I'll finish with this:

"Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy." (1 Pet 4:12,13)

"I came to send fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!" -- Jesus (Luke 12:49)

"...each one's work will become manifest; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one's work, of what sort it is." (1 Cor 3:13)

"In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ,..." (1 Pet 1:6,7)

Gideon's in His Pockets

Honestly, I think you'll agree, most folks don't listen when advice is offered on child rearing. Until a child ends up in real trouble -- jail or on drugs or in some terrible situation, most parents innately think they have enough 'on the ball' so to speak to raise their children. But then there are the few or the frustrated who seek out an oracle. For them, there are so many advisors publishing books, leading seminars and voicing opinions on the topic that they are numb to the plethora of so-called sages – Christian and secular. So why should we throw our hat in the ring with even just a couple pages?

Because we passionately believe that all of us as Christians must fight for our children. The world wants them, and sure enough Satan wants to destroy them. When you consider the inroads amorality has made in shaping our society in the last couple of decades, it screams of parental lethargy in the spiritual sense. We simply wouldn't be where we are if, on the whole, Christian parents were as effective as they want to be.

So, what makes us some wellspring of wisdom? Frankly, not much. And so, we humbly offer the following words as much from our blunders as our wonders. We are so grateful to God for having given us five children, two in heaven and three here on earth – all of whom we know are born again and have a sincere, motivating love for Christ. And so, we hope the brief tidbits below will edify and encourage all of you who are parenting.

Your first ministry responsibility

Think of how much God gave to make you a part of His family. Whether pastor or evangelist or seamstress or mechanic, whether CEO or teacher or homemaker – your highest priority in ministry to people should be the 'flock' under your own roof. I struggled with this a bit when we started having children – not that I didn't love them, but rather I was so intent on making ministry monuments (for myself really). After a few years of making some ghastly and grotesque ministerial 'meadow-muffins', I realized what I was missing – the whole point. If you cannot minister in devotion and love to the little ones God has placed in your care, you dare not feign ministry elsewhere.

Now, notice that I said “ministry to people” above. Do not go the opposite direction and make your family’s care something idolatrous. Do not place anyone or anything before your God and your ministry to Him. Your ‘vertical’ ministry should always take priority over your ‘horizontal’ ministry so to speak.

The Source

Go to the source, the fountain head. There are so many good books on childrearing that they can ‘crowd out’ the “Author and Perfecter” of what we really need to understand. Nothing substitutes for lots of direct dial-in with the Lord. When our kids were growing up, God blessed me with an hour and a quarter commute to work for six years or so and I found it to be extremely valuable as prayer time – lifting up my wife and kids, day after day. I also find the quiet evening hours after everyone has gone to bed as wonderful prayer time. What ever time works for you, embrace it and spend LOTS of time in it.

Believing

I cannot count how many times some well meaning person expressed ‘concern’ for one of my kids. They were frequently the ‘clown of the class’ or getting into some mischief. As you well know, each child is a unique personality and rather than trying to force-fit them into some religiously defined mold of character, we found it far more important to simply have faith for each of them, that they would know and follow their Lord. I’m convinced that fearfulness for the spiritual welfare of your child can be as problematic as trusting God is beneficial. Believe God for your children. And recall that true faith is accompanied by responsive works – loving, training, disciplining, guiding, and encouraging. Don’t give in to expecting the worst from them. Continually surrender your fears to God and remember He loves them far more than you. Contrary to some people’s expectation, all our kids are wonderfully saved, have indeed led numerous other people to faith in Christ and are engaged in serving the Lord. What greater joy can a parent have?!

Being real – bearing fruit after your kind

Our kids have gotten so many apologies from us for myriad failures throughout their lives. Admitting your foul-ups doesn’t need to demean your godly parental authority. On the contrary,

it's the people who are the most real and honest with us as adults who are the ones we love and appreciate all the more. The same is valid with our kids. Now, the flip side of that coin is that we never abdicated our role as parents. Being a real person doesn't mean that your kids are right and you're wrong. It seems like every 'family-oriented' movie we've seen in last few years puts parents in the position as total losers, goof-balls that the kids need to set straight. That is terribly damaging to a child's perspective. Rebelliousness is being glorified in our media and its origin is very sinister.

Ultimately, your kids are going to model their parents to some degree. You bear fruit 'after your kind' as the KJV Bible says. To the degree your kids witness the reality of Christ in your life, they have the best opportunity to ultimately find it for themselves. If you're lukewarm, don't expect them to be 'on fire'. Clearly, there are exceptions to this, but they are exceptions. Why else do you think the scripture says of the believer that, "his righteousness is unto his children's children."?

Protecting

I'm pretty slow-witted so it took me a few years to realize that if I allowed my kids to camp out in front of the TV, that the media producers would be more influential in forming their characters than anything/anyone else. We simply turned it off. I know that's extreme, but at the very least we should, as parents, be very careful of what we allow into our kids' minds, especially when they are little. We must be discerning of what messages are being planted there – it's NOT just the violence or sex or cursing – it's the MESSAge that's equally if not more impacting.

Training

They'll probably be the first to tell you, yes, I force-fed my family the scripture. We had family Bible studies for the entirety of their youth and sometimes it was not so much appreciated as endured. As quiet as I normally am, I can drone on forever when you put a Bible in my hand and a captive audience in front of me. Ha! In addition, we strongly encouraged the kids to adopt a daily meaningful devotional time – their 'quiet time'.

You know the Word instructs us to train up a child in the way he should go. Notice the emphasis on the positive in that. Everything about loving God and serving Him is indeed put in that light in scripture – oh, not that it's easy or without trial. But rather that as parents, it's

important to portray the Christian life as God sees it, not as the world does. The world taunts that Christianity is a matter of do's and don'ts with emphasis on the latter. Exposing that perspective as bogus and demonstrating that your faith in Jesus is the most powerful, real and best part of your life is critical in training your child.

Loving discipline

It's a bunch of contemporary Laodicean malarkey that you should never spank your kids. Hogwash!! That is expressly contrary to scripture. So much media focus has of late been on abuse that we've been brainwashed into a Dr. Spock-based fearfulness. If you lovingly discipline your kids, including when necessary a reasonable spanking, they will love you all the more. I recommend that if you spank, don't use your hand. Use something else and let your hands always be for comforting and support. If you need to spank, never do it in public; never humiliate your child before others; always explain what and why. If you need to spank, then only spank until they've gotten the message and it's clear that rebellion is released. Now, please hear me on this – don't ever spank in anger or to an extreme. Don't ever allow such punishment to truly hurt your child if you know what I mean. My grandfather was seemingly mercilessly whipped with a belt as a child and as a consequence would never discipline his own kids – it was left to grandma. You must be calm, loving and discerning in this. And this is key – after you are done, you should love on them big time. The point is to teach a lasting lesson, not to create alienation.

My youngest, Gabe, got in trouble one time and was sent up to his room to await a spanking. Generally, I would give a few swats across the bottom. Anticipating this, he found a couple of little green Gideon's Bibles and stuck them in his back pockets. Thinking he'd outwitted dad he was fully prepared to 'fake-it' big time. However, to his chagrin, when I came in, not knowing what he'd done, I simply said, "OK, Gabe, you really blew it this time – drop 'em." (his pants, that is) At this, I thought I noticed a certain shock and chagrin. Ha! When he grew up, he laughingly confessed to this scheme – I never knew.

You know, this is exactly what we as believers seek to do as well in a spiritual sense. But, if God let us get away with putting Gideon's in our back pockets so to speak, we'd never learn the critical lessons of our Christian walk. Who the Lord loves, He corrects. (Pro 3:12)

God bless you and help you raise your children to love Him in these last days.

God's Gym

The sweat stung his sightless eyes as he pushed against the heavy wooden beam. It didn't matter that it was dark; he couldn't see anyway. Rubbing the dirt and perspiration from his brow, he avoided the puncture wounds, still sore and oozing, that had blinded him.

The crack of a whip stung his back and a harsh guttural voice yelled something like, "Grind harder, you miserable ox!" The words hurt more than the whip. They were launched from hell and their taunting insinuations were a constant reminder of his condition and his failures before God.

Pushing harder on the wooden lever that moved the huge grinding stone around and around, he thought of his father and mother – how he'd treated them so poorly and now it was too late to change that. He thought of the many stories of childhood that honored the deeds of past heroes – Moses, Joshua, Gideon and others. They used to inspire him; now, they only tormented him as he pondered a life that might have been different... different if only he wasn't so...

He sobbed as he toiled. Again, the whip cracked. He stumbled and fell into the manure below. It had lost its power to nauseate him, but it too reminded him of failure – his cavalier attitude toward God's commands. His mind flooded with accusations, 'Unclean! Unholy! Unfaithful!'

His arms were so weak, he could hardly lift himself back up; but the guard provided the proper stimulation once again.

And as his tormentor laughed, he also heard the laughter of women – women who had suffered because of him, women also who had baited his lust and left him or teased and manipulated him – and he'd deserved it all and much worse. His passionate sin nature and lack of self control stood in stark contrast to the power of God's Spirit that had, in the past, given him such strength of purpose.

But he'd taken God's grace for granted. In fact, he hadn't even realized it when the Holy Spirit had withdrawn. It was such a shock when calamity befell him. Never before, had such pain, such grief, such sorrow overwhelmed his heart – and where was God? Where was the One Who never failed?

Perhaps, the Lord was so disgusted with his life that He'd abandoned him. That's exactly what he deserved. That's what he would do himself if he were in God's place. Perhaps, God was

never there... no, he knew better than that. He'd been through too much to believe that lie – but maybe...

Questions and doubts bounced off each other and danced in his weary mind like playful foxes but they burned the fields of faith and trust that once stood in his heart. Now, the fruit of his life looked rotten. For as long as he could remember, he'd been called by the Lord yet callous to the Lord. He'd failed in every way – how could God ever use him again, how could God ever love him. He'd treated the Lord like ... but...

'How could God do this?! Or let this happen?... whatever! What good could come of this defeat? What light could ever shine in this darkness? What ...'

Suddenly, he heard something or thought he did. Was it the chirping of a sparrow? Or the cooing of a dove? A light breeze kissed his head.

Immediately, a distant guard's voice echoed in the dark prison, "Bring him to the party!"

Doors swung open and his chains were loosened temporarily. They pushed him through dank corridors and up slippery stairways – finally emerging into a din of laughter and mockery.

His feet were chained again, and he felt spit hit his cheek. In contrast to the silence of the prison, the noise here was deafening. Thousands scorned him, remarking how pitiful and scrawny he appeared. His stumbling prompted even more riotous laughter and scorn. They boasted of the superiority of their power, their god.

'I'm so weak, Lord. I'm such a miserable display of your power, your truth.' He could go no lower. His self-confidence was nonexistent; his prayer was feeble; his strength, a distant and fading memory.

He slumped against the cold stone pillar and a lock of sweaty hair fell in his face. But then, in the deepest depths of despair – he heard or sensed the Voice he'd once known. It was a voice in his heart that was unlike any earthly sound for as it spoke gently to him, he was supernaturally revived within. His doubts and self-pity unexplainably vanished and new faith – ever so small – emerged. The light of hope flickered again.

He struggled to his feet. Somehow, he realized that his life, all the tragedy, all the failures, all of it was no surprise to the Lord, but rather, He was using it to His glory – but how? He didn't know, but nevertheless, he 'knew' in his heart.

"Yes," the beautiful voice musically echoed inwardly, "I love you and I am with you!"
(Hebrews 13:5)

Wonderfully, supernaturally, faith erupted and came alive in him. He somehow knew that he was more in tune with the Spirit of God than ever. Strangely, his attention was riveted not upon his deplorable circumstance but upon a coming heavenly kingdom, and it consumed him like a fire without the burning. All he desired was to be with his Love, his Maker and to use his every last breath, every last ounce of his life's strength to glorify Him.

His weakness seemed irrelevant. All that mattered was pleasing his Lord. But how? What could he possibly do that would matter, that would make a difference? The joy of a great and eager anticipation overwhelmed him. He knew he would soon worship his Lord, his Love in person – somehow, he just knew it.

Some rotten food hit him in the face, but now, he laughed. He even sang! The lad who was next to him ducked behind the other pillar to hide. He said to the boy, “Are these the pillars of the house? Place my hands upon them.”

With his arms outstretched, he suddenly seemed to see a picture in his mind's eye of another with outstretched arms... upon a wooden cross... and it brought tears to his eyes and a holy anger to his heart.

He cried out, “O Lord, God. Remember me, I pray! Strengthen me, I pray, just this once...!”

A sudden rush of incredible power and strength filled him, and he pushed the pillars apart. The mirth and mockery of the place soon turned to screams of terror as the huge house imploded – the demonic powers were destroyed, the enemies of God's people buried in lifeless rubble.

Suddenly, he could see! And what a sight!! Vistas of Paradise surrounded him, and tender, mighty arms held him. A familiar voice more beautiful than the sweetest song said, “Well done!”

In Hebrews 11, the ‘hall of faith’, we find a powerful truth which is absolutely counter-intuitive to the carnal mind. In describing the deeds of the great men and women of faith, the Holy Spirit inserts the characteristic “out of weakness were made strong.”

Clearly, this applies to Samson, one of the judges or heroes of Israel, but just as clearly, its truth is universal in God's economy. Paul the Apostle wrote, “...when I am weak, then I am strong.” (2Cor 12:10)

Now, when we consider Samson, we naturally think of his physical strength but fundamentally, this principle speaks to our faith in God. Faith in what He accomplished on Calvary and faith

that makes it more than theological – but rather personal. As Samson spread his arms to topple the pillars of the house of Dagon, so Jesus spread His arms on the cross and toppled the pillars of sin and death in the house of Satan. (See Romans 8:2). And like Samson, He chose to lay down His life in the process.

It's one thing to acknowledge the wonderful truth of this intellectually and quite another to hold it close and personal when circumstances crush or weaken your heart. But that's the very time when the purest strength is born. When you finally know how utterly weak and helpless you are on your own, you're ready for the resurrection of power, the power of His might. Even prophetically, it's when the power and self-confidence of the Jewish people is broken, that they will be saved (see Dan 12:7).

Now, this strength comes as the 'world' fades in your heart and your attachment to Christ and your heavenly home emerges as the uncontested focal point of your life. If you're discovering this shocking but hallowed fact – your own weakness – and find yourself rehearsing failures and what-could-have-beens; if you ever hit the humiliation that always precedes humility or feel utterly defeated, take heart. It comes to all who truly love God.

- David said, *"Someday, I shall surely die at the hand of Saul."* (1Sam 27:1)
- Elijah moaned, *"I alone am left in Israel..."* (1Kings 19:10)
- Jacob cried, *"If I am bereaved, I am bereaved..."* (Genesis 43:14)
- Peter wept bitterly about his denial of Christ. (Mat 26:75)
- All of these came at times of great weakness. Towards the end of his earthly life, Paul admitted, *"I am the chief of sinners."* (1Tim 1:15).

You see, it's just this simple – man's end is God's beginning.

I know I'm weak in some areas – maybe you do too. However, it is the weak who count on God and as a consequence, will ultimately overcome. God will do what only God can do – when you turn to Him, He'll turn your frailty into strength, your despair into hope and your sorrow into joy. Go to prayer again...and again. Go to His Word again... and again!

Remember, if you know Christ as your Lord and Savior, you're just passing through this world. No matter what you're dealing with now, I guarantee, you will one day consider it unworthy to compare to the goodness God has shown you. Friend, He really does love you with relentless affection.

Grappling with Growth

Apart from Jesus Christ, there is no other biography like it in scripture. We observe his life literally from pre-cradle to post grave with a wonderful spotlight on both his highs and lows during the length of his pilgrimage. Jacob. And in his life, we find a treasure trove of insight into spiritual growth.

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

We first find him in Genesis 25 where he was in the womb fighting with his brother! Here, though, we discover from Romans 9:10-13 that he was chosen and loved by God which amplifies the Bible's message of God's sovereignty, foreknowledge and grace. That is, the heavenly Father's love was not based upon Jacob's history, good deeds or machismo and stood in stark contrast to his earthly father's favor of his brother Esau. God loves you and I in the same way.

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

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

Now, I'll suggest that this latter event parallels and typifies the salvation experience of some Christians. Here's what I mean. You remember, Jacob saw the Lord in heaven with a ladder bridging the gap between heaven and earth, the holy and unholy, the perfect eternal realm of God and the broken, temporal prison of man. Jesus would later indicate that that ladder was Himself (see John 1:51). You could say that Jacob came to a knowledge or an awareness of the Lord. However, though he was awed, he was not yet submitted. His response was like that of many

believers when he gave God a conditional allegiance. “*And Jacob vowed a vow, saying, **If** God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat, and raiment to put on, so that I come again to my father's house in peace; **then** shall the LORD be my God:*” (Gen 28:20,21) Yes, he had a lot of growing to do.

Eventually, he made his way to the household of his crafty old uncle Laban to reap a little of what he sowed. There he worked for seven years to merit the reward of the ‘girl of his dreams’ – Rachel. Laban, though, pulled a fast one on him for in the dark he switched the ‘goods’ giving instead his older daughter Leah. Now she must have been ‘a sight for sore eyes’ literally because that’s what her name can imply – she was someone who made your eyes hurt. So, imagine Jacob’s surprise in the morning! But he’s got to come out on top, remember.

Consequently, he demanded to have his expected reward, Rachel. Laban capitulated -- but only conditionally – kind of like Jacob being conditional with God. Hmm. You see, Laban was most certainly God’s instrument in Jacob’s life to mirror him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

His method could perhaps be regarded as a little loony or even superstitious, but the Lord helped him anyway. In addition, however, God spoke to Jacob in a dream and clarified that it was He who caused the brown, the spotted and speckled animals in the flock to multiply, not Jacob's branch carvings.

In this setting, Jacob learned that both Laban's past blessings and his own were from the Lord and not due to his ingenuity. It's not clear that he ever sought the Lord in Haran, but graciously God told him that he should leave that area and return to Canaan and to his credit, he obeyed. One of the early lessons many of us as believers learn is that God will indeed take care of us. (See Phi 4:19)

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

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

He made his own "two camps" by splitting the family into two groups hoping that if one was plundered, the other might escape. That is, he resorted to his natural tendency to scheme and

was still not trusting God. Like many of us, he recognized God's presence but in times of testing leaned upon his own wits anyway. Many of us do the same thing.

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

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

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

Now, this grappling was a critical point both for Jacob as it can be for us as we seek to grow in the Lord. Jacob had for much of his life encountered difficulty. But it had always been of his own making. He had 'gypped' his brother, deceived his dad, angered his in-laws, but now God Himself crippled him and fixed it so that he couldn't escape his adversary. Many of us find it difficult to accept that God would 'lame' us, and we can be tempted to think that it's because He's mad at us as well. We can, at those times, let go of Him – stop trusting that He loves us. We can interpret his method as mean. Yet, God's not mean. He's not upset or put off by our grappling with Him.

But this was where Jacob prevailed. He hung on to the Lord. Hosea makes it clear that at the end he cried out, not in victory, but in humility. (See Hos 12:3-5)

"This is an invaluable place for everyone to come to - the place where we are conquered by God. There is something to be said for every man doing his "wrestling" with God, and then acknowledging God's greatness after having been defeated. We must know we serve a God who is greater than us, and we cannot conquer much at all until we have been conquered by Him" - Guzik

Does God Himself bring difficulty into the life of His child? Yes.

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

And this was the pivotal point.

“Jacob thought the real enemy was outside of him - Esau. The real enemy was his own carnal, fleshly nature, which had not been conquered by God“ - Guzik

There, Jacob was renamed Israel – he went from “heel-snatcher” or “sneaky-conniving guy” to “one governed or ruled by God”. You could say that this wasn’t Jacob’s salvation – he already believed. It was his submission or sanctification. His need for character adjustment was being brought to light. It was a point of demarcation; from that point on he was a changed AND changing man. You see, he still had a lot of growing to do.

“From this point on, he will be called Jacob twice as often as he is called Israel; apparently, there was still plenty of "old man" left in Jacob.” - Guzik

In fact, he’s not referred to directly as Israel again for a couple of chapters.

Jacob portrays the ‘old man’s nature’ and Israel the new. From hereon, we can observe the ‘highs and lows’ of his spiritual progress associated with his names.

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

Anyway, he met the day with new courage and went out in front of the family to face Esau. To his surprise, the reunion was wonderfully amiable, but Jacob continued in some bad habits -- he lied to his brother indicating he would follow him back to Mt. Seir and instead, he headed for a place called Succoth and then Shechem. So where was the fruit of his submission? He did show courage but recall, fruit requires patience (see Luke 8:15, James 5:7).

The same is true for us as Christians.

"A vine does not produce grapes by Act of Parliament; they are the fruit of the vine's own life; so the conduct which conforms to the standard of the Kingdom is not produced by any demand, not even God's, but is the fruit of that divine nature which God gives as the result of what he has done in and by Christ." - Hooke

We tend to look for 'McFruit' in both our own lives and the lives of our spiritual family. Failures weigh us down because we don't think as God does.

"Our weak hearts, prone to legalism and unbelief, receive these words with great difficulty: God is for us. . . They have failed Him; but He is for them. They are ignorant; but He is for them. They have not yet brought forth much fruit; but He is for them." - Newell

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

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

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

Now post facto, the prince figured he'd 'do the right thing' so he sought to formalize the affair with a marriage. Very contemporary. But Jacob's bent toward dishonesty had rubbed off on his boys -- though they agreed to the deal, they made the prince promise to circumcise himself and all the males of the city of Shechem. A few days later, while the Shechemite guys were in pain

and incapacitated, two of Dinah's brothers slaughtered all the men of the city. Then the rest of the brothers spoiled the place taking all the goods, animals and enslaving the women and children. Whoa! Even Jacob was appalled. He told them that they had made his name to stink and feared a huge reprisal from the other inhabitants of the region.

We as believers just cannot allow ourselves to think that all material 'blessings' are necessarily good. We can't think that because we've got our little piece of Shechem and we've even 'built an altar' that we're still following the Lord. Jacob had his ranch and his religion, but because he wasn't in the 'place' (spiritually or physically) God wanted him, he wasn't growing spiritually – bearing good fruit. And not only so, but his family was corrupted. (See Luke 8:14)

Fortunately, the shock of the whole business and the concern over potential new enemies seemed to re-awaken the desire for a 'pilgrim's progress' in Jacob. The Lord graciously spoke to him and directed him to Bethel – back to Bethel. It means "the house of God."

This was where he originally encountered the Lord, remember? This was where he said he'd return, and that conditionally God would be his God. This was the place where God delivered him in his hour of distress. In type, it speaks of our need as believers to return to the basics of our faith when we've strayed or when we've settled down in the wrong 'place'. We all need to return to our own Bethel. It's a humbling thing and crucial to our growth. It speaks of humble repentance.

He told the family to 'cough up' their idols, their pagan ear and nose rings, and to change their clothes. Yes! Way to go, Jacob! He didn't just allow his kids to 'find the truth' on their own. There's a time for that – when you've been truly living it out yourself. But Jacob realized his error and knew that he had to set the record straight. For the first time in a while, he exerted healthy spiritual authority. He was repenting himself and resetting the moral parameters of the family. Regardless of Walt Disney's propaganda, friends, believe me, kids cannot make it on their own!! There's a time for gentleness and a time for sternness, both in love. But Christian parents who are growing in the Lord must not abdicate their responsibility to guide their kids.

At Bethel, God visibly appeared to Jacob and told him, *"Your name is Jacob. Your name shall not be called any more Jacob, but Israel shall be your name." And He called his name Israel.*

Much lay ahead for Israel – many sorrows and grief, times of dejection and feeling like 'all things were against him'. (Gen 42:36) He also had times of joy and restored hope. But from this

time forward, he actually does get called Israel once in a while. In fact, as you track it, he's generally referred to as such more and more vis-à-vis Jacob and the last mention of him in the recounting of his life is indeed as Israel (see Gen 50:2).

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

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

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

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

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

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

And to give us a wonderful picture or type of which character continues on in eternity – with over 2500 mentions in the scripture – we read of the land, the nation and the people of ***Israel***, not Jacob. Praise God!

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



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!

And it’s in these kind of situations that we can get carried away by the descending current of this world’s priorities. Here, the sandcastles of our good intentions are swept away.

So, that’s why I love these wonderful reflective moments which for me are becoming increasingly more important and refreshing. Today, I’m reading in the book of Joshua, preparing to teach out of the book of Mark, chapter one.

In Mark 1, we find 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. 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 was it 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 was submerged by John to, in His own words, “*...fulfill all righteousness.*”

Now this passage in Joshua 3 is awesome – I think it’s plainly 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.

The heavenly message was then given – 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 scriptures point to the resurrection of Christ and the *Ark* is itself a fascinating picture of Jesus (more on that in another study, perhaps).

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

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

Can you see it? The picture is perfect. When Christ died for us on Calvary (that is, as the Ark entered the river) sin and death (the Jordan) was “swallowed up” in victory (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 – in other words, death lost its sting (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 is, we are living in exciting times!

Next, 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. 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*



and said to him, "I am willing, be cleansed."

Handling Love

“It’s scandalous!”

“It’s immoral!”

“It’s disgusting!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

Leprosy had made him an outcast so long ago, he’d forgotten... no, not really forgotten...it was just that the memories of his family and friends, who now never came close to him, were too painful to recall.

His skin was covered with oozing wounds, his nose and ears were gone. Several of his fingers and toes were gone too. His face was covered and barely human. He shuffled more from imbalance than pain – physically, he felt nothing.

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

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

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

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

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

Could it be true!? But no one could cure leprosy! Never, had that happened to a Jew. But wait...he thought for a moment and vaguely remembered the tale of a Syrian whom the prophet of God told to wash in the Jordan river and sure enough – he had been healed! He thought of how far the Jordan was from where he sat.

Could he walk that far? Maybe. But would this rabbi help him? Maybe...but like the Syrian, maybe he needed to be or to know someone special or maybe he needed some coins to give... alas, he was helpless in either case. The rabbi would surely recoil at the sight of him.

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

Now, as he approached, he stumbled, got back up, and nervously he neared the man, Jesus. Odd, he thought, he didn't dress like a famous rabbi. But something about him was so approachable – there was an 'air' about the man – a kindness that seemed to radiate from him.

'Well, here goes...' He closed in on the small group – his eyes riveted upon the man in the middle. As he neared, an angry voice seemed to shout in his mind that he wasn't supposed to get this close to people, but his fear was overpowered by his hope.

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

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

His heart poured out, *"If You are willing, You can make me clean!"*

In the silent moment that followed, an eternity passed. Would Jesus speak the Word? Would He give the command to be cleansed? And then the incredible happened.....

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

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

You see, touching him was forbidden. To the religious, Jesus had just defiled Himself – in contacting the man's uncleanness, He Himself was now supposedly unclean. In reality, He remained spotless (See Titus 1:15,16)

And with this gentle touch upon his decaying flesh, the man sensed an eruption, a mighty cascading flood of love! Inexplicable, indefinable, uncontainable, unconditional love!

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

And then came the words, *"I am willing, be cleansed."*

Immediately, his body was totally restored -- his skin, as soft as a child's, his senses, restored. And the best part of all – he knew, he truly knew that God **loved** him!

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

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

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

Now, we cannot truly define God's love – even 1Cor 13 is really a description. You see, the love of God is one of His infinite attributes. As such, it is by definition, undefinable.

We can, however, appreciate the demonstration of His love by observing Christ. Consider His interaction with Peter on the shores of Galilee's lake. In John 21, after His resurrection, Jesus confronts Peter with such loving openness – three times, He presses the issue, “Peter do you love Me?” fully aware of the bitter sense of failure in Peter's heart for his three denials the night of the Lord's arrest. He even probes by shifting the question from Peter's “agape” (or divine) love to his “phileo” (or brotherly) love which in itself is quite revealing.

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

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

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

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

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

Then consider the cross.

Countless volumes have still understated the marvelous measureless love of God as demonstrated on Calvary. Armies of gifted preachers and expositors have proclaimed it in every corner of the world. How then, could anyone ever have the slightest doubt of God's earnest desire for intimacy with us?

For many reasons – none of them good – but nevertheless, real.

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

Let me explain...

First, many if not most of us have experienced at some time a crushing tragedy. The loss of a child, a spouse, a break-up, an endless series of foster homes, terrible abuse, a lifetime of loneliness... Without the hope of heaven and a present trust in Abba, these experiences will turn to bitterness and worldly sorrow which the Bible declares will, in turn, bring death – which is fundamentally separation from God (See 2 Cor 7:10). Now, God doesn’t command us to pretend such things don’t hurt or to play a spiritual masquerade, but rather to run to Him for help and to know that the day is soon coming when sorrow will be no more. Read Isaiah 51:4 and Jeremiah 31:13.

I’ll share a private moment with you that I hope will not offend anyone nor draw undue attention to me except as an illustration. You see, crushing hurt can overwhelm our ability to sense or even believe in God’s love temporarily. This is not a failure on God’s part nor necessarily a permanent condition of our own hearts. But a crushed, truly crushed human heart simply lacks the ability to discern anything but grief, sorrow and pain.

Though admittedly a weak example, if you took a hot branding iron and seared my back and then offered to give my neck a massage, I surely wouldn’t enjoy it because the pain of the burns would be so great.

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

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

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

He grabbed me gently and I turned around and buried my agonizing face in his chest (he's a tall guy!). All I could sense was my heart and his powerful hug.

He'd traveled more than two hours to see us and at that critical moment he was the expression of God's love to me even though I had no more ability to discern it than to swim across the ocean. And God knew it.

Later, however, as the Spirit of God began the mending process, I considered how loving it was of my Lord to send him and He also showed me numerous other things that He had done which were just incredibly loving. Now, as I look to heaven, I have come to love the Lord and His children so much more dearly as a result.

When your heart fails, God hasn't failed. He never fails. (See Psalm 73:26)

Next, we may think, 'Oh, I'm such a worthless person, a 'loser'. How could You love me?' or on the flip-side, 'I'm confident of God's love because I've been 'good', or I've led someone to Him or...' How often have we entertained such ideas even in the background of our minds? The pitiful estranged condition of our 'old man' always wants to swing us from 'castigation to congratulation' and back. All because we have a tendency towards trying to earn love. That's possibly because all our lives, it has seemed like people have either loved, liked, ignored or hated us based upon what we did or didn't do – this has conditioned or reinforced the notion of our needing to merit love.

However, God's love (like it or not) is unconditional – totally lop-sided if you would. He never measures out His affection for you based on your worthiness or unworthiness. In fact, He never measures out His love period – it is infinite, unbounded, and relentless! (See Jeremiah 31:3)

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

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

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

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

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

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

Finally, we are naturally so spiritually near-sighted that the only God we can perceive, looks like us, thinks like us and behaves like us. No wonder we distrust such a Being. The first thing sinful man did in the Garden of Eden when he heard the Lord coming was to hide. You see, sin twists and contorts our perception of God a full 180 degrees. But Jesus displayed Abba's character to the world – healing, blessing, loving, compassion, giving, patience, forgiving and on and on. This is why it is so critical that we endeavor to see God as He is – not as the religionists teach or as the world portrays or as the devil fumes. The truth is utterly good. God is good and

oh, how He loves you. He doesn't see you like you see you. When you're saved, covered so to speak by the atoning sacrifice of Christ's blood and broken body, Abba sees you as beautifully clean -- worth everything it cost Him to redeem you.

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

Let Him touch you too.

Heaven's Joy

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

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

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

Charles Swindoll mentioned an ad in a Kansas newspaper. It read, "I will listen to you talk for 30 minutes without comment for \$5.00." Swindoll said,

"Sounds like a hoax, doesn't it? But the person was serious. Did anybody call? You bet. It wasn't long before this individual was receiving 10 to 20 calls a day. The pain of loneliness was so sharp that some were willing to try anything for a half hour of companionship."

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

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

What's heaven like? As we read of it in scripture, we only get glimpses, but they are startling and compelling. Paul wrote humbly, *"I know such a man—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows—how he was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible*

words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter.” It is written of Jesus, that, *“for the joy set before Him”* He endured the cross. And, we’re all aware of the Apostle John’s description of the streets of gold and gates of pearl. So, what we do know of it is that what is spoken and seen there is mind boggling at the least.

But the part that fascinates more than any other is the aspect of its community. Consider that we are instructed to regard God as our Father, Jesus as our Bridegroom, our Brother, our Friend and the Holy Spirit as our Comforter. We are described as brethren and family, (Eph 3:15) integrated so tightly as to be like parts of the same body or living stones in a temple – joined together perfectly (Eph 2:21,22; 4:15,16; Col 2:19). With all focus upon our God (Rev 4 and 5), heaven is truly about community. In fact, the community is a result of that focus and as you study Revelation, you can’t help but be impressed with heaven’s sense of togetherness. As God’s character fills all, heaven’s essence is genuine, loving relationship in every direction.

Even while we’re here on earth, Christ said, *“Where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them.”* (Mat 18:20) And our Father *“made us alive together with Christ...raised us up together and made us sit together in the heavenly in Christ.”* (Eph 2:5, 6) Together. Together. Together. It resounds in scripture, but too often it echoes only faintly in the halls of our existence.

For many Christians, the closest thing to a sense of community they get to experience is a weekly hour or so in a prayer breakfast or home fellowship group. Hey, these are indeed great, but they’re like the first step in a marathon – a means and not an end.

Jesus described the cause of joy in heaven in Luke 15 with three parables. In the first, there was a lost sheep – when it was found and united with the flock the owner called his friends and neighbors together to rejoice; in the following parable, it’s a lost coin – the woman who finally finds it also calls her friends and neighbors together to rejoice; in the story of the lost son – the outcome is a relationship restored and a grand celebration. Friends, family, neighbors – they echo the community of heaven. Not only do these parables point clearly to finding what was lost and a consequent reuniting, but in each case, there was a celebration with others who cared. And why would they care? Because Jesus was also saying that heaven is a community that is composed of truly integrated lives and truly incredible relationships.

Acts 2:44 says of the early church, *“...ALL THAT BELIEVED WERE TOGETHER...”* This passage has led sincere believers to adopt at least a couple of different perspectives – either that

communal living is the epitome of how a real church ought to function, or that such arrangements are always a dismal failure and are irrelevant to our time. I like however, what my former pastor had to say about it...

“If you were around in the 60's and 70's, you might remember the many communal-type ministries which sprang up on the West Coast. Where are they now? Why didn't they work? I suggest they failed in their attempt to duplicate what happened in Acts 2 because there was no inherent reason for them to do so. On the Day of Pentecost, 3,000 folks got saved in one day — 3,000 people who had come from all over the world to celebrate Pentecost. Following their conversion, they sensed the need to remain in Jerusalem in order that they might be grounded in their new-found faith. But what were they to do? Jump on a 747, fly home, get their stuff, and come back?”

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

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

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

Now, our modern church organizations have become experts at gathering people for a few hours at a time, but as good and necessary as these gatherings are, they only serve a very temporal purpose if they don't nurture the on-going process of linking lives to The Life and thus to one another. The call to each of us is to foster fellowship and to build the body in radically

loving ways as a life-style. The Great Commission is NOT just finding the lost but building us into a community representative of God's nature.

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

- Randy Frazee

Some have made sound doctrine of scripture the main point of their ministry and we need that. Some have made godly worship their focus and we need that. Some have emphasized evangelism and missions as their main thing, and we need that. But apart from demonstrating to the lost world the beauty of godly community, we fall short -- especially in these last days. In fact, the Bible indicates that it is in these days more than any others that we must be in close community relationship.

Heb 10:25 says -- *"not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching."* Friends, the Day of the Lord is fast approaching. And in this day of increasing isolation and selfish independence, we need communities of Christian faith based upon sincere discipleship.

Sure, the application can be pretty sticky, kind of a pain. But that reminds me of a story told by the philosopher Schopenhauer --

'a group of porcupines were marooned one bitter cold night in the middle of a large frozen field. There was no way to escape the biting wind. They could not burrow into the frozen ground. As they huddled together to keep warm, their sharp quills began to pinch and hurt. The closer they moved together, the more the pain increased. Some of the animals could not bear the pain and drew apart to sleep alone. In the morning they had frozen to death. They didn't survive.'

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

May we be stirred to emulate heaven, to understand that as it is fundamental to the joy we'll know there, it is here as well. Certainly, we're going to struggle with it in our human frailty, but we must be, more than ever, making the effort to be bound together in loving community -- not in word, not in theory but in fact. May those of us who feed the flock and/or find the flock also

fellowship with the flock. Jesus did. May we all, in following our Lord, help create that heavenly sense of community wherever we go. It's a real part of heaven's joy.

Let It Burn!

Perhaps it was a dream... perhaps not. I had the ‘sense’ of peace and security that was truly beyond words. Nothing on this earth could compare – filled with an infinite security that was completely unpolluted by any sense of danger, death, disease...no tension, turmoil or trouble of any kind...only a perfectly pleasant sense of peace and the understanding of unlimited possibilities. Words just won’t do...

The peace Jesus promised to His disciples – what does it ‘look’ like? What does it feel like? How is it different than the peace this world offers? Is it worth the pursuit? Is it even obtainable?

Fundamentally, the gospel of Jesus Christ is the gospel of peace. (Eph 6:15) In fact, seventeen epistles of the New Testament begin with a pronouncement of grace and peace. For many centuries the Jewish people had greeted one another with the word, “Shalom” meaning peace or peace to you. However, what the Holy Spirit is emphasizing in the New Testament is that we cannot have peace unless we first have received grace.

As part of the fruit of the Holy Spirit (Gal 5:21, 22), it is unique in that we are told to seek it, to pursue it (Psa 34:14, 1 Pet 3:11, Rom 14:19, 2 Tim 2:22 and Heb 12:14). Apart from a single reference to meekness, this is a fundamental distinction for although the Word says that God gives peace (John 14:27), we are also to literally “chase it down.”

Now, clearly there is a type of peace in this world – that is, peaceful coexistence with other people, but the gospel proclaims a far superior peace. That is peace with God. Strong’s puts it like this – peace is “the tranquil state of a soul assured of its salvation through Christ, and so fearing nothing from God and content with its earthly lot, of whatsoever sort that is.”

Jesus who is called the Prince of Peace said – “*Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword.*” (Matt 10:34) Of course, He is no war monger; He is simply laying out the truth that the gospel of peace WITH GOD will inevitably bring war in this world. That’s because this world is run by Satan who is in a continual conflict with God.

The peace of salvation is the peace which is a free gift (Rom 5:1, Col 1:20) It is the peace that bypasses all understanding of the human mind and thus guards it as well as your heart through Christ (Phil 4:7). But if peace pursuant to salvation is a free gift, why are we instructed to seek

and chase it down? I'm not trying to pose a theological question that only echoes somewhere within the halls of 'higher learning', but I suggest that the answer has wonderful application and offers a glorious promise.

Perhaps the answer lies in the symbolism of the Old Testament peace offering.

"The peace offerings, unlike other sacrifices, were not ordained to be offered in fixed and regular course. (The only constantly recurring peace offering appears to have been that of the two firstling lambs at Pentecost. (Leviticus 23:19)) The general principle of the peace offering seems to have been that it should be entirely spontaneous, offered as occasion should arise, from the feeling of the sacrificer himself." - Smith's Bible Dictionary

"The peace offering differed from the [other] oblations ... in this respect: while the burnt offering was wholly consumed on the altar, and the freewill offering was partly consumed and partly assigned to the priests; in this offering the fat alone was burnt; only a small part was allotted to the priests while the rest was granted to the offerer and his friends, thus forming a sacred feast of which the Lord, His priests, and people conjointly partook, and which was symbolic of the spiritual feast, the sacred communion which, through Christ, the great peace offering, believers enjoy." - Jamieson, Faussett and Brown

Therefore, as these references indicate, the peace offering was a spontaneous, free-will gesture and clearly spoke of fellowship with both our Great High Priest and our God. It should also be noted that it included unleavened and leavened bread -- leaven being a type or symbol of sin (Lev 7:13). This stands in stark contrast to the animal offering which was to be without blemish and is quite instructive for although the animal sacrifice which portrays Christ was to be flawless, the two types of bread picture the pure reborn inner being as well as our own flawed sin nature -- the Christian condition (Rom 7:7-25).

You see, you don't have peace with God, fellowship with the Creator, based upon your ability to be without 'leaven' -- sinless. Rather, the sacrifice was acceptable to God, inclusive of the leaven because of the perfect or spotless animal sacrifice. None of us establishes peace with God on any other basis. You can't qualify yourself, purge yourself, make yourself holy enough to obtain that peace. You can't do enough good works to somehow grasp it. That's the fundamental doctrine of grace, isn't it?

OK, but why the pursuit of peace?

Well, there remains another unique peace offering, and it has to do with the Nazarite. In Numbers 6, we find the law concerning this person who has made a vow concerning a period of time, to be set apart totally unto God. Although his conduct during this time included the abstention from wine and from touching any corpse, his peace offering differed in two ways from the standard – first, there was no leaven allowed in the bread of the offering and second, he let his hair grow during the period of the vow. At the conclusion of his vow when the peace offering was made, he cropped his hair and burned it in the fire under the peace offering sacrifice.

Now, the Nazarite was in pursuit of God so to speak. Going beyond the standard sacrifice, he had a heart to utterly devote himself to the Lord. This was reflected in his diet, his cleanliness and his sacrifice. Clearly, he is a picture of the Lord Jesus who was called a Nazarene (the name means the same thing – separated -- Mat 2:23). The absence of leaven speaks of the purity of the devotion while the burning of the hair could typify the consuming of that which the flesh produces which might otherwise give beauty and/or a covering.

Pictured in the standard peace offering, we who believe in Christ benefit from His sacrifice on the cross. By the laying down of His precious life, our Lord made peace for us with the Father. That peace is the gracious gift of God to all who will receive it. Jesus said, “*Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you...*” (John 14:27) There is a peace, however, that is not only with the Father but in the Father.

At the completion of the law on the Nazarite in Numbers, Moses recorded the priest’s blessing:

“The LORD bless you and keep you;

The LORD make His face shine upon you,

And be gracious to you;

The LORD lift up His countenance upon you,

And give you peace.” (Num 6:24-26)

Notice that the end result is all about peace, the peace of beholding the LORD’s countenance. Notice also that it follows His grace just as in the New Testament epistles.

Now look at the first part of the blessing above – I suggest that God has indeed blessed us graciously with salvation – the peace with Him; thus, we can now come into His presence with confidence. In addition, He is keeping us by the peace that is in Him, that is, in the personal intimacy of a deeper and deeper relationship with Him. The more we pursue that intimacy, that

closeness, the greater that peace. “...the peace of God, which passes all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.” (Phi 4:7)

Oh, there’s a ‘peace’ of compromise with this world too but the Lord says, “You shall not seek their peace nor their prosperity all your days for ever.” (Deut 23:6) On the contrary, along with the psalmist, our hearts should echo, “One thing have I desired of the LORD, that will I seek after; that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the LORD, and to enquire in his temple.” and, “When thou said, Seek ye my face; my heart said unto thee, Thy face, LORD, will I seek.” (Psa 27:4,8)

It is when we drift away that we miss out on the peace of intimacy with God.

Of course, as ‘born-anew’ Christians, we do have the peace of atonement, Christ’s satisfactory payment for sin. You can confidently rest in that. No pursuit is necessary. But there’s more for the true ‘seeker’ – “If ye then be risen with Christ, **seek** those things which are above, where Christ sits on the right hand of God.” (Col 3:1)

Also, if you decide like the Nazarite to seek and pursue, you’ll burn your hair if you would, that is, your ‘covering’ – the covering of the attractions of the flesh. You see, that covering won’t matter any longer because you know what God has is infinitely better.

We’ll wrap up with the New Testament story to illustrate this point: “Now they came to Jericho. As He went out of Jericho with His disciples and a great multitude, blind Bartimaeus, the son of Timaeus, sat by the road begging. And when he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to cry out and say, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!”

Then many warned him to be quiet; but he cried out all the more, “Son of David, have mercy on me!”

So, Jesus stood still and commanded him to be called. Then they called the blind man, saying to him, “Be of good cheer. Rise, He is calling you.” And throwing aside his garment, he rose and came to Jesus.

So, Jesus answered and said to him, “What do you want Me to do for you?”

The blind man said to Him, “Rabboni, that I may receive my sight.”

Then Jesus said to him, “Go your way; your faith has made you well.” And immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus on the road.” (Mark 10:46-52)

Casting aside his once all-important covering, blind Bart received his sight, and then he also followed, he pursued Christ. In like manner, God calls us to pursue His peace – to pursue HIM.

The Bible speaks of seeking or pursuing Him more than 70 times. You see, in His presence is fullness of joy. In His presence is perfect peace (Isa 26:3) and indescribable security. And don't you know that He desires your pursuit – draw near to God and He will draw near to you! (James 4:8)

Let's Get it Straight

“...we should admit it: John was weird. Any man who preached like this, lived in the desert, wore funny clothes and lived on grasshoppers and wild honey was just plain weird. Praise God that Jesus didn't have a "slick" advance man with a thousand-dollar suit and a two-hundred dollar haircut; praise God that He uses weird people.” – David Guzik

But can you identify with John? Do you WANT to identify with John?? Admittedly, my own lack of style in fashion and a diabetic diet (are grasshoppers high in carbs?) lead me to identify a little bit with him in the ‘weird’ category. But we should all identify with his mission. You see, John understood that he was preparing the way before his Lord. He understood his need to point others to Him. And he understood his need to decrease as Jesus increased.

This notion of preparing the way is fascinating! That’s because no one prepares the way for someone they don’t absolutely expect to come. John knew the first coming of the Messiah was at hand. He said, *“I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worth to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy spirit and fire.”* (Mat 3:11)

Now, he may have suspected that it was Jesus of whom he spoke for when Christ came to be baptized, John told Him, *“I need to be baptized by You...”* (Mat 3:14) but he testified that he only knew for sure when he later saw the heavens opened and the Holy Spirit descending upon Christ. He said, *“I did not know Him, but He who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘Upon whom you see the Spirit descending, and remaining on Him, this is He who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’ And I have seen and testified that this is the Son of God.”* (John 1:33-35)

In like manner, we have been given a sign preceding the second coming of the Messiah (recall, this is not the same thing as the rapture but follows it) – the budding of the “fig tree”. (See Mat 24:32-34) After describing in detail the events of the last days and tribulation period, Jesus told his disciples, *“Now learn this parable from the fig tree: when its branch has already become tender and puts forth leaves, you know that summer is near. So, you also, when you see all these things, know that it is near – at the doors! Assuredly, I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away till all these things take place.”*

Now the fig tree has been a type and ‘fig’ure of the nation of Israel in scripture and many if not most conservative Bible scholars agree that the rebirth of the nation Israel in 1948 is clearly its

re-budding so to speak after a long dormancy. What is not clear is how long a generation is from a prophetic standpoint.

One well known author proposed back in the 1970's that it was possibly 40 years - most likely based upon the fact that it took 40 years for the older generation in the wilderness to pass away before the children of Israel could take the promised land. However, if the 40 years began in 1948 (and that's not an insignificant 'if') then the conclusion of the period would have been in 1988 – oops. Now, that suggestion was certainly not made to lead anyone astray but in honest expectation. It was also not made as a prediction though some took it as such.

Personally, I'm inclined to believe that the prophetic number for a generation is 70 - 80 years based upon Isa 23:15, Psa 90:10 and the first mention of 70 years in Gen 5:12 separating two generations. I cannot be dogmatic on that, however. There are other Bible teachers who are leaning toward other numbers or are simply unsure. Whatever the case, we have been given a sign as well (see 1 Thes 5:1-9) and should be committed to preparing the way before our Lord. That's because, the lack of this expectation can lead to a life-style unworthy of our Savior. Jesus said, *"But if that evil servant says in his heart, 'My master is delaying his coming,' and begins to beat his fellow servants, and to eat and drink with the drunkards, the master of that servant will come on a day when he is not looking for him and at an hour that he is not aware of, and will cut him in two and appoint him his portion with the hypocrites. There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth."* (Mat 24:48-51)

So how do we prepare the way? All four gospels record the answer (Mat 3:3, Mk 1:3, Lk 3:4,5, Jn 1:23) – straightness. In both the Greek and Hebrew, it means making a way that is straight, true, upright and implies a way that is pleasing. John did this by preaching an uncompromising message of repentance. His behavior may have seemed strange, but his message was plain and undiluted. What exactly did he say?

"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" (Mat 3:2) He did not toy around with a 'social gospel' or play to the 'seeker' crowd with an entertaining friendly message. The time was at hand. Many today claim that we today are too sophisticated for this kind of message – that it is simply a 'turn-off' and will never win souls to the kingdom. They say we need a 'kinder, gentler' gospel to borrow a contemporary phrase. Hey, the gospel is kind and gentle to the repentant, but it is tough on the rebellious and self-satisfied.

To the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism John said, *"Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore, bear fruits worthy of repentance, and do not think to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones. And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore, every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."*

I'll suggest that some teachers are not giving people 'all the facts' such as their absolute need to forsake sin and humble themselves before God. It may be because they are more afraid of the reactions of their audience than they are of their Lord. The religious leaders of John's time tied their righteous standing before God to their association with Abraham. This led to the assumption that the fruit of their lives was immaterial – a delusion John clearly dashed to pieces. Some folks today are using their 'association' with Jesus in the same way. Now, those of you who have followed our writings know that we who are saved are unshakably covered in grace by the atoning blood of Christ. That's not the issue – bearing fruit in keeping with that salvation is the issue. That's the straightness our King is looking for – the straight path individually within your heart and corporately within the church.

Now, we should revel in the awesomeness of grace – the grace poured out upon us who believe by our immeasurably loving Father. But, too many of us today, including yours truly, can subtly slip into the attitude that since so-and-so has this or that going on in their life and I know they're a sincere Christian, that it must not be so bad that I'm playing with this sin or that lack of devotion.

Four preachers met for a friendly gathering. During the conversation one preacher said, "Our people come to us and pour out their hearts, confess certain sins and needs. Let's do the same. Confession is good for the soul." In due time all agreed. One confessed he liked to gamble and would sneak off when away from his church. The second confessed his struggle with lust and the third one confessed to materialism. When it came to the fourth one, he wouldn't confess. The others pressed him saying, "Come now, we confessed ours. What is your secret or vice?" Finally, he answered, "It is gossiping, and I can hardly wait to get out of here." Ha!

Please hear me on this, neither your pastor nor your elder nor your Christian brother are your standard. There is certainly comfort in understanding that we are all prone to human weakness.

However, their fruit or the lack of it is NOT your measure or justification. Jesus is our standard – He is the one we are to aspire to follow.

John appreciated that. He knew the standard and reflected it when he said, *“I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.”* It was also evident when Christ came to him at the Jordan and he said, *“I need to be baptized by You, and are You coming to me?”* (Mat 3:15)

Do you believe He’s coming? Really? If so, you’ll be very much in tune with ‘preparing His way’. Personally, you’ll be concerned that you’re pleasing to Him – like a bride preparing for her bridegroom. One of the greatest thrills in performing weddings is to see up close the bridegroom’s amazement as his bride approaches. Do you want to see that look on Christ’s face? For the bride, to hear her bridegroom actually utter the words, “I do” makes her heart leap. Do you realize that someday soon He will say that to you? Wow! You know, by dying on the cross, he said exactly that – “I do!” And in heaven, His “I do!” will fill eternity with bliss. The scripture says, *“And every man that hath this hope in him (of Christ’s appearance) purifies himself, even as He is pure.”* (1Jn 3:3) Even as “a friend” of the Bridegroom, John rejoiced to hear His voice. *“He that has the bride is the bridegroom: but the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom’s voice: this my joy therefore is fulfilled.”* (Jn 3:29)

As a part of the larger body of Christ, ‘straightness’ means you’ll ‘behave as you believe’, doing what you know to be pleasing to Him – as a servant. With all your heart, you’ll live in a way that reflects a compelling desire to hear, “Well, done!” from Him.

“Some think that "readiness" for Jesus' return is a rather mystical thing; it really isn't - it is a matter of being about our business for the Lord ...we must ask ourselves: what have we done with our knowledge? Our time? Our money? Our abilities? The sins of omission often seem to be more damning than the sins of commission.” – David Guzik

Finally, not only is preparing the way a matter of personal repentance but of accepting others’ repentance as well.

“You see, so many have "unpardonable sins" for others. This is usually the result of a person's inability to deal with their own guilt. They develop a certain attitude toward people who have committed "that" sin. Maybe it's adultery, or divorce, or homosexuality. And even

though they repent, they are never quite good enough. That sin is always kept over their heads. Perhaps, in their opinion, it's all right for a non-Christian to have fallen; but if a Christian falls, then it's all over. "How could a Christian have done that?" "How could a Christian have fallen into adultery?" "How could a Christian have ever been involved in a divorce?" "How could a Christian have fallen into a homosexual encounter?" Let me answer that. I don't know how. But I do know that some have, and some do. And I also know that if they turn to God in sincere faith and repentance, that He forgives them. And I know something else. He restores them. That is the point of the prodigal son. He was restored. God forgives and forgets. And if he forgives, who are you to do any less? You may say, "But God hates that sin." Yes, He does. But does God hate the sinner? You may say, "Well, God may forgive them, but they'll never be the same." No, not if you have anything to say about it, they won't. Don't you see? This is the very place where God desires for us to be like Him. God forgives. Let Him. God forgives. Be like Him. — J. David Hoke

Oh, dear friends in Christ, prepare the way before Him! He's coming. He's coming at last! He's even at the door. Make straight paths for our King!