



Things Above

Volume 2

2nd Edition

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Introduction

As I shared in Volume One, I am a man so desperately in need of God's grace, it just amazes me that He would shed His love upon me. But as we endeavor to know Him better, we discover that He is so often the Master of the unexpected. He seems to specialize in the 'nobodies,' and is found in the 'nowheres'. As He commands the wind and waves, as He heals the sick and raises the dead, as He ties into the 'spiritual elite' and cares for the lowly sinners, as He dies and then rises to eternal life – He is continually surprising us. These devotions are offered in the 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 their pilgrimage.

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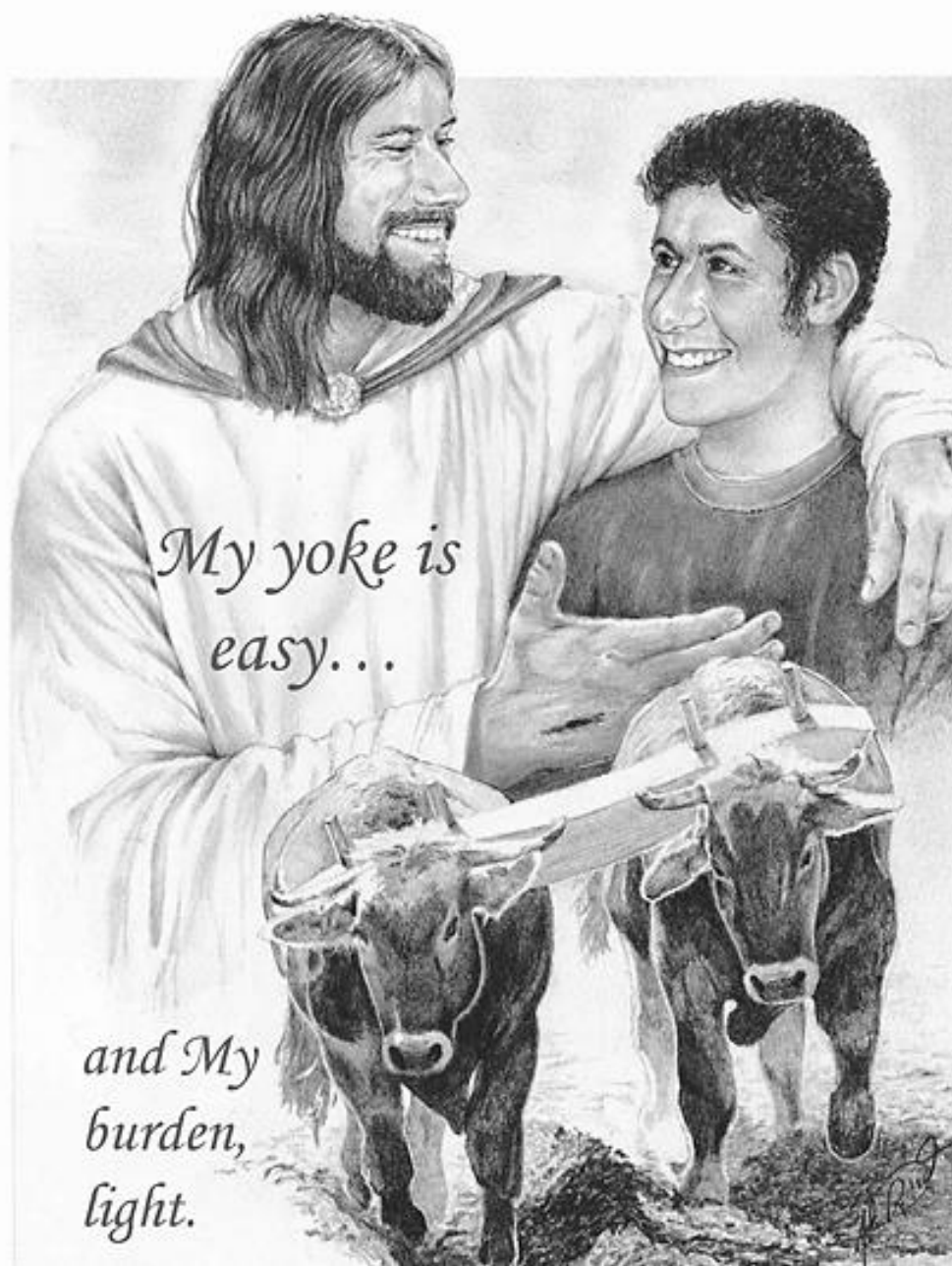
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“If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth. For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.” Col 3:1-3



Never So High

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

Before him, stood a lad with a ruddy complexion. His face was familiar of course for the young man had entertained his father with the harp before the war, before the present conflict. But now, at his side dangled the huge bloody head of the once dominating Goliath. Even as it swung, its grotesque savage face made him sick.

"Who are you?!" his forgetful father Saul had queried, likewise amazed at what he'd witnessed. This boy, David, had just single-handedly taken out the greatest enemy of the nation – a display of faith and courage unparalleled in history. Without a doubt, it was the Hand of God for the antagonizing monster had towered nearly ten feet tall – at least twice the size of the boy.

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

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

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

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

And thus, is presented in scripture a lesson (in type) for us. Fast-forward to about 33 AD. In like manner, there stood the largest and ugliest – the most rotten of creatures – Satan. Like Goliath with Israel, he taunted and bullied all of us with sin and death. And every one of us were fearful of his gigantic threats – even those of us upon the 'throne' (who, when you think about it is each and every one of us, for we have all sat upon the throne of our own lives).

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

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

This is when our heart is knit with the Son of David – Jesus.

For although the greatness of David's deed was unparalleled, it was the humility, the character of his heart that was overwhelmingly attractive. So, it is with Christ, the Son of David, and consequently it 're-wires our circuits'. Our surrender to Him is a heart-changing response to His own humble surrender unto God the Father. His deed was, is and always will be indescribably awesome, but His character is even more so. The deed illustrated it for all of us to see.

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

This is the 'stuff' of heaven.

How wonderful it will be; you see, there are no 'proud-sters' in heaven – no one looking for flatteries or temporal esteem.

You might say heaven's air is love and heaven's fragrance is humility.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

As a matter of fact, the words for “humble” in both testaments means to be “low”. In other words, ...

God's way up is down.

Before us, upon the pages of scripture, we have the beautiful sample of Jesus' earthly life – from His humble beginning there in the feed trough in Bethlehem's stable to the washing of His friends' feet in the upper room – all that we purview is a grand display of humility.

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

In Hebrews 12:2, it says that He despised the shame of the cross, but this was not because of pride. We must understand that this word translated despise or despising means to “think little of” and that is its connotation elsewhere in the New Testament. So, of course Christ ‘thought little of’ the shame compared to the eternal joy that awaited Him.

Now, you might think, ‘Yes, but this humble behavior was because He was ‘found as a man and emptied of His divine powers’ (Phil 2:5). You might be linking His humility to His humanity. And, of course, there was a ‘positional’ humility or ‘low-ness’ therein. However, it is missing the mark to view Christ’s humble character solely as the result of His human condition, as something otherwise uncharacteristic of Him as our risen Lord of All.

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

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

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

We don’t recognize that sin has warped our ideas and perceptions 180 degrees. In God’s ‘economy’ we discover the eternal reality – ‘up’ is ‘down’. The ‘highway’ of holiness is the ‘low-way’ of humility. Jesus, knowing our hearts, said, “*If anyone desires to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all.*” Then He took a little child and set him in the midst of them. And when He had taken him in His arms, He said to them, “*Whoever receives one of these little children in My name receives Me; and whoever receives Me, receives not Me but Him who sent Me.*” (Mark 9:35, 36)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

When our dear boy went home to be with the Lord, one kind man, a vice-principal who had known him at school, sent us the following note: “I saw something that showed me yet another

side of Gabe. One of the ladies in the attendance office got pretty mean with him when he brought a note to the office. She ended up ridiculing Gabe's voice doubting he was being honest, etc." (He had a raspy voice because of congenital vocal-chord deformity.) "But Gabe was very calm and seemed to take no offense at all. He gently explained that he really did talk this way. I saw the patience of Christ's love that day..."

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

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

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

Object of Desire

Have you ever been on a treasure hunt? Have you ever lost something extremely important – your Bible, your wallet, your purse, your keys, and did you notice the unrest in your heart and mind? When that happens, you search and search and ponder and ask around, “Have you seen such and such?” And when the obvious options are exhausted, you start pulling out all the stops – you look in closets or drawers or trunks of cars – places you know your treasure can’t be, but you’re getting desperate.

Sometimes, other people try to help, but they don’t have the same intensity of desire, so their search is pretty lame, and they ask, “What was it again?” or “What color is it again?” This is your treasure, not theirs.

But then there’s the exclamation point – “I FOUND it!” Your heart leaps, your mind just dances for a moment and the soothing gladness of having your treasure secure settles in.

Now, imagine that we’re not talking about keys or money or credit cards or your ID. Imagine that we’re searching for something 100s or 1000s of times more precious to you perhaps something of more value than can be spoken. Immediately, most of us will begin to picture someone rather than something...

So now, your search becomes far more intense – you don’t want to play ANY games – you want absolutely nothing other than perfectly truthful guidance and understanding, sincere help. But when the consequent discovery comes, it is likewise far more elating.

This is why Jesus said to lay up our treasures in heaven, for where our treasures are, our hearts are compelled to follow. Sad to say, however, many today have treated this command as optional or given it only an intellectual assent. For some, their focus is predominantly to obtain the most out of this life, to pursue personal agendas (sometimes with a spiritual façade), and they slide from the ambassadorship in God’s kingdom to citizenship in this world for their treasures are mostly rooted in planet earth.

William Wilberforce wrote, *“It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this one.”*

The most famous of prayers says, *“Thy kingdom – come!”* Nevertheless, the Bible tells us that the last-days church called the Laodiceans is one in which people think they don’t need

God's kingdom; they are well off – they've bought and sold and planted and built. And in fact, they are pictured as fully engrossed in this activity.

Now, Jesus also said that in the day in which the Son of Man is revealed (that is, His second coming) it would be, *"as it was in the days of Lot: They ate, they drank, they bought, they sold, they planted, they built..."* and soon afterward He followed it with, *"Remember Lot's wife,"* who turned to look longingly at Sodom when it was judged and ... well you know the story. (Luke 17 and Gen 19)

Here's a question - in this, was the Lord just saying that the sinful world would be acting normally – unaware of the coming judgment? Sure, but that's certainly not all, for that has been the world's behavior ever since we left Eden. The unique and identifying things are that:

- Lot was physically removed from the judgment and ...
- His family was doing the same things as the world – that is, their treasures were in Sodom. That's why Lot's wife turned back.

Lot's family became 'Laodicean' so to speak. Now, clearly, the Laodiceans are pictured in Revelation as a faithless church and that makes Christ's question concerning His return for His church thunder, if we're listening -- He asked, *"Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will He really find faith on the earth?"* (Luke 18)

He's NOT talking of the world. He's exhibiting His concern for His last-days church which becomes indistinguishable in behavior from the world.

Now, earthly treasures may be such obvious things as homes, careers or finances, but they can also be represented in such attitudes as, "I just want to get married first" or "I want grandchildren first" or "I just don't want this ministry to end" – that is, heartfelt desires or even in some circumstances, ministries – anything here in this life that is more important to us than the return and reunion with our Lord.

A.W. Tozer wrote, *"The church is constantly being tempted to accept this world as her home, and sometimes she has listened to those who would woo her away and use her for their own ends... We do well to think of the long tomorrow."*

*There's peace in my eternal home
On the outside, only war
And when I gaze in Your eternal eyes
I find my evermore.
-- Anonymous*

So back to our original situation - do you know what you're looking for? You see, everyone's looking – however, most folks don't realize what they are really seeking, really longing for. That's why they fill their lives with the pursuit of substitutes – things that give at best only a momentary pleasure or satisfaction.

- They look for houses when what they unknowingly desire is the comfort of home – a forever home.
- They look for possessions of all kinds when what they most deeply long for is the permanent inheritance of all things in Jesus.
- They look for temporary pleasures, for fun, for escape from boredom when what they truly yearn for is the eternal joy and forever growing ecstasy of God's presence.
- They look for recognition, success and the praise of men in their job or studies when what their heart earnestly desires is the satisfaction, fullness of purpose and sense of accomplishment in hearing these simple words, “Well done, good and faithful servant...” from God Himself.
- They look for ministerial ‘applause’ and ‘success’ when what they most deeply want is the awesome privilege of placing a beautiful crown at the feet of their Lord – a crown formed only by a loving and obedient relationship with Him, not by how full their schedule is or by numbers of people or buildings or dutiful works or the spotlight.

So why don't most of us recognize what we are truly longing for in our inner man? Why do we fill our time with the pursuit of poor substitutes?

Perspective.

Why do we work so hard to build what will only one day burn? Why do we hide from deep and tender relationships behind the wall or mask of busy-ness? Why do we spend so much effort to accumulate that which is only dust in the wind?

Perspective.

Back in 1649, Richard Baxter wrote, *“If there be so certain and glorious a rest for the saints, why is there no more industrious seeking after it? One would think, if a man did but once hear of such unspeakable glory to be obtained, and believed what he heard to be true, he should be transported with the vehemency of his desire after it, and should almost forget to eat and drink, and should care for nothing else, and speak of and inquire after nothing else, but how to get this treasure. And yet people who hear of it daily, and profess to believe it as a fundamental article of their faith, do as little mind it, or labour for it, as if they had never heard of any such thing, or did not believe one word they hear.”* (emphasis added)

It is an eternal perspective that Jesus directed us to embrace. He said, *“Seek first the kingdom of heaven...”* and *“Set your mind on things above...”* Paul wrote, *“while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal.”* And John exclaimed, *“Come Lord Jesus.”* I think this is why:

- When we see the consequences of our sin in the light of eternity, we hug the cross.
- When we ponder God’s heavenly kingdom, we actually catch glimpses of it.
- When our motivations are brought under heaven’s holy spotlight, we can see the ‘gems and the chaff.’
- When we earnestly pray, “Come, Lord Jesus!” it’s because we are no longer a friend of the world but an anxious bride to be.

Christ is indeed coming very soon. Will you be watching and ready or like Lot in Sodom? Will He have to PULL you out, overcoming your reluctance? (What a terrible way to enter into God’s presence.) Let’s set our minds on things above and place the treasures of our trust, our

time, our toil, our ‘tender’ – indeed, our all, in heaven. Let’s watch for His appearing sincerely, even eagerly and in faith. This pleases God.

Let’s be “*looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God.*” 2 Pet 3:12

“*Let temporal things serve your use, but the eternal be the object of your desire.*” Thomas a Kempis

If you have never prayed to receive God’s free gift of eternal life. Do it now! Simply confess to Him your sins, your need for forgiveness, believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God Who died for you and rose again – open your heart to Him – the consequences are eternal.

PEACE LIKE A RIVER

When peace like a river, attendeth my way;

When sorrows like sea billows roll;

Whatever my lot, thou hast taught me to say,

It is well, it is well with my soul.

It is well...with my soul... It is well, it is well, with my soul...

Though Satan should buffet, though trials should come,

Let this blest assurance control,

That Christ hath regarded my helpless estate,

And hath shed His own blood for my soul.

It is well...with my soul... It is well, it is well, with my soul...

He lives--oh, the bliss of this glorious thought;

My sin, not in part, but the whole,

Is nailed to the cross, and I bear it no more.

Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, Oh my soul.

It is well...with my soul... It is well, it is well, with my soul...

And, Lord, haste the day when our faith shall be sight

The clouds be rolled back as a scroll,

The trumpet shall sound, and the Lord shall descend;

Even so, it is well with my soul...

It is well...with my soul... It is well, it is well, with my soul...

In 1871, tragedy struck Chicago as fire ravaged the city. When it was all over, 300 people were dead and 100,000 were homeless. Horatio Gates Spafford was one of those who tried to help the people of the city get back on their feet. A lawyer who had invested much of his money into the downtown Chicago real estate, he'd lost a great deal to the fire. A year later, his one son (he had four daughters) died. Nevertheless, Spafford, who was a friend of evangelist DL Moody,

ministered to the homeless, impoverished, and grief-stricken who had been likewise ruined by the fire.

After about two years of such work, Spafford and his family decided to take a vacation. They were to go to England to join Moody and Ira Sankey on one of their evangelistic crusades, then travel in Europe. Horatio was delayed by business but sent his family on ahead. He would catch up to them on the other side of the Atlantic.

Their ship, the Ville de Havre, never made it. Off Newfoundland, it collided with an English sailing ship, the Loch Earn, and sank within 20 minutes.

Though Horatio's wife, Anna, was able to cling to a piece of floating wreckage (one of only 47 survivors among hundreds), their four daughters--Maggie, Tanetta, Annie, and Bessie--were killed. Horatio received a telegram from his wife, with only two words: "saved alone."

Spafford boarded the next available ship to be near his grieving wife, and the two finally met up with Moody. "It is well," Spafford told him quietly. "The will of God be done."

Though reports vary as to when he did so, Spafford was led during those days of overwhelming grief to pen the words to one of the most beautiful hymns we know, beloved by Christians lowly and great.

When tragedies assault our lives, they are usually accompanied by a numbing detachment, a 'targeting' anger and a cruel sense of insecurity concerning God or our relationship with Him.

It is in these circumstances that if we cry out to the Lord and surrender our crushed, wandering hearts, that we actually meet Him. It is only in these circumstances that we realize that He is greater than them – it's no longer theory.

And so, broken people who love God look to heaven. Heavenly-minded people are enraptured with their Maker. They are ever conscious of His presence. They are motivated to do His pleasure with hearts unfettered by mixed motives.

It is well with our souls as we look to our salvation – that is because we know, truly know that all will be made right, all you may think you've lost will be found in Him. He's the Good Shepherd and He loves you more than you can imagine.

Perceiving With Believing

I'm about to do some marriage counseling for a young couple planning a wedding in the Spring and I'm glad I have a manual! Oh, it's not a matter of inexperience, rather it's that apart from the truth of the scriptures which we'll share, much of the 'good advice' I can offer them is born out of my 'blow-its' – and my wife agrees... don't you, Honey! (Stop nodding so hard, you'll hurt your neck.) You see, my ability to perceive the state of my better half is not all that reliable.

And my son isn't doing much better it seems. I recently wanted to take a picture of him in order to do a piece of artwork, but I didn't tell him immediately who I wanted him to model. Later when I arrived at his home to take the picture, he said he'd figured I was going to draw him as Samson, but his wife suggested that it was probably going to be Balaam's ass! Ha!

Perception has been a problem in my family for a long time...

In fact, it started about 6000 years ago or so with my ancestors Adam and Eve. Here's the story: They really had some nice digs – ideal in fact – and they were really into gardening. Spiritually, they were really close to the Lord and their daily devotions were awesome. However, the Lord had told them not to eat of this one tree in the garden and said that if they did, they'd die. Now, one day, they were hanging out close to this very same tree (and don't ask me why) and up comes this crafty serpent. Well, he starts a conversation with Eve, and she tells him about the deadly tree, but...

“Then the serpent said to the woman, “You will not surely die. For God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” So, when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree desirable to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate. She also gave to her husband with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both of them were opened and they knew that they were naked, and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves coverings. And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. Then the LORD God called to Adam and said to him, “Where are you?” So, he said “I heard Your voice in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked, and I hid myself.” (Gen 3:4-10)

Anyway, here's the deal – what changed there in the garden of Eden was Adam and Eve's perception. The Hebrew word for “know” in the passage above is pronounced “yada” (as in

yadeh-yadeh-yada) which literally means to ascertain by seeing. That is, to perceive. And it is correctly translated as “perceive” much of the time in scripture. Now, up until this time, they had only perceived good. Remember, God said all that he had made up to that time was “good”. But their sin brought in the perception of evil. The Hebrew word for “evil” is “ra” and literally means to ‘spoil by shattering.’

With the serpent’s appearance, evil entered the scene. But before they submitted to him and consequently obtained their new ‘viewpoint’; they simply could not perceive it.

So, as they were told they then perceived good and evil but here’s the kicker – sin, like a computer virus, infected their new ‘perceivers’. What happened is that Adam and Eve now indeed perceived both good and evil, but having the new mental file labeled “evil” as well as “good” was the only thing that made him more like God.

You see, what goes into these files is a totally different matter. We can assume that man gained the ability to distinguish good and evil accurately, but that is NOT at all the case. For sin not only created the new ‘file’ folder called evil, but it also began spoiling or shattering man’s perception of what was truly good as well.

Earlier in the Genesis story, we see that man’s natural tendency was/is to label everything – fundamentally, this means that he trusts his perception or judgment. To distinguish, to discern and then to declare what something or who someone is – this is what God did as we read the story of creation and this is what He had Adam do with all the animals and with his mate. Like baby steps into life – man’s perceiving was his own limited copying of the Creator’s knowledge. I say “limited” because God doesn’t simply ‘perceive’ – He knows.

But man perceives. He can only go on what he senses.

And his enemy, Satan, knew that if man’s perceiver was malfunctioning, then the whole unit would be doomed.

Imagine this, what if you had a TV set that had a secret software component that changed everything you saw on it from what was really being broadcast? How about if it believably changed everyone’s appearance along with everyone’s words and actions? Now, imagine that this faulty TV receiver is your only window on the world. In a spiritual sense, this is what happened to mankind in the garden.

And three perceptions are mentioned as changing as a result:

- man’s perception of himself

- man's perception of God
- man's perception of paradise and his home

Let's consider each one. First, referring back to the scripture passage above, man's immediate impression of himself with this new perceiver was shame. That which was created and declared by God to be good now needed to be covered up or so man thought. Adam and Eve ceased to agree with God – their physical condition of nakedness had not changed but their perception of it had.

Indeed, ever since, man's coverings (of all sorts) have served his desire to hide his shame. Fundamentally, deep within his heart, man is ashamed and discontent with who he is (how he perceives himself). Even his boasting, arrogance and seeming self-confidence are cover ups.

So, they used these large scratchy fig leaves to clothe themselves which, of course, was an uncomfortable reminder of their disobedience and new sin nature.

Second, was Adam and Eve's new perception of the Lord. God; the One with Whom they had once fellowshiped was now feared. This was because they believed Satan and misperceived God as hard, resentful and repressive (like the man in the parable of the talents – see Mat 25:24,25).

But God did not and does not change (see Mal 3:6). It was their perception of God that changed. Indeed, man has never since truly been able to recognize God for Who He is. Fundamentally, man sees God, in character, as a 'man' – loftier and grander than himself, but still imagining that the Lord perceives as he perceives, thinks as he thinks – i.e. he continues to believe Satan's lie. And God addresses this many times in Scripture. (See Num 23:19; Isa 55:8,9; Jer 29:11; Psa 50:21, etc.). It is a gross misperception.

The irony is that in order to bridge this perception gap, God did become a man – Jesus Christ; and having spent three years with his disciples, was still not recognized by them (see John 14:8,9). Not really, not until His atoning death and resurrection. The guys who had followed Him for those years were arguing even the day before His arrest and crucifixion who was going to be the greatest in the coming kingdom. They were shocked and amazed that very evening when Christ washed their feet as an example of God's will for them. Genuine humble servanthood did not and does not equate with greatness in man's perception even within the church at times.

You see, in the garden of Eden, fig leaves didn't really do the job. They were like man's efforts to cover himself by religious observances or keeping the Mosaic Law. But mercifully and graciously, God gave them coverings of skin (see Gen 3:21). And this revealed His heart for them – it clearly implied an animal died, blood was shed, a sacrifice was made, a gift was given – all to adequately cover man, to truly cover his shame. Prophetically, this clearly speaks of the unmerited gift of Christ's sacrificial death and the covering of our sins by His righteousness.

In the book of Revelation, Christ speaking to the last days Laodicean church says, *"Because you say, 'I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing' – and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked (talk about a perception problem!) – I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire, that you may be rich, and white garments, that you may be clothed, that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed."* (Rev 3:17, 18) God wants to cover us.

Third, there was their new perception of paradise and planet earth. Man was once a resident of paradise. He woke up to it every day. His life was so peaceful, purposeful and productive – we can't conceive of it. To picture it as two people frolicking in their B'day suits amid a botanical wonderland is a cruel and hideous parody, a trivial and mean imagination.

God Himself had planted this garden – it was a holy place where He fellowshiped with man. However, with his new perceiver, man was unfit to dwell there, so God moved him out and barred the entrance. No longer could they see or perceive paradise and this world looked much, much different -- thus it is today. The apostles Paul and John saw heaven but only by supernatural revelation. Fundamentally, man cannot see his true home.

And so, the problem of perception is the 'perception problem'. Satan lied:

- he said we wouldn't die but we die
- he said we would clearly perceive good and evil, but we are blind, perceiving much in error, even good as evil and evil as good.
- he said God was holding back something good for us, but God was protecting us. He has not and will not hold back that which is good for His children (see Psa 84:11)

And we have believed the serpent. In fact, this enemy still lies to us every day and there are times when we 'take the bait' – right?

So... can we 'clear the fog'? Can we fix the problem? Can we make our 'perceivers' function as designed? No.

No?!?

President Kennedy once said that man has made his problems and man can fix them. Well, he was dead wrong on the latter part. But there is hope...let me explain.

In the upper floors of one of the WTC towers was a very successful company. The employees were well off and fully engrossed in the realm of financial fantasy. Their view of the world was literally panoramic and their lives quite prosperous. It would seem that they needed nothing, not even God.

But God knew differently, and He'd planted among them one soul who was a continual Christian witness before them. Until September 11th, they paid him little attention. But then came the terrible catastrophe by which we all were stunned – the jet that crashed into that tower hit it just below their offices and they all were trapped. In a moment, every perspective on life changed for them.

And yet, there was this one guy among them whose perspective was basically unchanged and many of them came to him now, earnestly seeking help. Just before the end, he was able to telephone his wife to say goodbye, and he reported that a large number of people, perhaps three quarters of the company's employees, had gotten saved and were raising their hands in prayer even as he spoke.

You see, the perspectives of God's witness didn't need to change because they weren't based upon what he saw before or after the catastrophe. As a born-again Christian, what he knew about himself, his Lord and God's promise of heaven was a matter of faith – not sight. (see 2 Cor 5:7) You could say that, as Christians, what we 'know' in our 'knower' is far more certain than what we perceive in our 'perceiver'. This kind of knowing is faith, childlike faith which is born out of our relationship with God and hearing His words.

You see, we can't fix the perception problem, but God can. Generally, He starts with how we perceive ourselves. Often, He puts us in circumstances that can strip away the fig leaves. Sometimes, we scramble to pick them back up or even to add more. However, fig leaves will not do – they must go. (And you know most of your fig leaves.)

That is, figuratively, we must bare-all to God, give Him all our cover-ups and our sins. No one will ever perceive themselves correctly apart from this. Now, as we do this, as we emerge from hiding amongst the trees so to speak, there is a shame of nakedness, a shame of insufficiency. It's like the emperor's new clothes – in reality, apart from God's tailoring, we are

naked --shamefully so, and when we finally see ourselves as such, we are positioned to receive God's covering.

No person could stitch this real covering together. In fact, like Christ's earthly robe, it has no stitching. It's a single work. It's a robe of righteousness or right-ness. It's a gift to you and me, yet like the animal skin given to Adam and Eve, it came at the expense of One's life – that is, Christ died to clothe you.

And as you receive it, you begin to perceive God correctly – to know Him relationally as gracious, loving, just and holy, merciful, longsuffering and... that He's "for you".

And then there's your perception of home. Clothed in heaven's high-fashion, you are no longer the worldly trend-setter you once were nor do you care to be. You come to realize that where God places you, outside the 'garden', is no picnic – though you're here on planet earth, it's not your home and never will be. Your vision clears and you perceive this world as a pilgrim does, for you know that heaven is your eternal home. (And while you're here, there's divinely directed work to do!)

Now, here's something I find radically wonderful -- because we are created beings, we will never be able to perceive omnisciently – in fact, one of the joys of heaven will be the eternal growth or bigness of our perceptions of these three things – who we are in Christ, Who our Lord is and the incredible delightfulness of our heavenly home. What an unspeakably grand eternity!

Now, if you're a 'born-anew' believer, you probably have understood these things already and are looking forward with eagerness to the time when God fixes the 'fix' we're in.

But if you're not sure of your eternal identity, relationship or home, listen to Christ's call – you see, you're potentially His bride – if you'll say yes to His proposal – a proposal He gave with bended knee on the cross of Calvary. Make Him the Lord of your life, for He is very soon about to respond with, "I do." by snatching us outta here and you DON'T want to miss it! He's going to take us home to a honeymoon that never ends.

It begins with a sincere prayer – say yes to the One Who loves you – Jesus our Christ.

Pinnacles of Prayer

"This, then, is how you should pray: " (See Matt 6:9-13)

"Our Father..." In coming before God, the first thing HE wants US to remember is that He is our Father. This is NOT a reminder for Him but for us. He is a true, a loving, a faithful Father and ever will be. Although the world has indeed corrupted the image of fatherhood in its moral meltdown, God is unchanged – He's compassionate, capable and purely interested in your good.

"...Who art in heaven..." There is a heaven and there is a hell. We are in neither place as yet, but ALL of us one day will be. God is in heaven, what the scriptures refer to as the "third heaven" – the sky and the cosmos being the first and second respectively. That is, God is above all, above all the mess of a sinful and cursed creation. He Himself is untouched by sin nor can He be. Perfectly pure and forever holy, holy, holy, His character is not like ours – He is loving to the uttermost, all-knowing, all-powerful and all-present. Yes, even though He is in heaven, He is also in the midst of His creation everywhere – there is nowhere you can go that He will not be with you. How does He do that??

"...hallowed be Thy name." Gayle Erwin wrote a wonderful work entitled "The YHWH Style" in which he reminds us that from a biblical standpoint that "name" is synonymous with "nature". Now, hallowed comes from the Greek word pronounced 'hagios' meaning 'a most holy thing'. Therefore, here we are reminded that in addition to remembering He is our Father, we are to ponder that His nature/name is most holy. In a day in which the concept of holiness is so poorly understood, one might ask, 'Why is this so important?'

Being separate, special, above all – these attributes are a part of holiness certainly, but by no means do they constitute even the 'tip of the iceberg' so to speak. In the Bible, we note that the quality which moves all of heaven, even the highest created beings, to worship God is His holiness. Describing it with mere words is like trying to impress an ant with the Mona Lisa. Suffice it to say that this prayer leads us as believers to esteem His very nature as infinitely higher than our own and expresses the desire for the whole world to have the same awe.

"Thy kingdom come..." Someone once told me that this really says. "Come, Thy kingdom." Now, His kingdom has come in a measure through the spread of the church, but it is indeed in a limited measure. One day, God's ways will fill all creation and there will be a day in which sin and its rotten fruit are long gone -- no more devil, no more demonic activity, no more sickness,

pain, suffering or death. We'll know pleasures forevermore, glorious reunions, justice and truth, grace and mercy, overflowing joy, perfect peace, endless love – these wonderful things will no longer be the topic of sermons but revealed in God to us as He reigns.

“Thy will be done,...” We sometimes need to be reminded that God's will applies not only to the means but to the end as well. God's will was the cross of Calvary (the means) as well as universal reconciliation (the 'end'). Tough 'medicine' for a tough situation but yielding the most tender of outcomes. Submitting to God's will for the means means trusting that His will for the outcome is always worth it. And it is. Jesus submitted to the cross because of the joy set before Him on the other side. So, is His will as to 'the means' always a hard pill to swallow? No, but don't be surprised or even disappointed when it is.

“...on earth as it is in heaven.” Did you know, heaven is coming to earth? For some radical and unfathomable reason, God will establish His very throne in our proximity. His heavenly city will descend close to earth and not only will He rule and reign our own once wayward planet but all of creation as well – from here! Heaven is perfect because of God. His presence makes it heaven and one day, earth will be a part of it. What better way for Him to demonstrate who He is than to turn the devil's own stomping grounds into His paradise. Only He can do such a thing. Only God can clean up this mess – and that's exactly what He's going to do. Earth will be as heaven! Wow!

“Give us this day our daily bread...” This request applies to all our daily necessity. We must never look to our Father as grudgingly coughing up some scraps of stale crackers as we beg. Remember, He's the One who is giving us this model prayer in the first place. If He has told us to ask, you can be sure it is because He loves to give. Note, however, the daily part – 'oh, if we could just get ahead a little – you know, put aside a little stash so we didn't have to DAILY come to Him.' That's exactly what the sin nature wants, because every day you don't depend on God, you'll drift from Him. This 'daily' business is more important than the provision itself. Those who are in the greatest sense of material security, if they depart from the daily seeking of God, are rather in the greatest spiritual peril. Yet, we tend to see it the other way – we just want the stuff. We want to be stuffed with the stuff. Like a bunch of 'turkeys' we gobble, gobble, gobble and then want to kick back and check in with God next week or when the 'pantry' gets low. This applies to both material and spiritual needs. But daily-ness is the recipe. Daily dependence on God leads to godliness.

“And forgive us our debts...” We owe God big time! We are in HUGE debt. Frankly we owe Him everything everywhere forever. And yet we are bankrupt. We can never pay for the forgiveness, the redemption, the eternal life He has provided. We can never ever EVER compensate Him for His Son. Every sincere Christian acknowledges this – our sin has been paid for in full, by Christ’s blood. You can’t sincerely ask God to cancel your debt if you don’t first accept that it exists. When I came to Christ, it was as the result of a ‘search for meaning and truth’. God, however, loved me too much to leave me in that ignorance. It was after years of wallowing in the gutters of lust and misguided depravity (as a ‘Christian’) that I realized how desperately I needed His forgiveness and redemption. It wasn’t until then that I really knew I had a debt and a Redeemer. There is no humility without humiliation. And here’s the kicker... Jesus said, *“to whom little is forgiven, the same loves little.”* (Luke 7:47) It wasn’t until I began to fathom the extent of my forgiveness that I began to truly love my Lord. True, love is the driver behind obedience (John 14:15) but love is driven itself by the appreciation of mercy and grace.

“...as we forgive our debtors...” Oh-oh, look out for that “as”. That little conjunction in the Greek means “and” or “also” or “indeed”. Forgiveness is not really optional for the believer. The sense of forgiveness we enjoy in this life is directly related to the forgiveness we extend to others. Now, I don’t believe this is a ‘conditional addendum’ on the contract of the cross so to speak. If you have truly accepted the gift of salvation provided for at Calvary, you are covered by Christ’s own righteousness – in God’s view, you are as righteous as Jesus Himself. Your place in heaven is secure.

However, your peace on earth or sense of rightness with God will be impacted by a hard heart toward others who frankly owe you immeasurably less than you owe God. And He does that purposefully – you cannot fully embody the love of God or a love for God if your heart is hardened by unforgiveness. Many of you know the story of Corrie ten Boom who was undoubtedly one of the dearest saints to preach the gospel. You remember how she shared her testimony of surviving Ravensbruck, a torturous prison camp in WWII where her sister was brutally treated and eventually died. One day after the war, as she spoke to a crowd about the Lord, she was approached by a man whose presence made her shake – the very prison guard who so harshly treated she and her dear sister. He had come to Christ himself and now asked for her forgiveness. Corrie recalled that she could not forgive him, she could not extend her hand to

even touch his. However, she prayed for God's strength to do His will and slowly reached out her hand in greeting. As their hands were joined, she sensed a supernatural quality of divine forgiveness overflowing in her heart. Like her, you cannot escape it. Quit trying. Forgive that person. Do it now!

“Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil (or the evil one).” The word temptation literally means a test. This is interesting for although the Bible clearly teaches that God tests our hearts (Psa 7:9; 11:5; Pro 17:3; 1 Thes 2:4) and that He will not let us be tested beyond what we can bear (1 Cor 10:13), Christ seems to teach us to pray ‘Don’t do it, Lord’. Why? He says it again in Matt 26:41. Is Jesus saying something contrary to what God desires for us? No way.

There are at least a couple of reasons – first, the humble, broken person is not necessarily afraid of God's tests but is absolutely aware of the seriousness of them. Jesus is affirming the posture of the humble servant. In the garden of Gethsemane, He told the sleepy Peter, James and John *“the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.”* Next, there are unnecessary tests or trials that come to us when we are disobedient and sinful. Paul wrote, *“But they that will be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and hurtful lusts, which drown men in destruction and perdition.”* (1 Tim 6:9) Jesus told us to pray that God would lead us away from such circumstances. That is made evident when he completes the sentence with *“but deliver us from evil (or the evil one).”* God's tests may be difficult, but they are always for our good.

Also, it could be that there is an eschatological application in this phrase for Jesus said concerning the trying tribulation events of the last days, *“Watch ye therefore, and pray always, that ye may be accounted worthy to escape all these things that shall come to pass, and to stand before the Son of man.”* (Luke 21:36)

“For Thine is the kingdom,...” “Kingdom” here is “royal power” not to be confused with an actual kingdom but rather the right or authority to rule over a kingdom. It may seem like Satan rules our world, but after Calvary that simply has not been the case. The devil has no more authority to rule. When Christ rose from the dead, the devil's goose was cooked if you would. What he connived to obtain from Adam and Eve, he lost through the just redemption of our world. It was a traumatic thing in heaven you know, at least for John. He observed it as recorded in Revelation – *“And I saw in the right hand of Him who sat on the throne a scroll written inside and on the back, sealed with seven seals. Then I saw a strong angel proclaiming with a loud voice, ‘Who is worthy to open the scroll and to loose its seals?’ And no one in*

heaven or on the earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll, or to look at it. So, I wept much, because no one was found worthy to open and read the scroll, or to look at it. But one of the elders said to me, 'Do not weep. Behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has prevailed to open the scroll and to loose its seven seals.' And I looked, and behold, in the midst of the throne and of the four living creatures, and in the midst of the elders, stood a Lamb as though it had been slain, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God sent out into all the earth. Then He came and took the scroll out of the right hand of Him who sat on the throne." (Rev 5:1-7)

What is this scroll? I agree with those who claim that it's likely either the divine inheritance and/or the deed to the planet. In the days this scripture was written such scrolls were used for these purposes. They had seals and notations linked to obligations or liens. You'll note John cried at first for no man could redeem earth from Satan's brutal rule for if in the set time a redeemer could not be found, Jewish law passed the right of ownership permanently to the one temporarily possessing it. (e.g. Lev 25:30) Can you imagine a world ruled forever by Satan?? Talk about hell on earth! But Christ's is the scroll, Christ's is the kingdom!! He alone has the right to rule our world.

"...and the power..." Christ is no powerless monarch. He not only has the right and authority to rule, He has the power – unmatched and limitless. Jesus said in prayer to the Father, *"... You have given him (the Son of God) power over all flesh, that he should give eternal life to as many as You have given him."* (John 17:2) *"And (after He had risen from the dead) Jesus came and spoke unto them, saying, All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth."* (Matt 28:18) Wow, just think – total power combined with infinite love, wisdom, a perfectly pure heart and the desire to do good!

"...and the glory..." Although, glory can mean a brightness or brilliance, it's probably more accurately understood here to mean a judgment, opinion or view. Because Christ has the right, authority and power to rule, His judgment or view is all that matters, really. Right? So why be hung up on man's opinions or what the devil tells you about yourself. In the NT, this word translated often as 'glory' always refers to *"a good opinion concerning one, resulting in praise, honour, and glory"* (Strong's). If you're His child, you can depend upon His judgment, His view of you as being good because His Son is in you.

“...*forever.*” That’s a long time. For nearly two thousand years, believers have lifted up this prayer and many, many like it. But two millennia is a comparatively non-existent wisp or vapor of time in the context of eternity. So, let’s pray it like we mean it! Maranatha! Come, Lord Jesus!

Prepared For His Appearing

Who was he talking too?? Probably not a major theological issue, but for Moses, it was the turning point of his life. Here, on the backside of a place that rivaled the moon for least likely places to vacation, the man picked by God wandered with the flock of his father in law.

Who was he talking to?? Maybe he was just humming one of his songs or thinking to himself, but it was the defining moment for David. Here, the man picked by God wandered amid the ashes of his town torched to the ground.

Did he really know who he was talking to?? Perhaps, it was a dream come true, but it was definitely D-day for Joseph. Here, after wandering for years amid the lonely forgottenness of prison and slavery stood the man picked by God before the most powerful king alive.

We can learn a great deal in considering these three men and especially how God deals with those he has called and chosen. First, Moses...

You remember the story from Sunday school no doubt. After 40 years of learning to be a somebody in Pharaoh's household, Moses then spent another 40 years learning to be content as a nobody. It's one thing to live in the desert wilderness with a bunch of smelly sheep and goats. It's quite another to be content there... especially after experiencing the pleasures of the court of a mighty king.

For Moses, it was a long and lowly road of preparation and God knew he was ready by a simple test. It was a bush, an ordinary bush with an extraordinary flame. Now, it was not uncommon to see a bush or scrub-tree burning in this desert wasteland, but this one was different – remember? It burned with fire but was not consumed. Now, in order to notice such a thing, Moses had to gaze upon it for some time. He probably did a double or triple-take. He may have wondered if it was a mirage.

But the scripture says that it wasn't until Moses said, *"I will go over and see this strange sight-why the bush does not burn up,"* and turned aside, that God called to him. This really is fascinating – Moses, like most of us in this day could have missed it and probably would have years earlier. When life is full of business that makes us feel important, such things are either unnoticed or unappreciated. But Moses, after forty years of doing what his Egyptian upbringing taught him was abhorrent, (that is, shepherding) noticed the supernatural within the natural. He was a big man in a big hurry to do big things back in Egypt. But here, there was no one to

impress, no schedule to keep, no day-timers or PDA's. Half his life had been spent in humiliation.

Consequently, God chose a very unique way to come to him – not in a dream, not a vision – but a flaming bush. Now, later, He would appear as a flaming mountain, but that was for the host of Israel. For Moses, it was a burning bush – hey, not even a tree. Nothing lofty but rather lowly. Nothing majestic but rather meek. Why?

Because the person God uses to lead or influence others only does so successfully when it is done in meekness and humility – that is, in the character of Christ. Moses was about to be placed in the most challenging leadership position imaginable – to undo 400 years of slavery, to break the bondage of cruel tyranny, to manage the exodus of two to six million people, to establish the laws that would govern a nation, to replicate the worship of heaven via the tabernacle...on and on it goes. In order to accomplish so much, God needed a man who on his own could do so little. Anyone else would mess it up and just get in the way.

At that point, he was ready so God spoke. *“So, when the LORD saw that he turned aside to look, God called to him from the midst of the bush and said, ‘Moses, Moses!’”* Ever notice how God frequently calls out to his children emphatically -- Moses, Moses! (Ex 3:4), Abraham, Abraham (Gen 22:11), Jacob, Jacob (Gen 46:2), Saul, Saul (Acts 9:4)? In each case, there's a big change of direction coming. God didn't bring Moses to the bottom of the world to leave him there, it was simply preparation.

David probably had as many tears running down his face as any of his men. Ziklag, the town where they and their families had lived was burning and in ruins. All the women and children were gone, presumed dead or taken into slavery, all their possessions pillaged. Remember, however, that this was not the whole situation – you see, David had been hunted by thousands of madmen, soldiers and spies, determined to kill him in obedience to their paranoid king, Saul. In Ziklag, David was an outcast from his nation, hunkered down with the enemies of Israel.

The heady days of glory following his slaying of Goliath were long gone. The kingdom of Israel was falling apart under constant attack by the Philistines. Much of the territory once occupied by the children of Jacob was now given up to the surrounding nations. Saul had brought coherence to the nation but also a ruthless tyranny and bondage, and his warfare was not all that effective. David had expatriated his parents to protect them and had even feigned insanity to survive. The kings of the Philistines had sent him home from the battle with his old

nemesis, Saul, fearing treason. Returning to their adopted home of Ziklag, they found it ravaged and destroyed by marauders. Now, the sometimes-noble group of ne'er-do-wells and malcontents that had gathered about him here amid the ashes of their home were about to stone him. Rejected by Israel, rejected by the enemies of Israel, rejected by the rejects of Israel – David was at the bottom.

Unlike Moses, David had received a great promise from God – one day, he would be king. But how in the world could that possibly come true given the circumstances he faced – his complete disgrace? After all, virtually half his life had been spent on the defensive. Was he ready? Again, God's test was painfully simple – take him to the 'threshold of hell' and see. Would David hang on to the promise of God? Like Abraham with knife raised over Isaac, like Jesus in Gethsemane, would he, in the final analysis, esteem his God as trustworthy?

At that defining moment, the scripture says that although he *"was greatly distressed...David encouraged himself in the LORD his God."* (1Sam 30:6) The language is descriptive of him being exceedingly cramped in grief and stress, yet he strengthened himself by considering the Lord. Previously, David had looked to his own trickery, integrity or resourcefulness to save him. Here, stripped of everything, he truly realized his only salvation was his Savior.

Joseph was really spruced up – shave and a haircut. He probably smelled good too. You didn't come before Pharaoh looking and stinking like you've been in a prison for years. But that's exactly where he'd been. You remember the story, don't you? Like David, Joseph had early indications of greatness, but unlike David's they were disputed and put down from the beginning. Recall, he twice dreamed of ruling over his family, even over his parents, and that didn't sit well with them -- especially his brothers, ten of whom were older than he and incensed by his swagger.

But before Joseph could be lifted up, he had to be taken down...low down. Far from the family's camp, his brothers tossed him down into a pit to ponder how they should kill him. Then they sold him into slavery, and he was taken down into Egypt. There he served faithfully an officer of Pharaoh's court but was unjustly thrown down into prison. In jail, he served faithfully the other prisoners, and one day he met the butler and baker of the king, put into prison during a purge. Recall how he interpreted their dreams and as he predicted, the baker was hanged while the butler was restored. Ah, but two more years passed; it was probably something like 15 or 16 years since he'd seen home. The butler forgot all about him. Had God?

Joseph had inspired dreams. He discerned the messages in others' dreams. Dreams were Joseph's deal. But his life was more like a nightmare. He was humbled, forsaken and forgotten – God took him from the place of privilege to the pits of prison. Half his life was spent in bondage. Was he ready for God's call? Again, a test.

Pharaoh dreamed a troubling dream and then another. It wasn't bad pizza; they were the kind of visions that make you really distraught. None of the court's wise men could interpret them. But then, the butler finally 'came to' and remembered the Hebrew prisoner that had interpreted his own dream. Test time for Joseph. If he was to rule Egypt, he had to have no fear of man and no self-reliance – characteristics that would not have come naturally to a son of Jacob. But then the last half of his life had been supernaturally humbling.

Cleaned up to emphasize the fact that he was before royalty, God's man was brought to Pharaoh, and he said to Joseph, *"I have had a dream, and there is no one who can interpret it. But I have heard it said of you that you can understand a dream, to interpret it."* Standing before this menacing monarch, given the opportunity to either shrink in fear or boldly boast his talents, Joseph boldly proclaimed, *"It is not in me; God will give Pharaoh an answer of peace."*

Yes, Joseph interpreted the night visions and rendered sage advice, but it wasn't Pharaoh who promoted him to Prime Minister – it was the Lord. (Psa 75:6,7)

Each of these men traveled the low road of preparation. It's a long road meant only for pilgrims. It leads through sorrow and grief, it weaves through humiliation and brokenness, it traces its way through loneliness and despair. But it has an end. It halts abruptly at the point of departure.

For Moses, one day he was an utterly obscure desert herder of sheep and the next, the man commissioned by God to do the impossible before the 'whole world.' For David, one day he was a gutter-scraper – at the very bottom of the social ladder and very shortly after, he became king. For Joseph, one day he was a forgotten filthy foreigner in prison and the next, second only to the most powerful man on earth.

Now, you may never lead the nation. You may have plenty of challenge just balancing the family checkbook! Nevertheless, this all applies to you if you're a sincere believer in Christ. The day is coming in which you will likewise be exalted, raised up from the bottom and set on

top. In like manner, it will happen quickly, as a matter of fact, in the blink of an eye. Now, your road has probably been long; you may have had illness, death of loved ones, poverty, abandonment, addiction, abuse. You may have wondered at the trials you've faced – 'Lord, what's going on?!?' **Preparation.**

Moses, David and Joseph – they each came from wealthy families and were driven by their circumstances into meagerness. They picture Christ who left the paradise of God's presence in heaven to walk among us 'penniless' and abandoned. Like Christ, they were exalted in due course and so will you and I; it's called resurrection or rapture. Either way, we're going up, just like our Savior. This life? It's not just about God working through you to accomplish His will but about God working in you to prepare you for what's waiting in eternity. The end result is what it's all about for the man or woman of God.

Joseph knew that when he said to his brothers, *"I die: and God will surely visit you, and bring you out of this land unto the land which he swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob."* And Joseph took an oath of the children of Israel, saying, *God will surely visit you, and you shall carry up my bones from hence.* David knew that when he said to the Lord, *"As for me, I will behold thy face in righteousness: I shall be satisfied, when I awake, with thy likeness."*

And God made that clear when He said to Moses, *"I will certainly be with you. And this shall be a sign to you that I have sent you: When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain."* Think about it – the blood, the hail, the frogs, the lice, the plague, the death of the first born, even the parting of the Red Sea – those weren't signs for Moses – those were for Pharaoh and the people of Israel. The sign for Moses of God's choice was the end result – "You will worship me here on this mountain."

Joseph said, "Just take me home." David said, "I'll be satisfied when I'm truly like You." And Moses? God said, "You'll worship Me on My mountain." (a picture of heaven) They all spoke of eternity – the end result if you would.

Dear ones, everything God weaves into the fabric of your lives is to prepare you and bring you to a delightful end – not in 'Egypt', not in 'Ziklag'. Your destination is heaven. May your hearts be knit with His along the way, content in the desert if that's where He's got you, at peace in the prison, if that's where He's got you, encouraged amidst the ashes if that's where He's got you.

One way or another, He's preparing you for His appearing. Through seasons of joy and times of sorrow, through blessings and under burdens, set your desire upon the Lord and know that

without fail, you will make it. God has great things for you to do in heaven, huge things! But the end result is His responsibility, and when you're there, along with Moses, David, Joseph (and even me), you'll agree, it was worth it all!

Rags to Riches

(Ragamuffin-style)

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

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

Here’s what happened –

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

Joshua fell before the Lord in desperate prayer thinking everything was lost, that they would soon be surrounded by vengeful Canaanites and be massacred.

But the Lord said, “Get up!” and led him through a process of supernatural detective work which ended in the identification of the problem – one guy – Achan.

With the leadership of Israel looking on, he admitted to taking some booty during the Jericho campaign, something which had been strictly forbidden. And as he described, the loot was found hidden in his tent.

At this point, with the truth of his sin evident before all, he and his family and his livestock and his possessions were first stoned, then burned and then buried in stones – wow! It’s not the least bit fuzzy, is it? God hates sin and deals severely with it. And we must remember that He has the right to do this and He is just.

And this sobers me, frankly. It can scare me to pieces because I’ve done much worse than Achan – I make him look like Billy Graham by comparison.

And the devil is always reminding me of it. Hmmm

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

You see, it’s kind of like the prophet Isaiah who in the first chapters of his book is going, “Woe to you,” and “Woe to you!” and so forth until chapter six where he sees the Lord, high and lifted up in His glory. And then he says ruefully, “Woe is ME for I’m ‘un-together’ and my ‘mouth is

unclean’” (slight paraphrase). For at that point, he realized that the standard is our Lord before Whom we also are awed and pained by our ‘un-togetherness’.

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

- That I’m uniquely bad
- That I’m beyond the forgiveness of God
- That God regrets His choosing me
- That God’s disappointment with me has limited or diminished His love for me
- That my weaknesses make me useless to Him
- That repentance means I need to get up and prove my worth – to show God that ‘I’m really better now.’
- That I can’t turn to the promises of God because I’ve over-used them.

And you know, I’ve been stupid enough to believe some or all of them at times!

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

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

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

fanciful self-impressions, fills our personal throne rooms with manure, the truth about our God brings freedom. And we see grace. Do you know what grace is?

It's totally unmerited kindness and favor. You see, God didn't invent grace for me or anyone else. He just IS gracious – always has been, always will be. It's not like someone just getting an impulse to buy me a gift cause I'm so nice. It's not about me or you; it's about God. Grace is who He is, not some 'effect' I've 'caused'. I'm simply the beneficiary, period.

And you don't really begin to comprehend it until you realize how desperately you need it. As long as you think you can "make it right" with God, that you can somehow show Him you are or were worthy of His forgiveness and goodness – then you are really still seeking to atone for your own sins, to observe a law of works.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

On one hand, Satan wants us to look inwardly in self-deprecation and/or to hang on to our pointless march for merit. That is, to be absorbed in our unworthiness or our drive to attain worthiness. On the other hand, receiving grace takes grace – that is, there is an attitude which is itself an unmerited gift that positions our hearts to receive from God His unmerited favor. John put it, *"...of His fullness we have all received, and grace for grace."* Jn 1:16

"...that in the ages to come He might show the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us in Christ Jesus." Ephesians 2:7

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

Remember

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

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

You know, of all that Jesus said, of all that He taught, besides His general admonishment to hold to it dearly, there was only one person, place or thing that He specifically warned his disciples to remember.

And we don't even know her name. Yet, her example is so important for us to consider that Christ made it a point to use her in describing the most sober, serious warning he gave his disciples.

“Remember Lot's wife.”

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

In Luke 17, Jesus said, *“And as it was in the days of Noah, so it will be also in the days of the Son of man.”* Then, he specified that they ate, drank, married and were given in marriage until

the day that Noah entered the ark. After this, He continued, *“Likewise, as it was also in the days of Lot, they ate, they drank, they bought, they sold, they planted, they built, but on the day Lot went out of Sodom...”* In both cases, God’s judgment came suddenly.

Many good Bible teachers point to the symbolism of Noah representing the Jewish believers during the Tribulation who will be preserved in the midst of God’s judgment while Lot represents the mostly gentile Church who is taken out of the path of judgment. In both cases, the people around them were engaged in purely ‘worldly’ activities so to speak. In Noah’s day they basically fed their faces and followed their passions. In Lot’s day, they fed their faces and expanded their earthly treasures. They’re doing what we’d generally consider to be routine activities. However, there’s no sense of awareness of what’s coming portrayed.

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

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

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

God was warning them. Yes..... he knew that was surely true.

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

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

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

She was behind the others. The language implies a reluctance, even a resistance to going forward. She evidently lingered behind. When she looked back, the word 'nabat' is used in the imperfect tense and is causative. That means that her looking back was not just a glance or sudden action. There was something going on in her for which looking back was simply part -- an ongoing process if you would. The imperfect adds color and movement by suggesting the "process" preliminary to its completion -- it implies a 'condition' versus a single occasion. Causative means that when the fire hit, it was like a switch -- almost like she had to look.

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

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

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

Whatever the case, we can be assured that Lot's wife:

- Was in relationship with a vexed but sincere believer -- Lot
- Was clearly and divinely warned of the impending judgment
- Was initially delivered into safety but did not take advantage of it
- Was not in agreement inwardly with the escape

- Was inwardly attached to Sodom
- Was separated forever from her escaping loved ones when judgment came

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Re-reminded

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

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

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

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

David, the Lord sent a judgment upon his household. The king experienced the incestuous rape of his own daughter, the murder of his son Amnon, the treachery and death of his son Absalom, the utter animosity of his dearest counselor Ahithophel, the rape of his concubines before all Israel and civil war.

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

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

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

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

Bathsheba lost her baby but went on to have two other sons, both of whom were important to God’s plan. Solomon became the next king, the wisest, wealthiest man to live on the planet, an author of three books of scripture and a part of the Messianic line. Nathan, his brother, was also a part of the Messianic line. You see, the legal or royal line flowed through Solomon and his descendants but was broken several generations later by the Lord’s curse upon Jeconiah (Jer

22:28-30). Joseph, the adoptive dad of Jesus was from that line as recorded in Matt 1. The blood line so to speak, however, came through Mary who, wouldn't you know it, was a descendant of Bathsheba's boy Nathan as recorded in Luke 3. The Messianic line was ultimately restored or re-established through the very woman who participated in the sin that nearly destroyed it.

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

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

Re-consider just Who your God is. Re-new your mind, your thoughts toward Him. Re-frain from doubt and despair. Re-peat the first works of your faith. Re-trace the steps you walked with Christ when you walked in peaceful trust. These are your re-sponses to Him – your 're-abilities' so to speak.

You may or may not witness the end of God's plan and how He finally brings the good He has promised to bring – at least in this life. Jacob and the boys, David and Bathsheba, Paul – they all saw part of the plan and were undoubtedly greatly encouraged by God's graciousness. But they didn't see the fullness of it in their lifetimes. That's why it's so important that you hold on and keep running the race. Heavenly mindedness includes a non-myopic view of the Lord's work. It often stretches beyond the horizon, even beyond the imagination. It's a marathon, not a sprint. But God is absolutely faithful and will indeed bring the good He has planned – the repentance, the reconciliation, the restoration, the revival, the resurrection, the reunion, the reward.



Ruthless

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

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

I can relate to Naomi.

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

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

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

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

*“Entreat me not to leave you,
Or to turn back from following after you;
For wherever you go, I will go;
And wherever you lodge, I will lodge;*

*Your people shall be my people,
And your God, my God.
Where you die, I will die,
And there will I be buried.
The LORD do so to me, and more also,
If anything but death parts you and me."*

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

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

But she and Ruth made the crossing of the Jordan – it didn't part for them – and made the climb back to Bethlehem. Clearly, she held on to the unseen, the illogical, the unexplainable. Leaving the pastures of Moab behind, trudging up what must have seemed like an exhausting path, she felt, I'm sure, judged, crushed and forsaken by God. 'After all, they had gone to Moab; they had left the land of Promise; they'd allowed their sons to marry the 'accursed women'; they'd done so much wrong, right? Perhaps she was just a 'statistic' like those of a couple of generations ago who died in the desert wilderness. Maybe they had angered God and this situation was the result. That was the sensible explanation.'

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

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

You see, the whole situation was all about Ruth – this tender woman encouraging her along the trek. But Naomi had no idea that her tragedy was God's prophetic masterpiece of the ages. She was clueless that Ruth, a woman from that treacherous land of Moab, a woman whose sickly husband God had brought to the grave, that she would be the great grandmother of Israel's

greatest king and a fundamental part of the Messianic line – that she would masterfully picture the grace of God upon the gentile nations during the church age.

Dragging her feet along that dusty path up to Bethlehem, she couldn't see chapter two let alone Revelation 22! She undoubtedly loved her daughter-in-law, but she surely longed for the 'good ole days' – way before Ruth, when she was Ruth-less so to speak. She had no way of knowing that her life was really all about someone else's – Ruth's. She had no way of knowing that her own tumultuous life would grandly portray the Jewish people in God's perfect plan.

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

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

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

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

And you know the story – in the end, her companions, speaking to her while she holds Ruth's little baby Obed, say unto her, "...*may he be to you a restorer of life...*" – certainly a prophetic allusion to Christ as well as the child.

As astounding and unreasonable as it may seem in 'Moab,' Christ will restore life. He came to us serving just as Obed's name means "serving." Have you left the 'house of Bread'? Maybe

you thought it was necessary; maybe you were famished. Do you find yourself in ‘Moab’? Bereaved? Lonely? Hanging by a thread? Perhaps it’s time to get back to ‘Bethlehem’. Need a helping hand?

I held my own son’s right hand when he died. Since then, I asked the Lord to hold my own and in fact He said, *“For I, the LORD your God, will hold your right hand, Saying to you, ‘Fear not, I will help you.’”* (Isa 41:13) Returning to the Bethlehem of basic trust is a humbling and dusty road. For you see, as with Naomi, your life and mine are all about someone else – Jesus Christ.

But you won’t realize His purpose unless you’re back there. You won’t find it in Moab. If Naomi hadn’t made that journey back, we’d be looking at a whole different history.

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

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

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

Selah!

(Think About It!)

Dateline: May, 445 BC

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

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

Dateline: May, 445 BC

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

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

Likewise, we as Christians need walls – NOT walls between one another but walls of defense against the spiritual enemies we face. Without them, we too are easy prey – the 'world' and/or our own sin nature then has too much freedom to bother, bully and oppress. This idea of physical wall-building around a city is rather foreign to us because military weaponry has made them obsolete. However, this isn't the case with the spiritual, so let's consider the well known wall-building story in scripture to see what we can glean. (Read the book of Nehemiah.)

Now, Nehemiah, whose name means “Jehovah has comforted” has long been considered by Bible scholars as a type or picture, both in name and action, of the Holy Spirit. And although this picture is evident in many ways, we’ll limit our consideration here to his main effort – building the wall surrounding Jerusalem.

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

Sanballat and Tobiah, who epitomized this opposition, are interesting pictures as well. They vociferously challenged the wall-building knowing that it would end their corrupt domination. Sanballat’s name means “sin (or the moon god) has given life”. As such, he is clearly representative of the sinful world and the lusts thereof. Tobiah, on the other hand, means “goodness of Jehovah” and thus combined with his actions represents the traitorous compromiser or compromising sin nature. Both these enemies – the ungodly world around us and our own sin-natures, are menaces to our wall-building in the spirit.

In Nehemiah, chapters two through six, we see that their tactics are:

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

love and a strong mind.” (1Tim 1:7) Also, Jesus said, “Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.” (Math 10:28)

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

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

- **Courage** (Neh 4:14). *“Watch, stand fast in the faith, be brave, be strong. Let all that you do be done with love.”* (1Cor 16:13,14)
- **Guarding** (Neh 4:13). This is alertness. (2Tim4:5, Eph 6:18)
- **Readiness** (Neh 4:16-18). By laboring with weapons in hand, they were an example of diligence and preparedness. The Bible tells us that the weapons of our warfare are spiritual and that we are to be at the ready as well. (2Cor 10:4, Eph 6:11-13)
- **Honesty and cooperation** (Neh 4:19,20). Truthfulness about our ‘wall-building’ especially in prayer is paramount. It can be a big task. As my pastor says, ‘We’re all ‘projects.’’ It doesn’t help to pretend you’re ‘together’ when you know you’re not.
- **A mind to work** (Neh 4:6). This pictures faith and perseverance.
- **Clothed** (Neh 4:23). Clothed? Yes, that is putting full confidence in the robe of Christ’s righteousness – wearing it and never putting it aside.

As a consequence, the wall surrounding Jerusalem was completed in just 52 days. Now, this is radical, for that’s the exact time between Christ’s death on the cross and the outpouring of His Spirit on Pentecost. That is, it’s the period between when the veil or barrier between God and man was torn open and the separation or barrier between the redeemed and the world was made obvious through the anointing of the Holy Spirit. Selah!

Now, it’s important to understand, as we’re discussing wall-building that we aren’t talking about erecting some fortress mentality – individually or corporately – with respect to evangelism

or our call to be salt and light in this world. Rather, we're dealing with the real, pragmatic need for spiritual defenses and personal holiness.

So, what do these walls represent? I'll suggest that they picture the strength or integrity of our mind or soul. You see, that's where the battles are really fought, aren't they? And the gates represent our reasoning, reckoning or judgments – entry points so to speak. In fact, the Hebrew word for gate is derived from the verb meaning to reason, think or reckon.

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

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

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

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

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

-- *Eliashib means 'God restores'*

-- *Zaccur and the sons of Hassenaah combine to mean [He's] 'mindful [that we're] sons of thorny' that is, sons of Adam if you would.*

-- *Jehoida means 'Jehovah knows'*

-- *Meshullam means 'friend'*

-- *Melatiah means 'Jehovah delivered'*

-- *Jadon means 'thankful'*

-- *Uzziel means 'my strength is God'*

-- *Hannaniah means 'God has favored'*

-- *Rephaiah means 'healed of Jehovah'*

- *Jedaiah means 'praised of Jehovah'*
- *Malchijah means 'my King is Jehovah'*
- *Hashabiah and Bevai combined to mean 'Jehovah has considered my goings'*
- *Azariah means 'Jehovah has ransomed'*
- *Zadok means 'righteous'*
- *Shemaiah means 'heard by Jehovah'*

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

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

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

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

And as long as we are here, we'll need to continue a maintenance schedule if you would – continue believing, really believing, that we're redeemed and forgiven. I don't mean believing because we prayed a specific prayer, said the right words, had the right attitude or read the right scriptures. That's all good, but we're not forgiven because Father God has to and therefore does so grudgingly. We're not forgiven because of some sort of legal technicality or loop-hole.

But the enemies of our souls want us to believe exactly that – if they can't convince us that we're lost, they want us to believe our sins are bad enough to diminish God's love toward us – that the cross may atone for them BUT...

Now, you may have carried some baggage around with you for quite some time believing just that – I did. You know your own 'earthiness', your own character flaws and failures. You know your own breaches and that you've been careless in guarding the 'gates' at times. Oh, you know

you're forgiven, but you subtly doubt you're still ravishing in God's sight, still loved as passionately. You know you're accepted but doubt that you'll be welcomed in.

Listen. You're accepted and forgiven IN Christ because God loves you furiously, relentlessly, unabashedly, inexhaustibly – read Ephesians 1:3-6. Believe it! And although your present 'walls' do consist of 'stone and brick' (it's our present portion), God sees the end result, the walls of your New Jerusalem (Rev 21:12-21) – magnificent, clear, sparkling gems – they speak of your heavenly wall, your heavenly character (1Jn 3:2, 1Cor 13:12). Gates made of huge, perfect pearls – they portray the endless covering of your grit by His grace.

A final thought -- Isaiah prophesied that one day, “... *you shall call your walls Salvation, and your gates Praise.*” That speaks of heavenly mindedness, Selah!

Splash! Grumble, Grumble

It just wasn't fair, and it was so frustrating! That's what he used to think; and now, his once sincere resolve had faded into a fatalistic sense of purposelessness. Falling, or rather shifting to the rear of the crowd, he figured that this was really where he belonged. Perhaps, he surmised, someone else could take his place and get the blessing. So, there he lay, pitifully and grotesquely lamed – like a 'slug' on the pavement just waiting for God's 'saltshaker' to end his daily despondence.

There was a certain sense of sad humor as he watched the crowded area occasionally come to a frenzy, erupting with cries and splashes followed by the inevitable melancholy and murmuring. The competition was incredibly intense, and as a result he had come to think of himself as the ultimate loser. 'Both lame and unlucky. You know, if I just had someone to help me into the pool, I'd have a chance,' he thought.

To many, if not most of the people there, God was the originator and referee of this contest. Everyone knew that upon occasion, there was a rippling in the pool that could only be caused by an angel. Everyone also knew that the first one who managed to get into the pool after this disturbance of the water would be healed. Needless to say, everyone was perpetually sopping wet and as a consequence, cold and grumpy.

In any event, he'd come to accept that God must be a grand competitor Himself or at least He enjoyed giving the prize of a miracle to the most dedicated, the quickest, the most resourceful or those that could push their way into position. It was clear that the healthy people in the area took delight as well in watching the chaos which spouted like a geyser now and then. Laughing mockery could be heard down every side alley.

After a long time, he was finally fed up with it all and resolved to his fate. 'God is for the strong, the successful, the popular – for them, not me,' he surmised. 'It was good of Him to make a way – I mean, at least some can get a new life. But obviously, it's not intended for me. My sins are just too ugly. I guess that's why He's judged me and here I am utterly hopeless. Reminds me of the ancient wilderness wanderings of our fathers.'

Sitting there, he had a lot of time to think about things and he developed a philosophy for most of what he observed, but God...? 'Well, He was watching too, probably, from far away in heaven... I suppose He doesn't care about me. Thirty-eight years like this!...Why...'

“Do you want to get well?” a calm inquiring voice tackled his attention.

‘What was that?’ Suddenly the shadow of a man nearby crossed his face blocking the blazing sun. He looked up and said, “Sir, I have no one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred. While I am trying to get in, someone else goes down ahead of me.”

‘What is this fellow doing here at the rear of the crowd?’ he wondered. ‘Hey, maybe I can convince him to help me to get in first! Maybe, he’ll push some of those big guys to the side. Maybe...’

“Get up! Pick up your mat and walk.”

To his utter amazement, he immediately sensed strength in his legs. His heart was beating incredibly fast... he jumped up and grabbed his mat. He felt as though he’d never been lame. ‘Where’d he go??’ he exclaimed to himself, looking all around for the man who healed him and was now nowhere to be found.

The account of this wonderful miracle is found in John chapter five. Clearly, I’m taking some liberty in suggesting the thoughts that may have run through the lame man’s mind. As you read it in the scripture though, you just want to shake your head in considering this poor man’s plight. For thirty-eight years, a serious sin left him in his debilitating condition and ultimately he found himself hanging out at the only place he thought could help him yet he was no doubt hopeless in his pursuit for he apparently pictured God as a ‘divine sports fan’, an omnipotent umpire of sorts and he had to play the game in order to get the blessing.

But along came Jesus. Uninvited. Unannounced. Unknown.

One of the lessons we can glean from this story is how easy it is for us to think of God incorrectly -- in terms of what is valued in society. But God is not a competitor, nor is He interested in our competition. Neither are His blessings the result of some heavenly lotto. Now, you may think, ‘Of course not!’ But for many of us, the subtle impression lingers that God does applaud the spiritually ‘strong’ and ignores or abhors the ‘weak’.

Sadly, many people admire Billy Graham, not for the power of his preaching but for the numbers – the huge crowds, the vast organization, the thousands of respondents. Many people think large church organizations or glitzy Christian television programs are centers of Holy Spirit activity because of the sophisticated worship, the variety, the popular teachers, the radio, tape and TV options. Many people worship God with the attitude of Bethesda. That is, ‘success’ in the contest is the measure of spirituality.

The ‘backwaters’ of this place are where the off-scouring settle. Pushed aside by the ‘healthy’ they come to the pool. The irony is that Bethesda means house of mercy or kindness and that’s what the spiritually hurting – the ‘unsuccessful’ are looking for. It’s not a physical place but a mindset. Pushed aside or simply not included with the ‘in’ crowd, many of God’s weaker sheep wind up discouraged and can get the impression that their Father in heaven is only interested in the ‘winners’, the ‘spiritual’ people. Pastors whose pictures are prominent, lay leaders who are elders or deacons, anyone in ‘ministry’ – the spiritually bruised and beaten can often think that God really loves those people – He must – they made it ‘into the pool’ so to speak before the rest of us. Consequently, ministers become celebrities of the congregation rather than servants and can even lust for the limelight.

But Jesus in this story blows that idea ‘out of the water’.

As a lesson on the character of our God and Savior, this story mirrors the Old Testament account of the Hebrew nation wandering in the wilderness. Deut 2:14 tells us that, like this poor man, they sinned a great sin and wound up in the most difficult of circumstances for the same time -- 38 years. You remember, the older generation died off. Only the new generation, the new man in type, could enter by faith into the land of promise. For 38 years, the ark of God’s presence traveled with them, but they remained homeless, because of their rebellious hearts.

It wasn’t until Moses died and Joshua took over that they could cross the Jordan dry-shod. You all know that Joshua is the same name as Jesus, and in our New Testament story, it is indeed Jesus who enters the scene and takes charge. Now, as a symbol, Moses can be said to represent the law, the ‘divine competition’ if you would. It was a godly game with hundreds of very good rules, but we all were quite hopeless to win it. And all our attempts to obey it, to win, to be the ‘first into the pool’ only drove us away, drove us further to the rear of the crowd. Do you know what I’m alluding to?

I suppose that there were those who pretended to have been healed in Bethesda’s waters, but they were probably only fooling themselves. There are also still sincere people today who to varying degrees try ‘faking it’ – oh, not so much with healing – that’s really not the point; rather, we can be insincere, dishonest with others and ourselves about our condition – our sin, our depravity, our total incapability to be good enough to please God on our own.

Referring back to the Jewish people in the wilderness, some of us also stumble in faith and then later try to make up for it by trying to do something like what we failed in earlier but on our

own – just to show God we’re ‘worthy of His grace’ (which of course is an oxymoron). (See Num 14:39-45)

Now, prophetically, this story of Bethesda could be speaking of the Jewish people who did not recognize the Messiah partly because they misunderstood the true character of God. God loves the Jews, but for a long, long time they have missed it, they missed the opportunity to enter the spiritual land of promise and chose rather, like their forefathers, to wander with Moses (the law) in the spiritual wilderness, striving with their Maker. They sinned greatly in turning away from Christ, but one day soon, Jesus will enter the picture again -- unannounced, uninvited but this time KNOWN. And they will be healed spiritually – no more games, no more contests.

Practically, we as Christians each must realize the Bethesda contest is not God’s way, the mechanisms of religiosity do not faithfully portray the character or intent of our Lord. Much, if not most of that has been invented by others.

We have sinned. We are lame. Our attempts to win the religious contest will only result in our being cold, wet, grumpy and disillusioned. Clearly, we need a Savior – both to enter the kingdom of God and to live abundantly in it. You may not yet know Him, but His question is simple and to the point – “Do you want to be healed?”

Do you? Do you really? (Obviously, He asks the question for a reason.) Or do you just want Him to help you play the ‘game’, to help you into the ‘pool’? It’s a difficult choice because it comes down to truly believing in grace, believing in a fantastically gracious God. And that’s a stretch for our naturally self-righteous performance-oriented senses. But Bethesda was framed by five colonnades or porches and as many of you know, five speaks repeatedly of grace in the Bible.

Nevertheless, how many of us encourage the Bethesda mentality? How many of us act like ministry is a club rather than a calling? How many sheep are shifting to the back unable to ‘compete’ with the ‘winners’? We must take heed if we are to represent our Father faithfully – He sternly warns, *“And as for you, O My flock, thus says the Lord GOD: "Behold, I shall judge between sheep and sheep, between rams and goats. Is it too little for you to have eaten up the good pasture, that you must tread down with your feet the residue of your pasture--and to have drunk of the clear waters, that you must foul the residue with your feet? And as for My flock, they eat what you have trampled with your feet, and they drink what you have fouled with your feet.”*

"Therefore, thus says the Lord GOD to them: "Behold, I Myself will judge between the fat and the lean sheep. Because you have pushed with side and shoulder, butted all the weak ones with your horns, and scattered them abroad, therefore I will save My flock, and they shall no longer be a prey; and I will judge between sheep and sheep. Ez 34:17-22

We must realize how easily the weak sheep are shifted out of focus, pushed to the side, scattered because they're not gathered. The Bethesda-Christianity does that. But God is not impressed with the powerful personalities.

Rather, here is our Savior – *"Behold! My Servant whom I uphold,*

My Elect One in whom My soul delights!

I have put My Spirit upon Him;

He will bring forth justice to the Gentiles.

He will not cry out, nor raise His voice,

Nor cause His voice to be heard in the street.

A bruised reed He will not break,

And smoking flax He will not quench;

He will bring forth justice for truth." Isa 42:1-3

Jesus goes to the discouraged, seeks out the lame, those in the rear of the crowd both in the world and in His church. While some are entertained by the 'splashing around', He offers the real solution and suddenly the game is over. Grace is the only way, not just a way.

Like Jesus, may we not be afraid to ignore the contest, to see it for what it is. May we find the ones to whom God seeks to be gracious. May we never push the weak aside.

The Appeal of Zeal

Upon entering the temple, He came to a boil, and it may have freaked out His disciples. At least it stuck in their memory. Looking around, He saw the vendors of ‘sanctified goods’ and proceeded to whip them out. Such behavior in this holy place was not at all the norm. In fact, the ‘head hogs at the trough’ so to speak were certainly going to come down on this with a heavy hand. Jesus was behaving as an ‘extremist’; John writes, “*And his disciples remembered that it was written, The zeal of Your house has eaten me up.*” (John 2:17)

In contrast, listen to the message that is being given to us today – “extremists are to blame for the bloodshed and terror around the world.” Islamic extremists are murdering Jews and Christians by the 1000s. Christian extremists are supposedly stirring up hatred against Muslims. The president and his cabinet members are chastising the ‘religious right’ and appealing to the ‘moderate Islamic’ community. The whole force of governmental, media and even religious voices are cautioning everyone to avoid the zealous, to embrace the mainstream, to be sane and restrained if you would.

Now, while the logic of this message appeals to our common sense, it also poses the greatest danger the church has seen in centuries. By lumping the ‘extreme’ elements of all endeavors into one pot, Satan seeks to neutralize the message of the only one that really matters – the church’s. Jesus himself said, “*I came not to bring peace but a sword.*” (Mat 10:34)

Now lest you misunderstand, He was NOT advocating what Islam has done historically – i.e. converting by the sword. He was not saying that we are to slay the infidels – on the contrary, we are to love the infidels. However, He was making clear that the message of the gospel is radical, and those who will truly live it out are likewise radical – they are zealous for God. But, much of the church today is sadly ‘room temperature’.

They say, ministries depend on budgets; callings are just jobs; and increasingly, sermons are designed to entertain. There’s no room for zeal – from the pulpit, it scares the flock; from the flock, it scares the pulpit. And so, we’ve nurtured environments that won’t offend in the course of either worship or witness. Consequently, we’re not changing the world around us to the extent we could – more and more, it’s changing us.

You may say, “Speak for yourself, Bro.” Trust me, I do! But to do justice to the issue, let me explain what zeal is, why the Lord desires it and its fruit.

In the Old Testament, zeal is literally the attitude and action spurred by jealousy. This is fascinating because it implies by definition an intimate relationship. A man or woman can be jealous over their spouse, and it results in perhaps the most intense responses we are capable of as people.

The New Testament word for zeal means to be brought to a boil, to be very hot, and of course, this compliments the OT concept. God desires us to have zeal for Him because frankly it indicates a powerful, passionate relationship with Him. The Laodicean church of Revelation chapter three which to many typifies the church of the last days is rebuked for being neither hot nor cold. That is, there was no zeal or enmity, only a toned down, affluent body of people who had learned to fit in.

God is zealous (see Isaiah 9:7, 37:32; Ez 5:13). Jesus is zealous (see John 2:17). The early church was zealous (see 2 Cor 7:11, 9:2). And Christ tells the Laodiceans to “*be zealous therefore, and repent*” (see Rev 3:19). So, what intense response are we to have to our God? Does He want us to nuke Mecca or to wear ‘angry Christian’ T-shirts?? NO!

Paul wrote, “*But [it is] good to be **zealously** affected always in [a] good [thing]...*” (Gal 4:18) and that Christ “*gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto Himself a peculiar people, **zealous of good works**.*” (Tit 2:14) He also spoke of the Jews that “*...they have a **zeal** of God, but not according to knowledge.*” (Rom 10:2) and of himself that “*...concerning **zeal**, [before his conversion he was] persecuting the church...*” (Phil 3:6) So clearly, zeal can be right or wrong in its motive and outcome.

The zeal God wants is rooted in a passionate love for Him and in the knowledge of the gospel of Christ. Apart from this, zeal is misdirected and tragic. But without zeal, Christianity is dead, dead at room temperature. God asks us, “How zealously do you love Me and your family in Christ? How zealous are you to do good even when good is reviled and you are persecuted for it? How zealously forgiving are you knowing that you are forgiven much more? How zealous are you to give what you cannot keep to gain what you cannot lose? How zealously trusting are you of God in the midst of hot times?”

You see, God makes His “*ministers a flame of fire*” (Psa 104:4). They are red hot, zealous of their relationship with Him. Christ was as zealous on the cross when He cried out, “*Father forgive them for they know not what they do*” as He was when He drove the merchants out of the temple. He was zealous when He said, “*come unto Me all you who are weary and heavy laden,*”

as well as when He said, “*whosoever among you who forsakes not all that he has cannot be my disciple.*”

The zealotry God looks for in our lives is not wide-eyed, out of control fanaticism fueled by unrighteous indignation. His zeal is the ‘real deal’ (pardon the play on words). And it is blatantly obvious to the world around. To the rebellious, it’s frightening; to the child of God (both lost or found) it’s awesomely appealing. It’s not ‘worked up’ by some ‘holy cheerleader’; it’s manifested by a heart that’s entirely wrapped up in God.

I’m reminded of a man who knocked on my front door one morning. Upon answering it, we found him meekly poised, asking to come in and to speak with us. At first, I didn’t recognize him, but he quickly explained that he resided just a few doors down the street.

“Oh, of course. Come in.” I replied.

“You know, I should have been here sooner, but... well, let me explain.”

His demeanor made it clear that whatever he had to say was terribly important. As a consequence, we listened somewhat apprehensive.

“You see, about nine months ago, we moved in down the street. I’d gotten a great job with the [*sporting goods company*] and my wife and two daughters were excited about being here.”

“But after only a few months, we found out that [*his wife*] was terminally ill with cancer. In only a couple of months, she died.”

“As you can imagine, I was devastated, but even more so were my daughters. The older one became so bitter and rebellious that she got involved with a gang and started using drugs and... well...”

“Anyway, the younger one just recoiled. She isolated herself and became the brunt of every cruel joke at school. She seemed to hate herself more and more and ...”

“I retreated to my work. It became my hiding place from grief. I had no faith to speak of but only a broken... no, a shattered heart that I felt I had to protect.”

“Well, I didn’t see it coming. One day, I came home and found my older daughter with a man much older than her. When I surprised them at my entry, she just erupted at me and they left the house in haste. Later she called and said that she was going to marry this guy whether I liked it or not and ... well, goodbye.”

“I freaked. She was so young and was making a huge mistake. I knew she had been distraught, but I never expected this.”

“A few days later, she went to the police and claimed that I had sexually abused her. Of course, this was completely untrue and I later found out that her new acquaintance had put her up to it.”

“Anyway, the authorities believed her and took away my other little girl to ‘protect her’. Shortly afterward, the [*local newspaper*] printed the story such that I looked very guilty.”

“I remember that!” I said. “That was you?”

“Yes. But it didn’t stop there. In a couple of days, I was let go from my job because the company didn’t want the bad publicity. Then, after I spent all I had in a legal dispute over the girls, I fell behind on the mortgage and the bank gave notice of foreclosure.”

“Wow. Just snow-balled, huh?”

“Yeah. But then, this guy who had taken my older daughter came back to the house while I was out. He must have had her key. Well, I came in and found him literally destroying the place with a pickaxe. He’d chopped up the furniture, the walls, the TV, even the last pictures I had of [his wife and kids]. I honestly couldn’t believe my eyes.”

“He threatened me with the ax and laughed hideously. He mocked that my daughter was his now and that if I knew what was good for her, I’d vacate the house immediately. I later found out he wanted to use it as a place to make and sell drugs. Then he left, breaking several more windows on the way.”

My mouth was agape listening to this incredible tale.

“So...I’d lost it all. My dear wife, my daughters, my job, my house, even the last mementos of happier times. I was broke and really broken. I had nowhere to turn, no friends, no family. So, I pawned some stuff and bought a pistol.”

“I drove out of town headed north and pulled over on the side of the road to just end it. I took the gun and pointed it at my head. It was shaking so hard... “

“But then, the most miraculous thing happened. In the deepest part of this pit, this dark, dark hole I was in, for some reason, I saw this picture in my mind,... a picture that was so vivid. I couldn’t shake it. And that’s why I’m here.”

“All I could see was the joyful countenance of your little girl. (She was 12 then.) You see, she and [*his younger daughter*] played together a lot and she was always sharing with her about Jesus. I mean it was natural, so natural. And she was obviously really in love with Christ. She just wanted to help my little one and she really did.”

“But, at the time, I’d rejected it. At least, I thought so. I was too strong and too ‘sane’ for that nonsense – or so I thought. But there in my car, with this gun to my head, I realized I was wrong. Her shining face seemed to say, ‘Come home. God loves you and He will help.’”

“So, I put the gun down and drove back into town. I saw [*the church on the north side of town*] and pulled in. To my relief, the pastor was there, and I sat down and talked with him for a long time.”

“There and then, I gave my heart to Jesus Christ and was born again. And I just can’t tell you how that changed me!”

“And the next day, the very next day, the authorities contacted me and said that [*his older daughter*] confessed that her accusation was a lie and that they were returning her as well as my younger girl into my care. Shortly afterward, the paper printed a great article. Then, I even got my job back with a raise. My house is still mine and it’s fixed back up.”

“And we’re all totally in love with Jesus! He’s given us new hope and a real faith, more real than anything I see with my eyes! Your little girl’s faith...how thankful I am for that now.”

Yes, zealous Christians are the only ones who make a difference in this world. They are the real salt and light Jesus spoke of. They bear the fruit of the Spirit in abundance. May we all forsake the rags of timidity, the lies of worldly conformity and a spiritually tepid lifestyle.

While the world is vilifying ‘religious extremism’ let us not confuse this with the passionate zeal we need to have for our God. We must be extreme! -- extreme in love, extreme in forgiveness, extreme in sharing and sacrifice, extreme in faith and trust, extreme in the pursuit of our Father’s desire!

It’s this kind of extreme Christianity that’s alive – it’s not just room temperature. It’s truly appealing to God for He is Himself a consuming fire! (Heb 12:29)

The Circle of Life

The typical wide-brimmed Chinese hat he wore was wrapped in ancient plastic wrap and shaded a face that was aged and downcast. He stood or rather stooped in a surreal contrast to the flashy, young and sensuous billboards and 30 foot high advertisements for Esprit, Top Girl, Totally Jo-Jo and the hundreds of other false boastings of a modern materialistic world which are quiet now but only a few hours earlier were bustling with crowds of people shopping, flirting, seeking gain.

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

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

Clearly, the overwhelming majority think of life as the pursuit of pleasure. In fact, it's common, when we're stuck in an unpleasurable routine, to hear someone say, "Hey, get a life!"

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

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

The very fact that he made this statement shows that we as believers can have the same misunderstanding about life as unbelievers.

So, what is life – really? And why does it matter? To the one who has never tasted the goodness of God, never been 'born again' through faith in Christ, any attempt to communicate this will make no sense. It will be like describing the most incredible sunset to someone born blind.

Randy Alcorn, in his novel “Deadline”, put it this way – his character Finney is ushered into Heaven –

“The crowd visible beyond the passageway grew with each step he took. Some faces he did not recognize, many he did. He took the last step – or was it the first – and entered the new world. As he came out the end – or was it the beginning – over the threshold, he gasped his first breath of heaven’s air. The gasp was a gasp of wonder at the beauty of this place, and the magnificence of its inhabitants. ...Many hands grabbed Finney’s, which he stretched out toward them, as if to confirm they were real. He must have some sort of body, since he could feel their touch. This struck a chord of familiarity. It had happened before. Or something very much like it. Yes, of course, when he was born into the other world. The passageway had been the birth canal between earth and heaven. And these were the midwives of heaven, supervising his birth, pulling him into the world, fussing over him and proudly presenting him to his new family. This was the real world, which he’d been no more capable of imagining before than an unborn child can imagine the infinite wonders that lie beyond the womb.”

Now, the Bible uses two terms for what we have translated as “life”. Their meanings are the same in both Greek and Hebrew, the original languages. However, they represent to the discerning heart, things that are worlds apart.

The first term comes from the word to breathe and means a breathing creature. In scripture, it always refers to earthly life. A few examples are:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

You see, by Adam and Eve, we broke off, detached, separated, became alienated from our Creator. Death is exactly that – separation from God. We say an electrical circuit is dead when it is open or separated from the flow of power. In a similar way, we lost connection with our Source, the essence of life; apart from Him, we rot and decay in every way. (As a matter of fact, we call it the Second Law of Thermodynamics - a law of physics.)

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

And analogous to the scene above of my companion on the early morning streets of Taipei, many of us are generally inclined to consider life just as a spectrum of worldly opportunities ranging from the poor have-nots to the blissful, binge-ing gotta-haves. But in reality, life, real life, is not even on this plane.

As we study scripture, it's obvious that the closer you are to the Lord, the more connected, the more intimate (John 17:3), the more LIFE you have; consider the four creatures immediately surrounding God's throne in heaven. These are the most privileged created beings of all. Notice, what is their common identifier? (See Revelation 4) They are LIVING! Could God be any more obvious?

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

No, I don't think we 'get it', but we can – we'll 'get it' as we get it. Got it?

If you have a loving, believing, submitted relationship with Jesus Christ, eternal LIFE will one day soon stun you with joy indescribable. When you are in His embrace, you will know, perfectly, that everything is right – everything – I said everything.

- Not some blissful forgetfulness, but the actual tangible understanding of truth, the grasping of His accomplished plan.
- Not some feigned obligatory posture of praise in spite of pain but an actual overwhelming change and restoration of your spirit, soul and body as well as ALL that pertains to your joy.
- Not a temporary emotional swing or flirtatious affair with glee but a completed work, a never-fading, always-dawning, ever-lasting, ever-expanding gift from God.

Moses, in the Old Testament put it this way, "*Choose life!*" (Deut 30:19,20) That is, consciously allow God's Spirit to draw you into the closer, more connected, more intimate relationship with Him. Pursue this course with wild abandon of self (and expect the world to think you're nuts!). You have nothing to fear – He's not too busy for you; He'll never leave you; His thoughts about you are without number and are for your good. It's in this relationship and the never-ending pursuit for more of God that we comprehend and enjoy life. We GET it. ...to know Him is to love Him ... is to Know Him is to Love Him ... is to KNOW HIM is to LOVE HIM... IS TO **KNOW** HIM IS TO LOVE HIM... This is the circle of life! “*And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have*

sent.” John 17:3

This Ole' House

My hand trembled as I carefully put the tiny pin back in the loop of the watchband and gently slipped it into place. You see, this watch is incredibly special to me and when it had broken, there was just no question as to whether I would fix it. Someone said, “Are you sure you want to try?” and I answered, “Are you kidding!? Of course!”

Now consider this - you and I are broken too. We are made far more intricate than the watchband of course, but we don't work, we don't function as originally designed. We are a sad comedy of missing the mark, one malfunction after another. But, we're in good company – our dear brother and apostle, Paul, wrote,

“...what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do... I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find. For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice. ...For I delight in the law of God according to the inward man. But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?” (Rom 7:14-24)

In this passage of scripture, he explains clearly that the problem with us is sin or to be more specific, our sin-nature.

Some of you know that before you establish a saving relationship with God through belief in Christ, you are bound, that is captive, to this sin-nature. However, once you recognize the power of what our Lord did for us on the cross and receive His gift of salvation, you are free not to sin anymore – you have a choice and the power.

Nevertheless, if you're like the rest of us who love the Lord, you find yourself making the wrong choices at times – malfunctioning. *“...we all stumble in many things” (Jam 3:2)* However, the good news is that our Manufacturer is a highly skilled repairman. He is marvelously insightful –

“...there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account.” (Heb 4:13) And His intent in fixing us is generally not just a temporary remedy but our eternal welfare.

This is what's disturbing about our God, isn't it? He rarely does anything the way we 'know' it should be done especially when it comes to repairs – critical repairs. Behind the lenses of sin, we see things differently. We often fail to recognize His handiwork and when someone points it out, we often don't want to accept it. We don't 'get it' and sometimes we don't want to 'get it'.

Here's the dynamic – this is what's going on. Sin first deceives us then it distorts our perception of reality. It deceives us into accepting its twisted version of what God is or isn't doing and then calcifies, if you would, our heart and soul so that we resist the truth of eternity (i.e. eternal consequences, heaven and hell) and our God.

“...but exhort one another daily, while it is called "Today," lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin.” (Heb 3:13)

Consequently, we become encased in a temporal view – and it's really pretty nuts. For example, to use an admittedly weak illustration, if your child was very ill with say a cancer and the doctor told you that there were just two options – one, was to give your child a pain pill and send him home. As a result, he'd feel better for a short while but would succumb to the disease in a few days. Or two, your little one could undergo a move to a nearby facility and receive a fantastic new surgery that though a bit stressful, a bit painful, would heal him for a long life. What's your choice?

It's obvious, isn't it? No sane parents who loved their child would choose the short-term option. Yet, when it comes to our understanding of God's remedies, we usually fail to appreciate the permanence of His eternal fix. We want the pain pill, the earthly, temporal solution because our 'lens' causes us to see it as 'reality' when in fact it is only a vapor.

“Certainly, every man at his best state is but vapor.” (Psa 39:5) “...what is your life? It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away.” (James 4:14).

Yes, we're broken, and God usually puts us 'in a fix' to fix us. It's because we're broken that we need to be broken! What? Yes, breaking through the hardness of our hearts is God's way of bringing forth His light and of giving us a new walk.

To illustrate this, we need to take a look at the Old Testament book of Judges. There, we find a man named Gideon. Now this fellow, became an awesome courageous leader of the nation, but he started out as a chicken. When he was first called by the Angel of the Lord to lead an attack against the Midianite hoards, he was hiding. After this, God had to break through his fear with several answers to his prayers confirming His divine will. But the real 'shattering' came when

He reduced the size of Gideon's army from 30,000 to a mere 300 so that they were outnumbered by their enemy 750 to 1. In God's eyes, Gideon still had them outnumbered but He wasn't doing it Gideon's way. Sound familiar?

But there was more than one result. God used this little group to defeat the mere hosts of Midian, but He also did something eternal in Gideon. By the time of his attack, this chicken became a real hero of faith (see Heb 11:32) -- utterly dependent on the Lord and trusting Him rather than the doubts of the devil.

This is amplified in type by his plan of attack. You see, each of his men brought with them a clay pitcher, a trumpet, and took up positions surrounding the Midianite camp. Upon Gideon's signal, they broke their pitchers revealing flaming torches inside. Then they blew their trumpets and shouted, "*The sword of the Lord and of Gideon!*" At this, the enemy host freaked out and began attacking themselves and soon, it was basically a 'mopping up' operation. What a victory!

But our point is that when the pitchers were broken, the flaming lights were revealed, and so it is with God's children. (Read also Jeremiah 18)

Now, this 'breaking-to-fix' doesn't always result in a battle charge into the enemy's camp. Sometimes, the breaking itself has to remain as a reminder of the fix. Consider the patriarch Jacob:

Here was a man who was always looking for an 'angle', an 'edge', scheming to get his way. From the family birth-right to the patriarchal blessing to the acquiring of his flocks and fortune -- we see him endeavoring to make his way through life on his own terms. When he first meets the Lord at Bethel, he even declares,

*"If God will be with me, and keep me in this way that I'm going, and give me bread to eat and clothing to put on, so that **I** come back to my father's house in peace, **then** the Lord shall be my God."* Gen 28:20,21 emphasis added.

And throughout his early life, though he acknowledged the Lord and his belief in Him, when you study his story you can't help but sense his tremendous self-will and self-reliance.

As he returns to Canaan, (trying to follow the Lord) after more than 20 years of absence, he learns that his twin brother Esau is coming to meet him with a band of 400 men. Now, the reason Jacob fled from the Promised Land in the first place was because he tricked his father Isaac into giving him the blessing rather than to Esau. Consequently, his brother had been furious and sought to kill Jacob.

Obviously, he did not now anticipate a warm welcome from the approaching host. So first, he splits his family and flocks into two groups hoping one will escape if the other is destroyed. Then he prays to the Lord, but it's almost like he's just 'covering all the bases' for once again, his clever little mind starts scheming. He sends drove after drove of presents to his brother hoping to buy his favor.

Finally, he retreats to a campsite alone, looking for a sorely needed rest -- if he's to out-smart his brother again, he's 'got to have some quiet time' and if all else fails, he can run like he did before long ago.

But this is where God steps in – a “Man” appears in Jacob’s camp (probably the Son of Man – Jesus) and suddenly they are wrestling. Imagine that, a man actually trying to physically overpower his Creator – talk about self-reliant!

After tussling literally all night, the Lord puts the ‘fix’ on Jacob. With the touch of His hand, He puts his hip out of joint. Nevertheless, Jacob fights – fights with His God! (This should sound painfully familiar to some of us!)

As the morning begins to dawn, his carnal strength is broken, and he finally cries out for the Angel to bless him. Now, this was not a victorious cry, but as Hosea 12:4 describes, it was a pitiful cry of desperation and weeping.

At last, this is where God wants him – he has come to the end of himself. He's held on to the Lord but let go of his schemes, his insufficient self-sufficiency. He is no longer fighting with the Lord but rather clinging to Him. He won't let go until he gets God's help.

The Lord then proclaims that this attitude indeed has power with God and men. That is, his utter dependence on the Lord. Consequently, the Lord does bless him, and Jacob is changed. Not only does God deliver him from his brother, but from himself as well – his far greater enemy.

And self-will, being the besetting sin that it is, God also leaves Jacob broken physically in order to remind him of the spiritual fix. You see, he limped the rest of his earthly life.

Now, you might respond, “How could a broken body fix anything?” Consider this – it was the brokenness of our God and Savior, Jesus Christ, that made it possible for us to be made whole.

“...the Lord Jesus on the night in which He was betrayed took bread and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, “Take, eat; this is My body which is broken for you; do this in remembrance of Me.” (1Cor 11:23,24)

And so, as we trust in Jesus, that is fall on Him – we ourselves will likewise be broken –

“The stone (Jesus) which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone, ...And whoever falls on this stone will be broken;” (Mat 21:42-44) For it is in that state that we get fixed for the long-term – the “long tomorrow” – the eternal repair.

I used to like watching this TV show called “This Old House”. In it, the crew would, over a series of episodes, take an old house – one with potential – and completely re-make it. I mean, they would rip out any and everything that was unnecessary for their desired end result. Then they would pains-takingly rebuild it into an amazing dwelling -- a real home.

And I’ve often thought of myself as that ole’ house in a way. But, unlike Bob Villa and the boys, who did such a marvelous job only to have another ‘burn-able’ building, our Father in heaven is shaping us for an eternal home (and an eternal home for us!) – more spectacular than mere words can describe!

The final fix on this ole’ house is when we are united with our new home in heaven. Until then, don’t despair during His repairs. The big, BIG picture is our eternal welfare – and because our God is good and kind and infinitely capable, we can trust Him for the results!

“When the true story of all things shall be known, then will it appear how precious in God’s sight, how powerful in his hands, were many broken things. Broken earthly hopes will be found to have been necessary to the bringing of the better hope which endures forever. Broken bodily constitutions will be found to have been needful in some cases to the attainment of that land where the body shall be weary and sore no more; broken earthly fortunes, to the winning of the wealth beyond the reach of rust and moth and thief; broken earthly honor, to the being crowned with the diadem which fades not away.” P.B. Power

Tried and True, May We Abide in You

A narrow finger jutted out from the prophet with a sorrowful yet sincere declaration, “You are the man!”

History hung in the balance along with the whole Messianic line. Quite possibly, heaven observed with intense interest. God knew the outcome ahead of time but no one else did – neither the prophet nor the accused. The man was guilty, that was clear. But the man was a king, the deed was despicable, and the question remained – how would David react?

He repented!

You’re all familiar with this famous story. David had blown it in the Bathsheba affair, and now he was exposed by his trusted friend, the prophet Nathan.

Understanding the need for and the nature of repentance is fundamental to our spiritual health. History is indeed hinged upon it, the world’s as well as yours and mine individually.

The Bible is filled with examples of those who failed to repent as well as those who did. Consider Cain. After killing his brother, Abel, you never see even a hint of repentance. Consider Esau. He begged his father Isaac to repent (change his mind) concerning the blessing, to no avail – yet Esau himself never repented of his ungodly attitudes. Consider King Saul. He never truly repented of esteeming the people’s opinion higher than God’s. Consider Judas. He was remorse over selling out Christ, but he never turned to God.

But then there’s Jacob, Moses, David, the Ninevites, Peter, Paul and others who when confronted with their failures and shortcomings, embraced the humiliating truth about themselves, turned toward God and changed.

In fact, as uncomfortable as it is to some to realize, there’s no neutral ground here. Everyone, yep, everyone is eventually either repentant or reprobate. Repentant means to have a genuine change of mind while the word reprobate is literally to be unapproved – to have failed the test. But we need to understand God’s ‘testing’ – we’re not talking SATs.

Let’s first consider repentance.

“There is great difficulty in expressing the true idea of a change of thought with reference to sin when we translate the New Testament “repentance” into other languages. The Latin

version renders it "exercise penitence" (poenitentiam agere). But "penitence" etymologically signifies pain, grief, distress, rather than a change of thought and purpose. Thus, Latin Christianity has been corrupted by the pernicious error of presenting grief over sin rather than abandonment of sin as the primary idea of New Testament repentance. It was easy to make the transition from penitence to penance, consequently [some] represent Jesus and the apostles as urging people to do penance (poenitentiam agite)."

"The English word "repent" is derived from the Latin repoenitere, and inherits the fault of the Latin, making grief the principal idea [rather than the] conception of a change of mind with reference to sin. But the exhortations of the ancient prophets, of Jesus, and of the apostles show that the change of mind is the dominant idea of the words employed, while the accompanying grief and consequent reformation enter into one's experience from the very nature of the case." (International Standard Bible Encyclopedia)

"Worldly repentance is nothing but remorse and regret for the consequences of our action. It has no redeeming qualities; it only puts us under the burden of our guilt. Judas repented of his actions, but he did not turn to God for forgiveness. He tried to remove his guilt by arguing with the priest. They didn't care that he betrayed innocent blood and said so. He then tried to ease his conscience by casting the money into the temple. Undoing a wrong is like trying to unscramble an egg. Giving the money back did not erase the burden or undo the consequences. Because of the weight of his guilt, Judas hanged himself as though that would offer restitution. It does not. In death, Judas was just as guilty as in this life, only now he had no opportunity to be redeemed."

"Worldly repentance does not turn us toward God, but instead it drives us away from God. We feel unworthy of God's mercy because we are not looking at God or His word; we are looking at our actions and our guilt. Guilt can never bring us to true repentance. Only the light of God's word can produce true repentance...[a] repentance [which] is not merely sorrow over what you have done in your life, but the joy of what God offers in exchange for your life..." (Eddie Snipes)

Now, a common misconception concerning repentance is that if you truly repent with regard to a specific sin-attitude or type of conduct, that you'll never need to deal with it again. That's not necessarily true. There are sinful attitudes in most if not all our hearts that require wisdom and diligence to deal with throughout our lives, and they can rear their nasty heads even after you've

previously truly repented of them -- a critical heart, a loose tongue, entertaining a haughty, prideful or lustful thought, need I go on? But here's wisdom...

"A.B. Simpson, the founder of the Christian and Missionary Alliance, told of a man who advertised for a coachman. Among those who came were two who seemed to him to be particularly bright. He took them aside and asked them how near they could drive to the edge of a precipice without falling over."

"The first candidate answered that he could go within half an inch and had frequently done so, just shaving the edge and feeling perfectly safe. He then asked the other the same question. 'Well, sir,' replied the man modestly, 'I really cannot tell, because I have never allowed myself to venture near the edge of a precipice. I have always made it a rule to keep as far as possible from danger, and I have had my reward in knowing that my master and his family were kept from danger and harm.'"

"The master had no difficulty in deciding between the two candidates. 'You are the man for me,' he said, 'the other may be brilliant, but you are safe.'" Victory Yap

The saved, repentant person has the power of God's Spirit and is free from the domination of sin but not necessarily from the attacks of the enemy, the world or the sin nature.

"Hard times can often lead to temptation... In our suffering the evil one is quick to come to our aid and offer one of his solutions; pursuing pleasure to numb the pain, coping an attitude, becoming bitter, getting even, feeding anger....." (Joni Erickson Tada)

When Satan left off tempting Christ in the wilderness, it says that *"he departed from Him until an opportune time."* (Luke 4:13) That's why we are told to wear our spiritual armor!! (Eph 6:11-18)

Although the emphasis in the following verse is surely upon forgiveness, we should also consider what is also implied about repentance when Jesus told his disciples, *"Take heed to yourselves. If your brother sins against you, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. And if he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times in a day returns to you, saying, 'I repent, you shall forgive him."* (Luke 17:3,4) Jesus did not mean that repentance is double-minded or wishy-washy. Sincere repentance means change, change of mind and consequently change of action/direction. But neither is it a once-and-for-all, now-I-can-cruise deal. We all have much to repent of – therefore we must also be very forgiving!!

All right now, since we've briefly considered repentance, let's look at the opposite side of the coin so to speak, that is, the reprobate. What makes one as such? Is it a committing of sin, a moral failure, a lack of good performance? Since the term literally means to be 'unapproved', to answer this we need to consider the approval or testing process as described in scripture.

Some people don't like the idea that God tests us. But the Bible is very specific about it. Testing, trying, proving, and tempting are generally used in translating the most frequently used terms in the original languages of Old and New Testaments. There are, however, two principle ideas involved – the first is given by the Hebrew word 'tsaraph' and Greek 'dokimazo' which come from roots meaning to smelt, refine and also to recognize as genuine. The second is 'chaqar' in the OT and 'peirasmos' in the NT which emphasize a search, examination or experiment.

We find the first concept in verses like:

Psa 17:3 "You have tested my heart; You have visited me in the night; You have tried me and have found nothing..."

Psa 26:2 "Examine me, O Lord, and prove me; Try my mind and my heart..."

Psa 66:10 "For You, O God, have tested us; You have refined us as silver is refined."

Isa 48:10 "Behold, I have refined you, but not as silver; I have tested you in the furnace of affliction."

Dan 12:10 "Many shall be purified, made white, and refined, but the wicked shall do wickedly..."

Zech 13:9 "I will bring the one-third through the fire, will refine them as silver is refined, and test them as gold is tested."

1 Cor 3:13 "each one's work will become clear; 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 Thes 2:4 "But as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, even so we speak, not as pleasing men, but God who tests our hearts."

1 Tim 3:10 "But let these also first be tested, then let them serve..."

Refining or smelting requires heat, lots of heat. The process is generally repeated to produce greater and greater purity in the metals. But the important thing to note is that the process does not simply destroy the pollutants but rather exposes them, bringing them to the surface. The Smelter then removes them. The same is true spiritually. Oh, how we would love for people to

only see the final result, to somehow rid ourselves of the dross in our lives such that everyone thinks we've always been and only are 99.9999999% pure! But that would be a lie. And it would only do us harm ultimately.

The second concept is found in such verses as:

Psa 139:1 "O Lord, You have searched me and known me."

Psa 139:23 "Search me, O God, and know my heart."

Jam 1:12 "Blessed is the man who endures temptation; for when he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him."

Now the examination goes hand in hand with the smelting if you would. But what is being examined? Is God looking to see how 'good' you are or how many religious works you've done or how high you can jump? Will He 'curve' your score if you can walk on coals of fire (extra credit)? Will someone really mess up the curve with their A++? Will God love you less if/when you 'fail'? Most people hate tests. I do. Why? Fear of failure. But in coming to Christ, we've already admitted failure, so what's being examined? When dross is revealed, the Examiner/Smelter is looking for... nope, I'm not going to tell you yet. Hang on.

There are instances in scripture where someone passed a test – Abraham in his willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac at God's command, Joseph in running from the seduction of Potiphar's wife, Daniel and the boys in Babylon in demonstrating their faithfulness to Jehovah. But there's only one person in all of history who passed every test flawlessly – Jesus. *"For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin."* (Heb 4:15) He came through with no dross at all so to speak; not 99.999999999999999% pure but 100% period, test after test after test – all the way!

And this is sooooo important to hold on to, for you and I as Christian believers may, like the guys mentioned above, pass a test or two here and there, but frankly, none of us will really 'set the curve' will we? Thus, we must place our confidence in the fact that Jesus perfectly passed it all, He is the 'approved' of God. And now, through faith in Christ, we may appropriate His 'approval' status to ourselves. This is ultimately what the Smelter is looking for -- He's looking for...

Faith... and what faith?

The two metals which the Bible uses to picture the testing in our lives are silver and gold. Silver is the metal of redemption and gold is associated with our faith. I'll submit this for your

consideration – in our times of testing and trial, it's not necessarily our 'success or failure' that is being examined, but rather the Smelter seeks to know if we will maintain our faith in His redemption through Jesus Christ which is the basis for our relationship with Him.

"...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, who having not seen you love." 1 Pet 1:6-8

"...let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful." (Heb 10:22,23)

"...having faith and a good conscience, which some having rejected, concerning the faith have suffered shipwreck..." (1 Tim 1:19)

"Now as Jannes and Jambres resisted Moses, so do these also resist the truth: men of corrupt minds, disapproved (reprobate) concerning the faith." (2 Tim 3:8)

And so, back to our question – what makes the reprobate, the disapproved, or as in the KJV, the 'disqualified'? Quite simply, God's testing reveals no faith in His redemptive work, His gracious gift. On the contrary, for this person trials or tribulation only show a hardness of heart – it is written of the Tribulation period in the book of Revelation, *"But the rest of mankind, who were not killed by these plagues, did not repent of the works of their hands, that they should not worship demons, and idols of gold, silver, brass, stone, and wood which can neither see nor hear nor walk. And they did not repent of their murders or their sorceries or their sexual immorality or their thefts."* (Rev 9:20,21)

We need to understand that although our Lord does indeed tell us to be conformed to the image of His dear Son (Rom 8:29, 12:2, Phi 3:10-12) and though godly character is indeed one fruit of His testing (Rom 5:3,4), there's only one kind of real failure. That's failing to trust in and submit to Him. If you do well, like Abraham with Isaac, that's ideal. If you need to repent, like David with Bathsheba, and you repent, you're that much less 'drossy'. Praise the Lord! David was not "disqualified" – he was truly repentant and maintained his faith in God. Clearly, there were severe consequences to his failure. Sin has consequences.

But God's testing produces good fruit. Indeed, it's a pruning and cleansing process at times. And the bottom line so to speak is abiding. Jesus said, *"Abide in Me, and I in you. As the*

branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me.” (John 15:4,5)

And so, in conclusion, what I want to make clear is that under all circumstances we must abide in Christ for He is the only one Who is in all ways “**tried and true**”. When you ‘pass a test’, abide in Him. When you fail but truly repent, abide in Him. Always abide in Christ our Lord!
O, Lord, our Lord, Tried and True, may we always, ever, abide in You!

Uncrossable

I was a goner. All it took was one look and WHAM-O; yep, when I first met my wife, I was instantly attracted to her (we won't get into what she first thought about me.) And it was a unique attraction. She wasn't (and isn't) just pretty – she seemed to me to be glowing, radiant in beauty. Her voice was like a song and her eyes like deep mysterious pools. She danced as she walked. Forty-five minutes later, I asked her to marry me. That was 46 years ago.

And what does that have to do with holiness? A LOT. Hang with me now – you'll see what I mean.

Holiness is from the Hebrew word pronounced 'qadash' and it means *to be separate, set apart and sacred*. Importantly, it is derived from the word meaning *to be or to make clean*. Thus, it is far more than simply a separateness; it points to a quality or essence of being that is absolutely without imperfection, without the slightest hint of impurity. But this definition is a mere shadow of the reality and a fuzzy one at best.

Let's search the scriptures to better understand it.

“Who shall not fear You, O Lord, and glorify Your name? For You alone are holy.” (Rev 15:4) God alone is holy in and of Himself. Seventy people, places or items are declared in the Bible to be holy. But, anyone or anything in scripture that is declared truthfully to be so derives that attribute solely because of a relationship with God Almighty.

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

While in the wilderness, the congregation of Israel camped outside the tabernacle. Within the outer court area of the tabernacle, came those seeking to worship. Within this court, was the Holy Place in which the priests alone ministered. Then, within the Holy Place was the Holy of Holies into which the High Priest alone could enter and that only once per year. So, as you can see, there is portrayed in its design a greater and greater association with holiness moving from the camp to the Ark of the Covenant in the Most Holy Place (i.e. the presence of God). At this point though, the holiness 'curve' takes an asymptotic turn and shoots right off the graph so to speak. Let me explain...

Occasionally, we find double-declarations in the original languages for emphasis such as “*peace, peace*” (Isa 26:3) or “*grace, grace*” (Zech 4:7) or “*Truly, truly*” (John 1:51, 3:5, 5:24) but there is only one triple-declaration in all of scripture – “*Holy, holy, holy*” (see Isa 6:3 and Rev 4:8). God’s holiness isn’t just perfect; it’s in a class by itself.

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

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

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

Now, here’s a stunning and breath-taking truth: God, contrary to what Satan suggested in the Garden of Eden, WANTS you to be a partaker of His holiness (1 Pet 1:15,16). This does NOT imply hair-buns or black hats. I’m not knocking those expressions – you simply cannot equate them with the divine holiness.

When you catch your breath, consider how significant this is – God wants you to share in the characteristic which mesmerizes the highest of His created beings. *“The four living creatures, each having six wings, were full of eyes around and within. And they do not rest day or night, saying: “Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, Who was and is and is to come!”* (Rev 4:8)

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

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

First, set apart and clean from the world, we are to be a visual display of what our Lord and His heavenly home are like in character. Thus, when the church is indistinguishable from the world,

it is failing. When we are consumed with self-gratification, we only betray the gospel no matter what T-shirts we wear, which church we attend or ministries we pursue.

Now, being distinguishable from the world doesn't necessarily mean being 'weird' (though the only man in the Bible apart from Christ who is specifically named as holy was clothed in camel's hair and ate bugs – John the Baptist). Holiness may seem strange to the world of the spiritually blind, but it's not because of our trying to appear outrageous. I was recently told by a pastor in France that a wide spread perception of the evangelical church there is as a bunch of 'crazies looking for a comet to be beamed up to' – that's clearly a misrepresentation, and it's certainly not the distinguish-ability of holiness.

But the world, when it sees true holiness, is utterly convicted and reacts by either accepting or rejecting it.

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

Third, it just amazes me that God would actually enjoy my fellowship (hey, you don't need to agree with me so quickly!) But He does! Yours too! He wants us to see Him and know Him as He is, but it's not a casual deal. The Bible tells us to "*Pursue peace with all people and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord.*" (Heb 12:14) That word "pursue" is actually a very aggressive word meaning to chase down in an almost violent manner, to run swiftly in order to catch a person or thing.

You see, if it was solely a matter of being saved and thus being holy, we would have no command to chase it. However, in partaking of His holiness to greater and greater degrees, the Lord becomes more 'visible' to us and in us and thus more impressive.

As with the tabernacle illustration, the closer we progress from the camp toward the One who is Holy, Holy, Holy – the more intimate our fellowship with Him will be. When the temple veil before the holy of holies was torn apart from top to bottom at the end of Christ's crucifixion, God was saying that the way into His presence is now open – the entire way – all because of Jesus. He WANTS you in His presence!

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

By accepting the gracious gift of salvation through Jesus Christ, you become one of God’s children – adopted into His family and therefore, by association with the only One who is holy, you are a partaker of His holiness. However, there is this issue of pursuit. It’s not an issue of salvation, no addition whatsoever to the finished work of the cross. It is, rather, a matter of response – *“Let us know, let us pursue the knowledge of the LORD.”* (Hos 6:3)

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

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

Yet personal holiness does not and will not come from works – we must not confuse holy conduct with holiness itself. The latter results in the former and not the other way around. Peter wrote, *“but as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, because it is written, “Be holy, for I am holy.”* (1 Pet 1:15,16)

Unfortunately, we can miss that little word “be” as in “be holy” which is actually “become”. It is a puncticular action without regard for beginning or ending – in other words, we are to become holy in our conduct. How’s that work? – Four ways:

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

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

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

Second, in Exodus 29:36, we have a wonderful illustration of holiness as we find the Lord giving instruction regarding the altar of sacrifice. In this passage, there are two actions specified. The first is a cleansing which comes from the blood. That is, the altar was made clean or ‘righteous’ by the blood of atonement. Next, the Lord says to anoint it in order to make it holy. Recall that anointing is done with oil and is always a picture of the anointing of the Holy Spirit. Here, we see then an important lesson – righteous standing is the result of the blood while holiness is due to the anointing of the ‘oil’ or Spirit of God.

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

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

Third, Romans 12:1,2 says, “*I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind...*” Paul picks up on the illustration of the altar of sacrifice and tells us, “...*present your bodies a living sacrifice...*” one that is holy and clearly different from the deathly avarice of the world.

Yes, this living sacrifice is holy, and it has nada, nothing, to do with somberness, monasticism or self-fustigation. As with salvation, personal holiness is a responsive choice on our part. God

initiates, and we get to participate, but fundamentally, it is always Him at work in us by His Spirit.

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

Fourth, go ahead and read Ezekiel 47:1-12. Many scholars consider this passage as pertaining to the millennial period yet among other things, it speaks of the sanctifying work of God’s Spirit.

This mighty, life-giving river is a miracle in and of itself. It starts as a small rivulet flowing from south of the altar of sacrifice and without any tributaries becomes a deep uncrossable river. The altar points to the shed blood of Christ and thus His gift of salvation – righteous standing before God. But the stream, the flowing water (literally living waters) speaks of the Holy Spirit. It’s a small rivulet to start with and typifies the deposit of God’s Spirit made in our hearts upon salvation.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

In conclusion, what does this holiness look like any way? The Bible uses just one word to describe the indescribable – we roughly translate it “beautiful” (Psa 29:2, 96:9) It can also mean pleasant, lovely or delightful. What you may never have considered is that our Holy, Holy, Holy God is thus indescribably beautiful, pleasant, lovely, delightful. Absolutely nothing compares, nothing even approaches. His holiness is a beauty that fills eternity with awe, that makes the highest sinless angels blush, that makes life...Life.

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

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

We Cry, “Abba”

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

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

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

And this is not worst of it; it’s only the tip of the iceberg. What’s happening in many homes is frankly too disgusting to describe. Children are morally abandoned – left to decide under the mentoring of our ‘family-friendly’ media what’s right and what (if anything) is wrong. They are sometimes even encouraged to change their gender while barely old enough to attend kindergarten.

Over one million juveniles are tried in state juvenile courts annually in the United States. A decade ago, the number of murders committed by teens was approximately 1000 a year, whereas in 2016, there were about 215,000 serious violent crimes committed by youths between the ages of 12 and 17 in the US. More than 70% of all juveniles in state reform institutions come from fatherless homes. Because of a lack of father figures in the home -- in the past 30 years there have been:

550% increase in violent crime

400% increase in illegitimate births

200% increase in teen pregnancies

300% increase in teen suicide

I submit that all of this stems fundamentally from a failure in fatherhood in our society. It's no wonder people have difficulty sometimes in relating to a heavenly Father! To more and more folks, children are a pleasure handicap, a burden, even a plague. With the advent of myriad birth control measures, sex has become increasingly an inconsequential pastime rather than a marital privilege.

This is absolutely NO accident, friends. One of the prime reasons people don't come to God is because the concept of a loving Father is under assault continuously. Just as marriage is supposed to be a picture of Christ's relationship to the Church so parenting is supposed to picture Father God's relationship to His children. When people don't see and understand that picture they behave as spiritual orphans. Anger, hopelessness, carnality, denial of the truth and hardness of heart become their means of dealing with it. The Bible says, "*Taste and see that the Lord is good.*" but many won't do that simply because it never comes across as a reasonable option – the concept of a good Father is unimaginable.

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

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

could only have taken his place in that sterile hospital room, I gladly would have. It destroyed me and my wife that we couldn't help him.

Then, as pain and anger beat upon my soul, I 'heard' a still soft voice within saying something like, 'You wanted to save your son, but you couldn't – I wanted to save my Son, but I couldn't. Now, in this fellowship of suffering, you begin to know Me and the pain I've felt.'

That realization changed my perspective. Father God wasn't simply turning His back on Jesus while He hung on the cross. I suggest He may have felt like I did – powerless. Now, don't misunderstand me – God is all powerful! But in order to save us, He had to surrender His beloved Son to the incomprehensibly hellish role of the slaughtered Lamb. His infinite love over-ruled His infinite power, indescribable grief and justified wrath. If you've believed that somehow God just stood back or turned His back or in any way simply detached Himself from Jesus until it was over, that He perhaps occupied Himself with other things or that He simply rested upon His throne because He knew the final outcome – you've missed it.

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

God's Father-heart is pure and perfect. We truly have nothing to compare to it in our humanity because we're a fallen humanity. Many of us have had great parents and many have not. But regardless, none of us I dare say, have seen and understood the parental picture of Father God – *"we see through a glass darkly"* (1Cor 13:12) *"Give me a worm that can understand a man, and I will give you a man who can understand God."*—John Wesley

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

God's Father-heart toward you is revealed in His Name –

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And there is another name we must consider as well.

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

Vine's Dictionary says,

"In the Gemara (a Rabbinical commentary on the Mishna, the traditional teaching of the Jews) it is stated that slaves were forbidden to address the head of the family by this title. It approximates to a personal name, in contrast to "Father," with which it is always joined in the NT. Abba is the word framed by the lips of infants and betokens unreasoning trust; "father" expresses an intelligent apprehension of the relationship. The two together express the love and intelligent confidence of the child." Easton's says, *"It is a term expressing warm affection and filial confidence. It has no perfect equivalent in our language."*

In His deepest trial, Christ cried out, “Abba, Father.” The Holy Spirit instructs that this is the appropriate name for us to use as well. You might think of it as “Papa” or “Daddy” – a term of endearment rather than a title. In the final analysis – God doesn’t expect you to truly fathom His Fatherhood or even to fully appreciate His awesome attributes, but He does want you to understand deep within your heart that He’s your real “Dad”, your tender-loving “Papa” – your “Abba, Father.” If you let Him, He will bring this to fuller and fuller realization especially as you face difficult trials. Abba truly knows far more than you realize, your joy, your grief, your emptiness, your fullness. He’s not the image of father you’ve always held – He’s much more. He’s Abba, Father.

What's the 'Diff'?

Slammed up against the locker, held firmly some distance above the floor by his incensed classmate, my then 15-year old son Michael had simply told his very large and infamously brutal assailant, "Jesus loves you and gave His life for you." The reply was an angry, "Don't ever mention that name to me again!" or something to that effect.

We are different, or we're supposed to be, and the world hates it. Jesus guaranteed that if we would live a godly life, we'd be loved and hated, appreciated and persecuted. (John 15:18-20) Increasingly though, something is happening to the church – it's happened before of course, and in fact there's some Old Testament stories which illustrate it.

In Exodus, we read that Moses led the Hebrew people out of Egypt; many Bible teachers liken their freedom from Pharaoh and passing through the Red Sea unto an OT picture of NT salvation and consequent baptism. Anyway, as they traveled, Exodus 12:28 says, "*And a mixed multitude went up also with them; and flocks, and herds, even very much cattle.*" of whom Matthew Henry notes,

"Probably the greatest part of this mixed multitude were but a rude unthinking mob, that followed the crowd they knew not why; we afterwards find that they proved a snare to them, and it is probable that when, soon afterwards, they understood that the children of Israel were to continue forty years in the wilderness, they quitted them, and returned to Egypt."

These stragglers caught in the tow if you would of the newly liberated Hebrew people were both a snare and a vulnerability. It was in these outskirts of the camp, the outer fringes so to speak, that this mixed multitude had a terrible effect. As Numbers 11:1-4 shows, a murmuring arose there against the Lord and as a consequence, He sent a consuming fire among them. Yet remaining unrepentant, this same group of people then began to lust uncontrollably, and their attitude led the people of Israel nearby to do the same. They wept and moaned again that they wanted MEAT – flesh, flesh, flesh! They even began to despise the heavenly manna.

It drove Moses to the brink – he wanted out; he wanted God just to kill him. Instead, the Lord brought an incredibly huge swarm of quail into the camp right in the 'strike-zone'. So, as my pastor used to say, "They were battin' down the quail. Homers everywhere!" (See Num 11:32 Yeah, I know, it was a poor pun then and still is.)

But then the Lord brought judgment upon those who lusted -- *“And while the flesh was yet between their teeth, ere it was chewed, the wrath of the LORD was kindled against the people, and the LORD smote the people with a very great plague. And he called the name of that place Kibrothhattaavah (graves of lust): because there they buried the people that lusted.”* (Num 11:33,34)

Not only was the mixed multitude a snare to Israel, but they were a weakness and a vulnerability as well. You see, as the host of Israel moved, it was these fringe-folk who were attacked first. Moses, in Deuteronomy reminded them, *“Remember what Amalek did unto thee by the way, when ye were come forth out of Egypt; How he met thee by the way, and smote the hindmost of thee, even all that were feeble behind thee, when thou wast faint and weary; and he feared not God.”* (Deut 25:17,18) The feeble and weak naturally fell behind and thus were amidst the mixed multitude. There, they were prey to the Amalekites (see Ex 17:8-15) – those descendants of Esau who quite adequately portray the sinful flesh.

Yes, mixture has been the perpetual plague-conundrum of Israel. The more they stood out from the world around them, the more they wanted to fit in. The more they fit in, the more they wanted to rise above and be separate. This is historically true and prophetically accurate as well. Historically, although they have in some case adopted the ways of the gentiles around them, the Jews have remained a ‘lumpy’ mix at best. In fact, no other people group has lasted more than two generations outside their homeland as clearly indigenous. The Israelites, however, were displaced from their homeland for as much as 2500 years and yet maintained their national identity.

And prophetically -- in Daniel’s famous interpretation of King Nebuchadnezzar’s dream, he revealed that, *“...whereas thou saw iron mixed with miry clay, they shall mingle themselves with the seed of men: but they shall not cleave one to another, even as iron is not mixed with clay.”* (Dan 2:43) As I’ve written before, I’m convinced that the clay in this vision is properly interpreted to be the Jewish people – the scripture makes that clear in Isa 45:9, Jer 18:6 and Isa 64:8. Therefore, I’m persuaded that this mingling with the ‘seed of men’ (i.e. gentiles) will be done by the Jews, trying as ever to fit in to the world - perhaps, it speaks specifically of Israel trying to mingle with the EU.

In any event, the consequences of mixture are the same for the church as for the Jewish people. As the last days church has in many places and in many aspects cooled to a tepid temp

spiritually, it has become itself a mix indistinguishable from the world. Christian media mimics the world, denominational leadership is more and more infused with worldliness, compromise and even devilish notions. Recent surveys reveal that more than a third of pastors and church leaders are playing with porn. The majority in several main line denominations even doubt the divinity of Christ. Divorce and marital fidelity is statistically now no different in the Christian community than it is in the society at large. Meanwhile, the Bible is being labeled as hate-language or irrelevant, and conference after conference at the highest international political and religious levels are convening to figure out how to make us all believe one homogenous soup of toxic spiritual waste. Yes, I know I'm using strong language.

And we have our own mixed multitude don't we. Those who 'follow along' but haven't really bought into a sincere faith in Christ. Now, I'm not at all advocating anything like sending them 'back to Egypt'. But we must realize that if we allow mixture in our own walk, it will bring with it, as it did with the Jews, lusting, murmuring against God and a vulnerability to the attacks of 'the flesh'. The real issue is that we need to take the 'beam out of our own eyes'!

And if we do, we'll be different. We'll stand out from the world around us. It's truly a day of decision for the church. The enemy of Christ has sensed our corporate luke-warmness and is pouring on the ice water if you know what I mean. Have you noticed how aggressive the community of the sexual and gender aberrant has become in the media, the schools, the government and the workplace? Have you noticed how timid our political and religious leaders have become in defining the true difference between satanically inspired religions and faith in Christ? Have you noticed how utterly and grotesquely violent and lewd the preponderance of our 'entertainment' has become? Accidental? No way.

A very large portion of the church has put aside the Word of God and has instead allowed the news and entertainment industry ('Christian' or otherwise) to formulate their 'truth for today'. At the same time, those who take a valid stand for any real Christian values are portrayed as just "fringe elements" – so say the reports. In truth, it is the spiritual 'fringe' elements themselves that are the ones fingering the faithful as "extremists" and "hate mongers". And oh, how they love to latch on to some truly tragic situation involving a so-called believer and shout it to the world as evidence of the 'weirdness' of the Christian faith.

Meanwhile, on the whole, we've become overly consumed with being 'relevant', seeker-sensitive, 'successful', entertaining and attractive. We've invested countless millions in

buildings, parking lots, potted plants and pew pads (all of which are appreciated!) but invested comparatively little in the true house of God. It's time for divine differentiation.

"Finding his newly-appointed pastor standing at his study window in the church weeping as he looked over the inner city's tragic conditions, a layman sought to console him: 'Don't worry. After you've been here a while, you'll get used to it.' Responded the minister, 'Yes, I know. That's why I am crying.'"-- Dennis Marquardt

Yes, it's time for true believers to be different again -- to love our enemies, to share the gospel, to genuinely care for the family of God, to devour the Word of God and to obey it, to forgive from the heart, to eschew evil and cling to what is good, to intercede sacrificially for one another, to seek to approve the excellent, to speak the truth in love and having done all, to stand... It's time to rejoice in that difference and know that although we are the minority here, we belong to the enormous family of believers -- the 'majority' in heaven!

Lord, break the mold of worldly acceptance, comfort and ease even as it's congealing around us. Open our eyes to behold the true state of our souls. Grant us peace in the knowledge of your grace and fire in the knowledge of your coming. Give us a fearlessness of man no matter the cost.

"Nikolai Berdyaev, who abandoned Marx for Christianity, insists that neither history nor theology nor the church brought him to the Christian faith, but a simple woman called only Mother Maria. He was present at a concentration camp when the Nazis were murdering Jews in gas chambers. One distraught mother refused to part with her baby. When Maria saw that the officer was only interested in numbers, without a word she pushed the mother aside and quickly took her place. This action revealed to Berdyaev the heart of Christianity-- and what atonement means." -- James S. Hewett, Illustrations Unlimited (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc, 1988)

"Blessed are ye, when men shall hate you, and when they shall separate you from their company, and shall reproach you, and cast out your name as evil, for the Son of man's sake."
(Luke 6:22)

"Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you," (2 Cor 6:17)

In closing, we will be thankful one day soon for the separation that godliness brings. We don't have to force the issue. Just living a truly godly life will make us stand out from the world.

Personal discomfort, even disgrace, may be the price, but it's worth it. You know that fellow who bullied my son for his witness? Well, a year or so later, he ran up to Mike in school and thanked him earnestly adding that during the summer, he'd given his heart to Christ – and now he is different too.

May each of us find the blessedness of difference from this world by conforming to the awesome character of our Lord Jesus Christ. May we never be the so-called 'difference without a distinction'. God grant us courage, conviction, comfort and Christ-likeliness in these treacherous times. God bless you.

When Thrones Are Thrown Away

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

We can't really know all that Saul mused while this new position as king over Israel was thrust upon him, but we can learn some extremely powerful lessons in observing him. These points become especially sharp in comparing Saul with his successor, David. Now, many excellent comparisons have been presented over the years between these two men. Thus, we'll seek herein to cover but a few points that have become exceptionally poignant to us recently and which we believe may have direct application for all.

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

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

Samuel lambasted him, saying,

"Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices,

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

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

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

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

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

I'll suggest we have a hint of it in 1 Sam 16:1,2: *"Now the LORD said to Samuel, "How long will you mourn for Saul, seeing I have rejected him from reigning over Israel? Fill your horn*

with oil and go; I am sending you to Jesse the Bethlehemite. For I have provided Myself a king among his sons."

And Samuel said, "How can I go? If Saul hears it, he will kill me."

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

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

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

David could lay it down. Saul couldn't.

Herein is the great lesson for all of us – it's about letting go and holding on. This world is a 'sticky' place filled with 'sticky' stuff. It sticks to the heart, and when it does it tempts us to hold on to it at all costs – even at the cost of the soul. On top of that, God Himself often gives us good things -- relationships, ministries, material goods, etc. that He sometimes later tests us with – will we adhere to them more than to Him? Or will we let go of them when He requires it and hold on to Him?

Even in heaven, we find those who have been given glorious crowns casting them before the throne of God. (Rev 4:9-11) And as a consequence, I'll suggest that those who are truly heavenly minded behave in like manner not just in heaven but here on earth as well. You see,

even Jesus, Who the scripture says will subdue all things will then in turn surrender it all to Father God. (1 Cor 15:25-28)

It's not that God gives just to take away. In fact, the Bible says that the gifts and callings of God are for keeps (Rom 11:29). But He does test us from time to time to see what we're holding on to – the gifts or the Giver. What has God given you? Good stuff and maybe ...some difficulty – so what are you holding on to? If God is leading you to -- can you truly let it go? Abraham did with Isaac. Moses did with Egypt. David did with the kingdom. Paul did with his 'stuff and status'. Jesus did with His life. Father God did with His Son.

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

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

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

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

Jesus plainly said, “...suppose a king is about to go to war against another king. Will he not first sit down and consider whether he is able with ten thousand men to oppose the one coming against him with twenty thousand? If he is not able, he will send a delegation while the other is still a long way off and will ask for terms of peace.” (i.e. he knows when to surrender his throne.) “In the same way,” (that is, when God requires it) “any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple. Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is fit neither for the soil nor for the manure pile; it is thrown out. He who has ears to hear, let him hear.” (Luke 14:31-35)

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

With an Expected End in Mind

It was a low point for Abraham, perhaps the lowest. The ‘father of faith’ was despairing. You see, he had heard the voice of the Lord while living in Ur –a place where the moon god (now known as Allah) was worshipped. But the true and living God had spoken to him, telling him to ‘forsake all’, to leave his home and family and to travel to an unknown place.

Well, Abraham, then called Abram, obeyed; at least he left. He took some family along though and at first, they journeyed as far as Haran, about 600 miles to the northwest along the ‘fertile crescent’. Some years later, after his father died, the Lord once again called him to travel onward to the land that he would inherit. And again, he pulled up stakes along with his wife, nephew and their entourage, caravanning to the modern-day land of Israel.

Now, you’re all familiar with the life of Abraham – you recall his journey into Egypt, his accumulation of great wealth, his longing for an heir, his courage, his fears, his deceptions, his integrity and ultimately, his love for God. But do you know that he came to a crisis of faith? - a point of real despair? He lost his peace and was wavering.

God had appeared and/or spoken to him personally several times (see Gen 12:2,3,7; 13:14-17). With great valor, he’d rescued Lot from an army of four kings with just his 318 servants (Gen 14). After this, He had been blessed by Melchizedek, who was a type or manifestation of Christ. Talk about spiritual ‘highs’!

But then the ‘bottom fell out.’ This man of faith was not yet a man of abiding inward peace. And the two are inextricably linked.

Abram feared greatly. We know this because right after these things, God spoke to him in a vision, “*Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield...*”

Abram despaired and complained. The Lord said, “*...[I am] your exceeding great reward.*” To which Abram replied, “*...Lord, GOD, what will You give me, seeing I go childless...*” In other words, ‘I don’t get it, Lord. I’ve followed and served you, and what good has it done me? No family, no kids, I’m a hunted man...probably...here I am alone in this place and I’ve just made some long-term enemies...I don’t get it. What good would it do to receive anything from You? I don’t have anyone to pass it on to anyway.’

“Look, You’ve given me no offspring...” he said.

And, save Christ, this is the condition of every heart among those on earth who truly follow the Lord, at some time or times. That's because the Lord, Who knows all and ultimately guides those who seek to follow Him, also allows some incredibly difficult things to transpire in their lives.

At this point, the Lord, unperturbed by Abram's perturbations, gave him what we now call the Abrahamic covenant. First, He declared that He would make his descendants as numerous as the stars in the heavens and then, that He would give to him, and his descendants the entire land around him.

After unilaterally guaranteeing this by 'cutting covenant' with Abram, God declared that he would go to his fathers ***"in peace."*** And this is my principle point – His peace became his peace.

This word, "peace" is **not** understood well at all. That's because it is not of this world. And yet, it is what our hearts cry out for every moment of our earthly existence. In the Hebrew, it literally means, 'to be safe' and directly implies 'to be sound or well', 'to be content or happy' and my favorite, 'to be complete.' In the Greek, it means, 'to be joined or at one.'

Now, these last days in which we live are so evil, some would say treacherous, that you can just 'smell the flame,' you can almost sense 'the heat,' so to speak. Paul the apostle wrote, *"But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come: for men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good, traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God..."* (2Tim3:1-5a) and this is speaking of those who wear a 'mask' of godliness if you would. How much worse the unabashed unbelieving world!

Evil times indeed.

But the Bible positions God's peace as being opposite of evil – *"I form the light, and create darkness: I make **peace**, and create evil: I the LORD do all these [things]."* (Isa 45:7) and, *"And the work of righteousness shall be **peace**..."* (Isa 32:17a) and that is why He says, *"[There is] no **peace**, says the LORD, unto the wicked.* (Isa 48:22). In this day, real peace is increasingly rare.

In contrast, we who look to Jesus in sincerity have a grand promise, *"You will keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on You because he trusts in You."* (Isa 26:3) (BTW, for you

Bible students, “perfect peace” here is really “peace peace” in the Hebrew – an amplified peace. This is the peace in the midst of the storm so to speak.)

You might say this quality of soul is what was lost in Eden and what was made recoverable at Calvary. It is also a principle characteristic of God’s thoughts toward you. He says, *“For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the LORD, thoughts of **peace**, and not of evil, to give you an expected end.”* (Jer 29:11) The NKJV says, *“to give you a future and a hope.”*

This security, this soundness, this contentedness and completeness, this unity with God is found powerfully and uniquely in Christ. Jesus said to His disciples, *“**Peace** I leave with you, my **peace** I give unto you: not as the world gives, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.”* (John 14:27) and, *“These things I have spoken to you, that in me you might have **peace**. In the world you shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world.”* (John 16:33)

So, God blessed Abraham exceedingly when He promised him that he would go to his fathers in peace. What He was saying was, ‘You will go into the next life in safety, in security, in soundness, in completeness and perfectly content.’ Wow!

How can you die and yet be perfectly sound? How can you leave loved ones behind and yet be perfectly complete? How can you be absolutely content when your body fails?

The peace of God.

The first century church in Thessalonica lost their peace also. They were looking for the appearing of Christ, trusting in the promise that when Christ appeared, He’d snatch ‘em up. Then deceitful teachers came and told them that, “Oops, you missed it. Christ came and left, and you got left behind.” (2Thes 2) Well, Paul set them straight with an awesome epistle and then concluded with these words, *“Now may the Lord of peace Himself give you peace always in every way.”* (2Thes 3:16)

Believers of all ages have, upon occasion, lost their peace. That’s one reason the Lord says, *“...seek peace and pursue it.”* (Psa 34:14) In fact, although God is known in scripture as the God of truth, of love, of knowledge, of glory, of mercy, of justice, of grace, of hope, of all comfort, of patience and of my strength, He is referred to most often in character as the God of peace.

So how do you secure such peace, especially in times of turmoil, grief or fear?

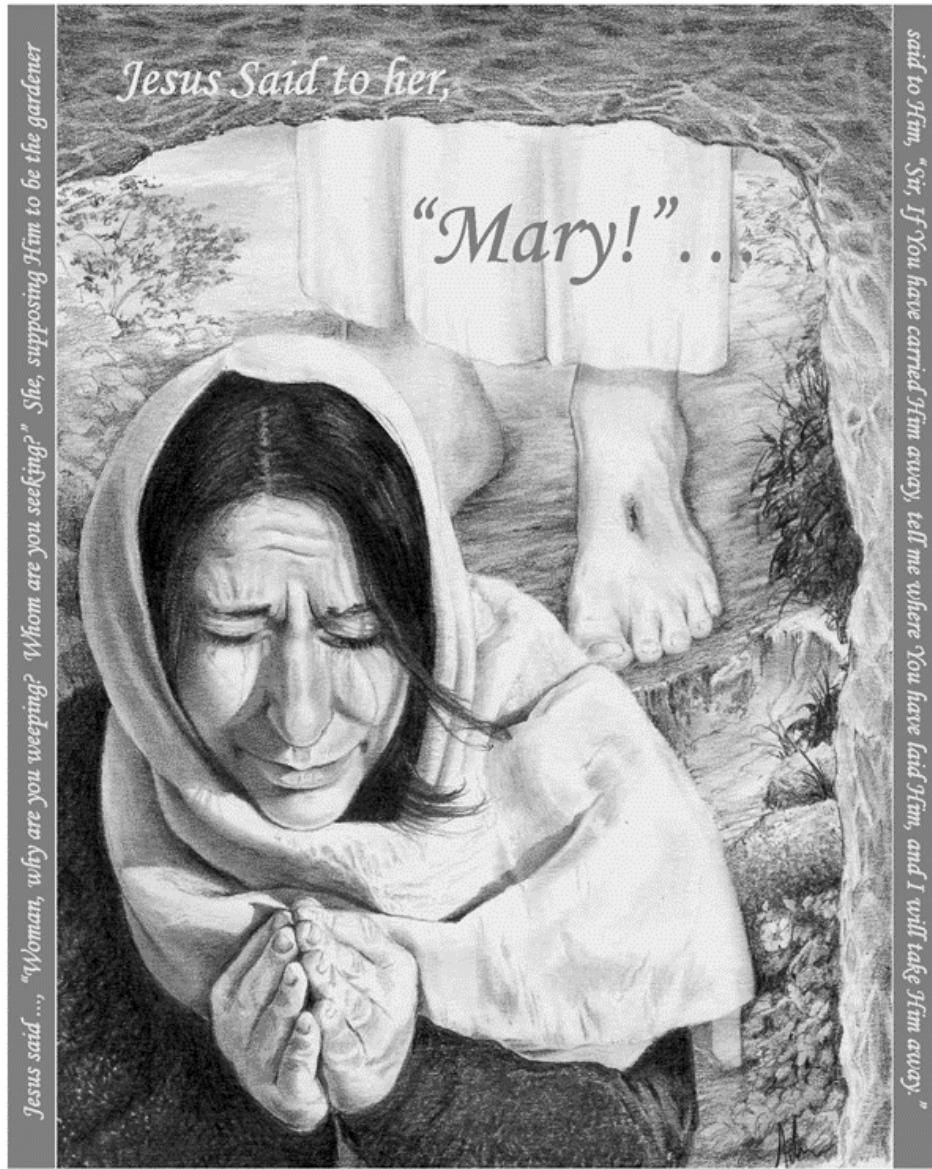
There was a radio announcer who I liked listening to while driving cross country, Paul Harvey. When he was still on the air, his trademark was always to give you a few details of some story and temporarily leave you hanging. You always knew more was to come and sure enough, after his ads were over, he'd tell you the conclusion of the matter which was inevitably quite interesting and often uplifting. Anyway, he'd always finish with, "And now you know the rest of the story."

And that's what the Lord does too, sort of. You see, just as with Abraham and the Thessalonian believers, He's told us the rest of the story. Jesus is indeed coming again and soon. He will reign on earth and we will live forever with Him in wonderful peace – heavenly peace. Don't get images of harps and clouds – rather remember we're talking of perfect security, soundness, well-being, an awesome sense of completeness and unity with our Maker.

That's where you'll find your peace – when you know Him and believe Him, when you know that despite desperate or discouraging circumstances, the end of the story is coming and it's perfect. He will make all things right whether you can imagine it now or not.

In these last days, men's hearts will fail them for fear of things that are coming upon the earth. But you can rest. The 'end of the story' is only the beginning of a grand existence that is too exciting, too wonderful, too fun, too joyful, too engaging, too ... huge to describe. As for now, don't 'hold your peace', hold His and tell everyone about it.

"Peace, peace to him that is far off, and to him that is near, says the LORD..." (Isa 57:19)
Shalom!



Jesus said ..., "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?" She, supposing Him to be the gardener

Jesus Said to her,

"Mary!"...

said to Him, "Sir, If You have carried Him away, tell me where You have laid Him, and I will take Him away."

Wrong Questions, Right Answer

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

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

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

"Why?!" her heart cried out along with her lips. 'Why?!'

Searching for reasons in a storm of confusion and ever-deepening heartbreak, she grasped at an answer – 'they have taken his body!'

She ran to where she found Peter, still sulking, and John. "They have taken away the Lord out of the tomb and ..." she began. Hearing this, Peter jumped to his feet and ran out – confused, angry, grieving.

'Oh, no! Why?!' his heart lamented.

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

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

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

Then John ventured in. For some reason, when he saw the inside of the tomb something 'clicked' inwardly – he believed.

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

“Dear woman, why are you weeping?” they asked. She explained what seemed to be obvious, “Because they have taken away my Lord... and I don’t know where they’ve laid Him.”

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

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

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

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

“Mary,” He spoke softly.

And her heart exploded!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

But with a single command, the raging storm was stilled.

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

Now, sorrows will come, if they haven’t already, for we are living in treacherous days. As a result, many people are asking these same questions (or will be) and those who are dealing with tragedy will not generally be lifted up by some well-meaning teacher’s 3-point lesson on God’s righteous judgments, His sovereignty, His mercy, etc.

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

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

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

And He rose again!

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

Looking at that painting, it hit me – He’s not there in that grave, in that condition, even though everyone who knew and loved Him thought He was. He was in that grave – He probably looked much like that. His death was real, the pain was real, the sorrow real, the anguish real. But early on the third day, Jesus – the Way the Truth and the Life, conquered sin and death and brought in the real reality – resurrection and eternal life in an indescribably wonderful place.

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