




Examine Yourself

**To See
Whether You Are In
The Faith**

by
Phil Enlow

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Introduction

2 Cor. 13:5. *Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you—unless, of course, you fail the test?*

The subject of this book is a very scary one for many people. They are afraid of what they will find. They don't know how. For many their "faith" is really "second-hand" faith, one they blindly and stubbornly cling to in the vain hope that it will get them to heaven. But how foolish it is gamble your soul on an unexamined faith. It is far worse than jumping out of an airplane without making sure you have a good parachute.

My purpose in examining this critical subject is not to injure or to cause needless fear but rather to strip away every false hope, every defective parachute, so that we may face eternity with the same confidence Paul had when he said, "I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him for that day." 2 Tim 1:12.

Paul said to "examine yourselves." There must be a way to do that. But for many it is necessary first to thoroughly establish why it is that we need to do it. It doesn't take a genius to see that the so-called Christian world is full of confusing and contradictory ideas about what it takes to be ready for the judgment day that will certainly come. Besides that Jesus plainly warned that His coming would be unexpected and that all who would be a part of His eternal kingdom must "be ready." Luke 12:40.

My prayer is that this book will comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable. There are many with a false sense of security who need to be awakened to their need while there is yet time. But there are also genuine born-again believers whose confidence is under attack from the enemy of their souls and who need a greater assurance. God's desire for both categories is that they come to a place of spiritual rest and confidence, a confidence that is on solid ground — Jesus Christ, and him crucified.

May God bless you as you read...

Chapter One

Why Examine Yourself?

Paul had a lot of problems with the Corinthian church. Even a casual reading of the two surviving letters he wrote makes it obvious that Paul — over a period of years — had to confront and deal with one serious issue after another: there were strife and divisions (1:10-12, 3:1-4); there was serious immorality and the church wasn't doing anything about it, (chapter 5); they were carrying disputes between brethren to outside civil courts (chapter 6); they had questions and problems regarding sex, marriage, and divorce (chapter 7); they tended to be selfish in their conduct, even when weaker brethren were wounded (chapter 8); some were spiritually presumptuous and careless (chapter 10); some had turned the Lord's supper into a drunken picnic (chapter 11); there was much confusion about and misuse of spiritual gifts (chapters 12 and 14); they had apparently entertained false doctrine, such as the teaching that there was no resurrection (chapter 15). There were other problems as well and we haven't even touched on 2 Corinthians. Sounds almost like churches today!

For someone like Paul, who cared so deeply for the Corinthians, who had laid his own life on the line to bring them to Christ and to nurture them spiritually, these problems were no doubt a heavy burden indeed. He had the heart of a true spiritual father, one who cared more about their welfare than his own.

And Paul was unable, most of the time, to confront these problems face to face. The divine call on his life carried him to many other places and laid upon him the burdens of many other churches as well. In addition, for long periods of time, Paul languished in

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prison while false ministers, able to travel freely, went behind him trying to undermine his work.

I have no doubt that Paul spent much time weeping and praying for his young converts, entreating God to rule and overrule. And of course he wrote letters, at least thirteen of which have been preserved for us as part of sacred scripture. These give us much wisdom and insight into the life of the young church and of the problems they faced.

Paul knew that genuine Christians could have real problems. The Corinthian believers were not long out of heathen darkness and had a lot of spiritual maturing to do. In 1 Cor. 3:1-3, he wrote, “Brothers, I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly — mere infants in Christ. I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready. You are still worldly.”

In spite of their problems Paul readily acknowledged that they were “the body of Christ” and that they did “not lack any spiritual gift.” 1 Cor. 12:27, 1:7. His father’s heart reached out to them as to young believers who needed to learn and grow.

A Deeper Problem

Still, the seriousness and persistence of their problems pointed to a greater need, to deeper issues. Paul had very good reason to believe that some of the members of the Corinthian congregation were not real Christians at all. It is one thing to help immature Christians to learn and grow. It is something else altogether to deal with lost church members.

Trying to alter the problem behavior of lost church members only buries the real problem — at best. Their hearts are unchanged. They can’t grow and mature: they’re still spiritually dead. The need is that they be brought under divine conviction of their true condition and genuinely born again.

It was because of this that Paul wrote what he did in 2 Cor. 13:5. *“Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you—unless, of*

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course, you fail the test?" I believe that this was divine wisdom, given to Paul to address a critical need. This wisdom took into account the fact that real visible church congregations of professed believers consisted of both true and false professors. Some were genuinely born-again and some only professed to be — or thought they were and were deceived. Could any other issue be more important?

And notice where the responsibility was placed! **Individual believers were responsible before God to make certain that they were saved.** Paul couldn't do that. Other ministers couldn't. The job wasn't given to angels. They were responsible themselves. No one could expect to arrive at the judgment unprepared and then blame someone else. Think about that!

This is not an appealing subject for many people. It makes them nervous. They are already struggling with questions about assurance of salvation and then someone comes along and questions them about it — and then has the gall to make them responsible! How dare they? The very idea! And yet that is exactly what Paul — under divine inspiration — did.

Check Your Parachute!

Think about the alternatives for a moment. Think about it in terms of two men, each expecting to have to jump without warning from an airplane. Both are wearing parachutes. Then someone comes along and questions them, alerting them to the fact that there are a lot of fake and defective parachutes on the market and people have been jumping to their deaths fully expecting their parachutes to work. Would it make sense to check and be sure? Of course!

Yet people get very defensive about their religion. They are easily offended. They tend to cling stubbornly — and even fearfully — to whatever hope their religion gives them. They point to their experiences, their religious works, their renowned and gifted teachers, their denomination or movement, and so forth, never willing to consider that they could be unprepared to meet their

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Maker in spite of all of these things. Such questions are for others, surely not for them!

How foolish this is! They will pay scrupulous attention to their investments, their retirement funds, their business interests, their perceived insurance needs, and many other facets of their lives, yet they will stubbornly, blindly cling to their religion, betting their souls on a faith they will not honestly examine. And yet God says we can know!

My Purpose

My purpose in examining this critical subject is not to injure or to cause needless fear but rather to strip away every false hope, every defective parachute, so that we may face eternity with the same confidence Paul had when he said, "I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him for that day." 2 Tim 1:12.

Paul said to "examine yourselves." There must be a way to do that. But first I would like to try to thoroughly establish why it is that we need to do it.

In Matthew, chapter 13, we are given a number of parables that reveal various truths regarding the kingdom Jesus had come to establish. One of these is the parable of the wheat and tares. The parable itself is found in Matt. 13:24-30. In it a farmer sowed good seed in his field. Then when everyone was asleep, his enemy went into the field and sowed weeds among the wheat. When everything came up the mixture of wheat and weeds became evident to the farmer's servants and they wondered how it had happened. The farmer told them that an enemy was responsible. He further told them to let them all grow together until the harvest. At that time the weeds would be gathered into bundles and burned and the wheat would be gathered into his barn.

The explanation is given in verses 37-43. Jesus, Himself, is the farmer and the field is the world. The good seed represents the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one. The enemy is

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the devil. The harvest represents the end of the age and the reapers are angels. Even as the parable pictured, there would be a separation of the two kinds at the end.

No doubt, there are many lessons in this parable but for our purposes here the main lesson is that Jesus knew that there would be a mixture of true and false among his professed followers throughout the course of the age. He wanted his disciples to understand this and be prepared.

The lesson is reinforced a few verses later (verses 47-50). Here the work of the kingdom is compared to fishermen letting a net down in a lake — something the disciples were very familiar with. In this case they caught “all kinds” of fish which were later separated, the good fish collected in the basket and the bad thrown away. Jesus said that at the end of the age angels would “come and separate the wicked from the righteous and throw them into the fiery furnace.”

Counterfeit Christians

Clearly the devil has made it his business from the day of Pentecost until now to oppose the church of Jesus by every possible means. He has attempted to stamp it out through persecution, of course, but by far his most effective tactic has been to invade and corrupt it. As Jesus foretold, his efforts have produced countless counterfeit Christians down through the age.

One of the devil’s favorite tactics is the false prophet. God has ordained through the “foolishness of preaching” (1 Cor. 1:21) to save those who believe — that is, the message seems foolish to worldly unbelievers. Satan, therefore, inspires ministers of his own to preach a false and empty gospel that, quite naturally, produces false Christians.

This is pictured quite clearly in Matt. 7:13-23. Within this passage we see both true and false prophets who persuade people to enter two kinds of gates and walk on two different roads. While the narrow way leads to life, the end of the false road is set forth in verses 21-23.

A true prophet is, of course, one who has been sent by Jesus Christ

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to preach His message. There is divine authority behind what he does and life imparted to willing hearers. The false prophet is raised up by the devil to mislead those who follow him. Outwardly, he appears to be a true prophet although, in fact, all he can do is to kill and destroy. Jesus pictured such men as ferocious wolves in sheep's clothing. To the undiscerning they appear to be sheep yet they are anything but.

Jesus told his disciples that they would be able to recognize these false prophets by the fruit they produced, just as they could tell good and bad trees by their fruit. As Jesus said, if you want to gather grapes you don't go to a thorn bush. If you desire figs you don't look for the nearest thistle. Trees bring forth after their own kind in the spiritual as well as in the natural realm. Whatever kind of life is in the tree is what will be reproduced in the fruit.

Obviously, though, from Jesus' remarks, it is evident that "many" will not recognize these false prophets and will be deceived by their message. They will go through the wide gate and set forth on the broad road, glad for all the company that travels there and sure of their destination.

What many people who read this passage don't realize is that each of these gates, the wide one and the narrow one, represents religious conversion. In both cases people are embracing a message that promises heaven. Both are embracing a lifestyle that they believe embodies the Christian life. Travelers on both roads journey in the expectation that that road leads to heaven. Both kinds of travelers call Jesus, "Lord." Both are engaged in activities that they believe constitute serving the Lord.

But the awful truth is revealed by Jesus in verses 21-23. Although both sets of travelers call Him "Lord," Jesus clearly said that not everyone who did so would enter the kingdom of heaven. What mattered was not what they said but what they did. The critical thing was actually doing the will of God.

I Never Knew You

When the broad road crowd arrived at the end of their journey,

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having been zealously engaged in their many religious endeavors, they found themselves, to their utter dismay, rejected as evildoers. **None** who entered that gate and traveled that way to its destination **were ever God's people**. This is an important truth to note. He did not say, "I knew you once but you messed up and lost out." He said plainly, **"I never knew you."**

The word "evildoers," also translated as "workers of iniquity" in the King James, is from the Greek word that means "lawless." These were people in whom self-will had never been confronted and conquered. Although they were very religious, and even zealous, what they did was an expression of self and self-will. Evidently, the "wide gate" gospel is very accommodating to sin and self-will. It does not thoroughly deal with the sinfulness of sinners and bring them to genuine repentance, nor cause them to give up their lives to follow Christ and do His will. The narrow gate, on the other hand, is not only hard to find but hard to enter. The sinner cannot take his sins through that gate and he must give up his life. It is no wonder that the wide gate appeals to so many.

Notice also the relative numbers of the different groups of travelers. The wide gate attracts "many" and the narrow gate "few." And so, not only did Jesus expect there to be a mixture, it seems very safe to say that **He expected the great majority of His professed followers down through the age to be false**. It is sobering to realize that, relatively speaking, "few" find the narrow gate and walk the narrow road that leads to life.

Verses 24-27 reveal another sobering truth. Having a true ministry is no guarantee of success! Many hear but do not do. The truth of God, brought by men He sends, is meant to be taken to heart and expressed practically in our lives. Those who hear only are spoken of as "foolish," like one building a house on a foundation of sand only to see it destroyed by a storm. Nothing short of the genuine living Word of God, believed — and obeyed — will enable anyone to survive spiritually and escape the certain fate of this wicked world.

This truth is pictured in another way in Matt. 13:3-9 as a farmer

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who sows his seed on four different types of soil. One kind is so hard that the seed has no chance at all to take root and the birds come and eat it. Another kind is rocky with not much soil. Here there is an apparent result but it does not last due to the lack of nourishment for the roots. The third type of soil already has thorns growing there and they choke out the crop. Only in the “good soil” does the seed flourish. The seed is the same but in different hearts — represented by the different types of soil — the results are very different. If we were talking about a literal farm crop it would be one thing, but Jesus was talking about eternal salvation.

Notice that, although the seed sprang up on three of the four types of soil, only the good soil produced a crop. In the one there were areas of heart and mind that were hard and resistant to the Word and the crop failed. In the other, worldly interests took precedence over the Word of God, which was choked out. Seeming results are no indicator of good soil. The Word of God will only produce a crop where the heart is thoroughly ploughed up, prepared, and then devoted to it.

Few Saved?

In Luke 13 we see another sobering passage. As Jesus traveled through the various villages and towns on his way to Jerusalem someone asked him, “Lord, are only a few people going to be saved.” Luke 13:23. I’m sure that many today would want to jump in and reassure the questioner about the vast numbers that would be saved through radio and television and great crusades — but listen to the answer Jesus gave:

“Make every effort to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to. Once the owner of the house gets up and closes the door, you will stand outside knocking and pleading, ‘Sir, open the door for us.’ But he will answer, ‘I don’t know you or where you come from.’ Then you will say, ‘We ate and drank with you, and you taught in our streets.’ But he will

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reply, 'I don't know you or where you come from. Away from me, all you evildoers!'" Luke 13:24-27.

In this account Jesus echoes what he had said in Matt. 7. The answer to the question that was asked is very evident. At the very least, we can safely say that, relative to the world's population, and even relative to the number who are religious, those who are truly saved are few. It is true that, when you consider the redeemed of every age, they make up a great throng that no man can number (Rev. 7:9), but that number is still few beside the total number of those who have lived and died lost.

Unable to Enter

There are two points that Jesus particularly makes in this message. One is that people will actually try to enter and not be able. The other concerns the limited time available for entering: when the door is closed it will be too late. Both of these truths lend a great urgency to the question of salvation. It is by far the most critical question of life. It is in fact the **ONLY** issue that will matter when this life is over. And the fact that people are concerned about it is no guarantee that they will be saved.

The fact that people can try and not be able surely tells us that a serious effort indeed is necessary if we are to secure the salvation of our souls. It is not a casual matter. The effort necessary is not one of works to gain God's favor, nor is it some kind of effort to convince God to save us. He is more than willing. He sent His Son to die to make it possible. I believe it rather speaks of the battle we face with our own unwillingness to give up sin and self. And there is no such thing as salvation without surrender.

That was the problem with the man we call the "rich young ruler." Mark 10:17-23. Here was a very zealous religious man who earnestly desired eternal life. He went out of his way to seek out Jesus regarding this all-important issue. He even ran to Jesus and fell on his knees out of reverence and respect for this one who could surely answer his question.

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However, Jesus quickly put the finger on his true “god” by telling the man to sell whatever he had, give it to the poor, and to come and take up his cross and follow him. The man’s money was his god. It was more important to him than the promise of eternal life and treasure in heaven. As he weighed the choice at hand he became very sad, unwilling to give up his earthly riches. He tried to enter in but was unable, not because the door was shut but because he was unwilling to pay the price. He knew that eternal life was desirable and important but it was not more important to him than his wealth. The very first of the ten commandments is, “You shall have no other gods before me.” Exodus 20:3.

The same principle is spelled out in Luke 14:26-35 where those who would follow Christ were told to count the cost. That cost was clearly spelled out as giving up one’s life. Family couldn’t come before Christ. Possessions couldn’t come first. Even one’s very life itself couldn’t be served ahead of Christ. Those who are unable to enter in are those who are confronted in some way with the cost of following Christ and are unwilling to pay it. It is not that the gate is closed; it is rather that they will not meet the conditions for entering.

If the gate were only a little wider, they would gladly enter. If they could somehow serve Christ AND self they would gladly do it. But faced with an uncompromising choice, they choose self and are unable to enter. And consider this: what is the true motive of someone who wants eternal life without giving up self? Is not their desire itself selfish? They are not really interested in serving Christ at all, only in obtaining eternal life, a prospect that seems to allow self to live forever. They do not see self as the central problem, the one thing that will keep them out of God’s eternal kingdom. Rather, they seek to promote the interests of self through religion.

That is why the wide gate is so appealing. There are so many opportunities in religion to gratify self. Religion is presented as a doorway whereby self may avoid hell and gain heaven — eternal self-gratification! It is seen as the solution to the problems of life — a way for self to have a smoother road through this world. Some brands

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of religion offer all kinds of emotional and even sensual experiences for self to enjoy (and become addicted to). There are endless opportunities for personal pride as well as praise and recognition by other religious people. In short, there are just as many opportunities to gratify self through religion as there are outside of it! What is so deceptive is that such religion is practiced “in Jesus’ Name,” and seemingly with Divine approval.

A Limited Opportunity

The other issue in Luke 13 concerns opportunity. God does not forever stand beside an open door entreating people to enter. If sinners do not act they risk losing their opportunity. When God confronts a sinner through the gospel and presses upon his heart the need to repent and believe, there is only one time of which the sinner may be sure, and that time is “**now.**” It is an incredibly dangerous presumption to say “no” or “not now.” It’s like saying to Almighty God, “God, I’m not ready to give up my sins. I know I ought to get saved, but I’d rather live in sin and rebellion awhile longer.” It may even be like saying, “God, how dare you put me on the spot like this! I’ll give up my sins when I get ready.”

There are many reasons why an opportunity to be saved may be lost. It should be obvious to any human being that we have no promise of tomorrow. Just because we are alive and healthy today is no guarantee that we will even be alive to see another dawn. I’ve heard and read many accounts of sinners who resisted conviction and left a gospel meeting only to be suddenly killed before having another opportunity. Salvation is the only thing that is important. Failure to seek God with all of our hearts and be sure of it is the height of folly.

Anyone whose primary concern is what he can selfishly get out of this present life is an utter fool. He is like the rich man of whom Jesus spoke in Luke 12:16-21. At the very point where he felt that he was all set to live a life of luxury and pleasure God said, “You fool! This very

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night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?” Luke 12:20.

Jesus highlighted another divine principle in John 12:35-36: “Then Jesus told them, ‘You are going to have the light just a little while longer. Walk while you have the light, before darkness overtakes you. The man who walks in the dark does not know where he is going. Put your trust in the light while you have it, so that you may become sons of light.’”

Here it is clearly revealed that when God gives men light, He requires them to embrace it and walk in it. Not to do so is to invite darkness. Indeed, the more men resist the light of God and put off attending to their salvation, the harder their hearts get until one day their hearts become like the hard soil of which Jesus spoke. No longer are they capable of hearing and responding to the Word of God. For them, the door is shut. In this case, although the sinner has not literally died, yet, so far as salvation is concerned, **he may as well have**. I wonder as I look out across the world today how many there are who are in this condition — and how many others are dangerously close to it.

Closely related to this is the hour in which we live. I am persuaded that in this hour God has loosed Satan to work as he has not been able to work since the cross, where Jesus bound “the strong man.” Matt. 12:29, Rev. 12:7-12. To anyone with an ounce of discernment it is abundantly evident that the power of darkness over the minds of men in our world is growing by the hour. Anyone who would follow Christ in this hour must swim against the tide as never before. I believe that before it is over everyone will be in one of two camps, God’s or the devil’s. At that point everyone will have made his or her choice and destinies will be fixed. The door will have been closed and all opportunity for sinners to be saved will be gone. Now is the only time we have to give our full attention to the salvation of our souls. How tragic it will be for men to have to say, “I knew I needed to repent,” or, “I meant to seek God; it was not my intention to be lost.”

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Yet, when there was an opportunity, something else was more important.

And there is yet another reason for the door being closed: Christ is coming, and no man knows when that will be. When He comes, it will be eternally too late. Christ plainly taught this in Matt. 24:36-44. He used the example of the salvation of Noah from the flood. Noah and his family alone believed God's warning of the coming flood and prepared. When the time came they were safe inside the ark with the door shut when sudden destruction came to the world of unbelieving sinners who had rejected the message. That destruction came without warning. One minute people were simply living their lives, unconcerned. The next, they felt the rain begin to fall and suddenly they knew. I have no doubt that some ran to the ark and beat on the door wanting to get in but it was too late. God had shut the door.

Jesus said that it would be like that at his coming. People would be engaged in their normal everyday activities when suddenly Christ would come and the lost and the saved would be finally and eternally separated. That is why Jesus said, "So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him." Matt 24:44. There is much teaching in our day that conveys the idea that those left behind when Jesus comes will have another opportunity to be saved but that is a lie from the pit of hell. They will have exactly the same opportunity that those outside the ark had — or else what Jesus said in Matt. 24 was meaningless.

The Midnight Cry

There is another very sobering passage that bears strongly on our subject: Matt. 25:1-13, the parable of the ten virgins. Here Jesus pictures his kingdom as ten virgins waiting for the coming bridegroom. All had lamps, representing their Christian profession, but only five actually had the oil that their lamps needed. They were called "wise" and the others were called "foolish."

The setting for this particular parable was "midnight," representing the time of greatest spiritual darkness. This confirms

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what we said earlier about conditions before Christ's return. Due to these conditions, they all became drowsy and fell asleep. At midnight, however, there was a sudden cry that the Bridegroom had arrived and they were to go out to meet him. Accordingly, they all got up and trimmed their lamps. However, the foolish quickly discovered that their lamps were going out because they had no oil. They further discovered that they couldn't obtain any from the wise but needed their own. In the end, the door was shut and they stood outside and heard the bridegroom say to them, "I tell you the truth, I don't know you."

This is perhaps the most sobering truth of all. These foolish virgins were not (apparently) people of the world. They were among the people of God and had the same profession. They were members of Bible-honoring churches who believed in the coming of the Lord. It seems that they at least outwardly remained faithful in a time of great darkness. The fact that they are referred to as "virgins" tells us that in some sense they didn't live like people of the world but rather appeared to anyone looking on to be Christians. But they had no oil. They had never truly been born again. In spite of their religious profession and their acknowledgement of the truth, they had never actually given up their lives and had Christ to come in and take up residence. Although they professed to be ready, and believed that they were ready, in fact, they were not.

These are surely the most tragic cases of all. I have no doubt that on the day of judgment the Lord will cause such people to look back to the times when the claims of Christ searched them out and they sidestepped them, substituting mental assent for obedience, activity for repentance, and profession for surrender. Such are caught between two worlds, unable to fully give up the one for the other. They say and do many right things but their hearts remain empty.

Why would Jesus tell us this? Is it simply to frighten us? Is it to destroy our confidence? Or is it rather a further reinforcement of what He had said in Luke 13 about making every effort to enter through the narrow door, to be personally diligent and sure of our

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own salvation? I wonder just how many church members in our day there are to whom these sobering words apply? The time to be concerned is now. At the midnight hour it will be too late.

Chapter Two

Lessons From The Early Church

2 Cor. 13:5. Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you—unless, of course, you fail the test?

This sobering admonition was written to the Corinthian church by a very concerned Apostle Paul. He recognized that not every member of the congregation was a genuine Christian and that the responsibility of making certain of salvation rested upon each individual. Paul had poured his heart out to them in giving them the gospel and seeking to establish them solidly on Christ, the one true foundation. Still, in spite of all his efforts, he saw needs that caused him to doubt some and thus to exhort them to examine themselves.

In chapter one we sought to begin laying the groundwork for this crucial subject by examining some of the teachings of our Lord Jesus regarding the kingdom He had come to establish. I believe we made it plain that Jesus expected the great majority of His professed followers down through the age to be false, counterfeits planted by Satan in an attempt to corrupt and hinder the work of God. The narrow road that leads to life would be found and traveled by “few” while the broad road that leads to destruction would be traveled by “many.”

The First Church

I believe it would be in order to briefly examine the beginnings of the church as they are recorded for us in the New Testament. We will be able to see examples of the outworking of the things that Jesus taught and find lessons that bear on the issues we face in our day.

Lessons From The Early Church

In the parable of the wheat and the tares Jesus made it plain that the devil would plant tares, unbelievers, his children, among the wheat, God's true children. The early history of the church is set forth in the book of Acts. For a considerable period of time following the inception of the church on the day of Pentecost the life, power, and purity of the young church was such that Satan couldn't get in — and he couldn't stop it! I believe that a sovereign God powerfully overshadowed the young church to get it solidly established and to give a mighty witness to Israel. In spite of the general unbelief of Israel the Lord was faithful to have His word proclaimed for the sake of the true remnant.

Think of the wonderful grace of God that was manifested among newborn believers! Never has the church known greater unity, greater love, greater power, or greater purity than during this period. I have no doubt that Satan was keenly interested in getting some of his people in but he just couldn't. And when he stirred up persecution it only drove the Christians to prayer for greater boldness and courage. No matter what Satan did the work of the gospel grew and spread.

But finally there came a day when the first sin was recorded in the young church. Acts 4:32-37 recounts for us the selfless way in which believers responded to the practical needs of other believers. It was God's grace at work that enabled them to do this. After all, when the church began Peter preached to a great crowd consisting of people from many countries who had gathered for the Jewish feast of Pentecost. When 3000 people were converted that day I have no doubt that there were many foreigners among them. The gospel made such an impact on them that they simply didn't go home. Over time this created practical economic problems and God moved the hearts of the believers to see to one another's needs.

Hypocrisy

But Satan, by the time of Acts 5, had succeeded in planting a couple in the church by the name of Ananias and Sapphira. As people

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began to sell surplus property and bring the proceeds of those sales to the Apostles' feet they, too, sold a piece of property. Unfortunately, however, self was on the throne of their hearts and it caused them to do two things. The first was to hold back part of the money for themselves. By itself this wasn't a terrible thing had they simply been honest about it. However, that same spirit of self moved them to pretend that they were bringing the whole amount. Their pride drove them to desire the credit for doing what others were doing.

I'm sure they had no real sense of what they had done. They probably reasoned that they had made a real sacrifice and congratulated themselves on their spirit of charity. But their act of deceit and hypocrisy was the first break in the perfect unity of spirit that prevailed in the young church. It was a direct affront and challenge, not to the people, or even to the apostles, but to the Holy Ghost. And that was the line that God led Peter to take with them. What they had done was supernaturally revealed to Peter and so he challenged, first Ananias, then Sapphira a few hours later. God struck both dead on the spot and great fear filled everyone who heard of it. Still the church continued to grow as new believers were being steadily added.

Hypocrisy is a terrible thing. Jesus warned of it, comparing it to leaven (Luke 12:1). Like leaven, a little hypocrisy will permeate and drastically affect the whole. At this stage of things God wouldn't let Satan corrupt the church. What if He judged every hypocrite today in the same manner? How many church members would be left?

Hypocrisy is a direct challenge to Christ. It is like saying, "I can run my own life, make my own decisions, and outwardly present myself in the church as a Christian, one who serves Christ — and get away with it!" Such people are deceived, yet they believe themselves to be Christians, on the road to heaven. They do not realize what incredible rebellion it is to serve self and pretend to serve Christ. Peter described their sin as lying, not to men, but to the Holy Ghost. Ananias and Sapphira paid the price on the spot but everyone like them will ultimately pay the same price unless they become aware of

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their condition and find a place of repentance. And so this particular attempt by Satan to invade the church failed.

Glory Seekers

In Acts 8 we see another kind of attempt. Following the death of Stephen by stoning, God used persecution by Saul and other Jews to scatter the church from Jerusalem so that the gospel could be carried to other places. It was at this time that Philip went to Samaria and preached. God bore witness to his preaching by enabling him to perform many mighty miracles of deliverance and the result was that great numbers believed.

Before Philip brought the gospel to the Samaritans there had been a sorcerer named Simon who had held a position of high esteem among the people. He had performed demon-inspired magic to bewitch the people. No doubt he enjoyed the status that his power gave him before the people. However, when Philip came even Simon was amazed at the great power of God that was manifest. As a result he was baptized and continued to follow Philip around, watching as he ministered and performed miracles.

In preaching among the Samaritans, Philip was breaking new ground. Up to that time all gospel work had been among the Jews and all the converts had been Jewish. But the Samaritans were despised by the Jews as “half-breeds.” Their ancestors were partly Jewish and partly heathen. They maintained their own religious traditions as we can see from John 4 where Jesus talked with the woman at the well.

And so, although many Samaritans had been baptized in Jesus’ name, none of them had at that time received the Holy Spirit as had those who were baptized on the day of Pentecost — and no doubt the other new converts in the months and years following. God wanted to bear witness by and through the apostles that the gospel had indeed been extended to the Samaritans. Accordingly, Peter and John were sent from Jerusalem to see what was going on. It was very evidently a genuine work of God and so they laid their hands on the new converts and they did receive the Holy Spirit.

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It was at this point that Simon's true condition came out. He went to Peter and John and offered them money for the ability to lay hands on people that they might receive the Holy Spirit. Of course, it then became obvious what his real motivation was. He was enamored by supernatural power and manifestation. He wanted it for self that he might continue to be "somebody" before the people. And religion attracts such people in droves. Many come because they want to wield the power and others come to experience it and see its manifestation. This attraction to the supernatural opens up many opportunities for Satan to deceive people. That is why Jesus warned so plainly that many would come in his name performing great lying signs and wonders that would deceive many. Matthew 24:4-5, 24.

Many Motives

People apparently follow Christ for many reasons other than a genuine love for God and His kingdom. Their motives vary greatly and are often hidden. This is plain from the ministry of Jesus recorded in the first part of John 6. On this occasion Jesus miraculously fed 5000 hungry people. After the providential meal it became necessary for Jesus to withdraw from the crowds. He discerned that the people intended to make him their king by force. In one sense you could say they believed in him and were honoring him but what was their real motive? Were they true seekers of God and His kingdom?

Their motives were entirely selfish. If Jesus was a prophet they wanted him to be THEIR prophet. When he did amazing things they wanted to bask in the glory of what their prophet could do. In short, they were sign-seekers who gloried in the supernatural. However, their interests were completely selfish and earthly. They had no interest in God's kingdom and heaven. They wanted an earthly king of whom they could be proud — and one, no doubt, who could deal in a supernatural way with the problems of life.

Many supposed followers of Christ fall into this category. Their supreme motivation is to glory in signs and wonders and miracles.

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They willingly follow someone who talks about Jesus and exhibits seeming miracle power. They are thrilled with every apparent miracle they see or hear about. They will go on and on about such things as though that were the very height of spirituality, the very essence of what God and His kingdom are all about.

However, if you start talking about taking up one's cross and daily following Jesus, or living a life of faith based on God's Word, or dying daily, or finding strength in God's sufficient grace to cope with weakness and affliction, they quickly lose interest. Their concept of the kingdom of God centers in supernatural power to make life's problems go away. Note: their interest in God's power has to do with the problems of THIS LIFE.

I'm glad that God in His mercy and compassion can and does intervene miraculously but that is not what the gospel is about. At best it is a witness to it. Hebrews 2:4, Mark 16:20, John 10:37-38. Such things are meant to point to the greatest miracle of all — salvation! I'm afraid that many religious people have such a distorted view of things that salvation is almost regarded as trivial, no big deal. "Accepting Jesus" and being "saved" are seen as simple and common whereas faith to cast out devils or heal someone's body, well, that's really something!

When the disciples returned from a season of ministry in which they had healed the sick and cast out devils (Luke 10:17-20) they were full of rejoicing and amazement that even the devils had been subject to them through Jesus' name. However, Jesus said, "...do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven." Luke 10:20. That's the real miracle! I wonder how many of today's miracle-chasers have any idea what Jesus was talking about? I wonder how many of them are even saved — or are they really just like the sign-seekers of Jesus' day?

Blessing Seekers

There were others among the crowds that day in John 6 who were not so much attracted by the supernatural itself but by the results,

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namely the food. Their interest in Jesus was motivated by the fleshly blessing they had enjoyed. They sought earthly food, not heavenly. They were concerned about bodily needs relating to their earthly life and not about their desperate need of eternal salvation. They undoubtedly wouldn't have cared if their provision had come through the Son of God or through some heathen magician.

People in every age have been motivated by similar concerns. Many in today's churches are there for earthly advantage. Some are motivated by business interests or social contacts. Some others associate themselves with religion through economic need with a hope of charitable aid. And multitudes have embraced a so-called gospel that centers in a Jesus who is primarily interested in helping them cope with the problems of this life.

Such a "gospel" is highly selective and very earthly and selfish. It is selective because it leaves out the parts of the true gospel message that are regarded as less palatable. It is earthly and selfish because the parts that are retained are carefully packaged to appeal to the interests and needs of the natural man who desires help with life's problems such as stress, financial problems, issues with relationships, health problems, psychological issues such as negative thinking, dealing with pain and loss, and so forth.

Christ can and does deal with the issues of this life. But what of sin and repentance, judgment and hell, the cross, and the blood? (Oh, let's not talk about those things. People will stop coming and then how will we reach them?) What of suffering for Christ? What of sacrifice? What of loving not our lives unto the death? What about the kinds of things that Paul said were necessary for him to minister the life of Christ to others (2 Corinthians 4:7-12)? Can such people ever "glory in tribulation," "in all things give thanks," "offer the sacrifice of praise," and especially "glory in...infirmities"?

The overwhelming majority of people attracted by that kind of "gospel" are lost and don't know it. Their motivation is no different than millions of others who just want help with life's problems. The idea that they can get that and go to heaven too is just icing on the

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cake, a wonderful bonus. You can build huge churches with that kind of a gospel but you will fill them with lost church members.

There were others in John 6 whose motivation was more like that of Simon the magician. They wanted to know what they had to do to be able to do the miraculous things that Jesus did. They wanted to know his secret. They had no real interest in serving God but in winning the praise and admiration of men. Their motivation was sinful selfish pride.

Jesus, of course, wasn't fooled. He immediately turned their attention to what God really wanted from them — that they believe in the one He had sent. Unfortunately that didn't interest them. However, such people interest Satan! They have great potential for serving his evil ends. He comes to them under the guise of the Holy Spirit and offers them power and influence and they all too often become tools for the deception of sign-seekers.

That is why Jesus warned so pointedly of those who would perform great miracles and signs to deceive. God is a miracle-working God but that is nowhere near the heart of what His kingdom is about. And Satan loves to take advantage of the selfish motivations of natural men and of a misplaced emphasis to deceive many and cause them to miss Christ. Undoubtedly it is people in this class who will be among those rejected as workers of iniquity that Jesus spoke of in Matt. 7:21-23.

And so we have seen two early attempts by Satan to infiltrate and corrupt the church fail. Unfortunately, though, it wasn't long before he began to succeed as Jesus had said he would. The rest of the New Testament records many instances of the apostles contending with his efforts.

Chapter Three

Why Paul Was Concerned

We began by referring to the problems encountered by Paul in the Corinthian church. It was these problems that caused him ultimately to instruct them to examine themselves to see whether they were in the faith. I believe that there are two reasons in particular for his concern. One was simply his knowledge that not everyone who follows even a true ministry really comes to heart-faith in Christ. That is why he wrote in 2 Cor. 6:1 urging them “not to receive God’s grace in vain.” It is one thing to hear and go along with truth but quite another to embrace it from the depths of one’s heart.

That is the particular concern of the book of Hebrews, especially in chapters 3 and 4. The comparison is drawn between the would-be followers of Christ and those who followed Moses out of Egypt and into the wilderness. The latter received a sure word of divine promise accompanied by powerful miracles yet the indictment was, “Their hearts are always going astray, and they have not known my ways.” Heb. 3:10. Their persistent unbelief caused them to be rejected. These were not believers who fell away: they were NEVER believers at heart.

Heb. 4:1 warns us, not of falling away from genuine faith, but of stopping SHORT of really entering in. The true gospel message must be received into our heart of hearts with genuine faith. That is the problem with so many. They make an outward profession, they give mental assent, they give of their money and time, they reform. In short they do everything BUT the one thing that matters: surrender unreservedly to Christ.

Imagine our life is like a house. We are like the man who owns that

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house. Some want Christ to come and live in their neighborhood and spread His good influence for their benefit. Some would like Him to come and actually live as a guest in their house. They want the sense of security of having Him living on the premises. They imagine that His presence frees them from the fear of divine judgment and disapproval as long as they honor Him in this way. They give Him the very best guest room in the house and consult with Him whenever they have a problem that needs solving. They believe that He must be pleased and satisfied with them for providing this accommodation.

The problem with this is that it falls far short of illustrating real salvation. Men will do about anything religiously speaking as long as they don't have to give up the throne of their lives. Yet anything short of this is in vain. It stops short of salvation. What should the man do? If he truly understands his need before God and Christ's perfect provision and just Who Christ is he will gladly sign over the deed to house and property and move into the servant's quarters. He will then say, "It is no longer my house to do with as I please. You are Lord and Master. What do you want me to do?"

Paul was well aware that some people could gravitate to his message for one reason or another and yet stop short of salvation. He knew that they had experienced a measure of God's grace in their lives but also that it was possible that it not result in salvation because they had stopped short of unconditional surrender.

False Ministries

The second reason for Paul's concern has more to do with an overriding theme of the whole book of 2 Corinthians, namely, the influence of false ministries among the people. Paul was deeply burdened about the spiritual dangers brought about by the influence of these ministries and so he returned again and again to the subject. Against his desire and even his better judgment he felt compelled to defend his own ministry, not because of human jealousy but, as he puts it in 2 Cor. 11:2, "a godly jealousy." The real issue he saw was not their affection for and attachment to him but to Christ Himself.

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Way back in the beginning of the first letter to the Corinthians Paul had to warn them about the kind of divisions that resulted from different ones preferring one ministry over another. This tendency betrayed their spiritual immaturity at the very least. The judgments that led to these preferences were purely carnal and natural and not based on a true spiritual discernment of the inspiration behind the ministries. The ministries Paul particularly mentions in the first chapter of 1 Corinthians were all genuine yet the people were seeing them too much through natural eyes.

This tendency is bad enough when true heaven-sent ministries are involved but it certainly opens the door for Satan to send in his counterfeits. All he has to do is to tailor his counterfeits to the natural preferences of the people! Paul gives a very broad hint of this in 1 Cor. 1:17. There he tells us that Christ sent him “to preach the gospel—not with words of human wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.” Paul didn’t say this, nor the many things included in the following passage, for no reason. He saw the great danger.

It would be difficult to overemphasize the importance of the truth he sets forth here. Remember that Paul is talking about the gospel, “the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes” (Rom. 1:16), the good news, the message of life and hope from God to man without which men will perish. Paul had a most particular interest in the integrity of the gospel and in the effectiveness of its proclamation. God took special pains to reveal to Paul the message he was to preach and to prepare him for his special calling. Galatians 1:6-23. The issue for him was not academic, not just a subject for theological debate: men’s souls depended upon it.

A Critical Danger

I think any reasonable person would agree that actually perverting — or changing — the gospel is a horrible and dangerous thing. To misdirect people regarding their relationship with God is surely the devil’s work. However, Paul, in 1 Cor. 1:17, introduces a

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different danger: that is, preaching a true message, BUT preaching it with human ability, “words of human wisdom.” And what is this terrible danger? THE CROSS OF CHRIST IS EMPTIED OF ITS POWER! Think about that! If the cross is emptied of its power, what happens to the hearers? Is it possible for them to be saved through such a message? Can words alone save?

Think about what Paul is saying here! He is saying that it is possible to preach a message that is absolutely scriptural and technically accurate so far as the words are concerned yet is completely empty of God’s power! Men employ their own clever abilities to communicate with other men what they call the gospel while God is totally absent from the whole affair. I am persuaded that in many religious circles today that is the real problem. They actively condemn false doctrine while themselves preaching an empty gospel devoid of any power to save their hearers. They may be eloquent, sincere, innovative, persuasive, engaging, and scriptural — and still be spiritually dead. And dead orthodoxy is just as dangerous to men’s souls as is false doctrine — and far more deceptive.

Do you think all the “workers of iniquity” in Matt. 7 necessarily preached false doctrine? I don’t. That’s one reason they were so dumbfounded at being rejected! How is it possible to sincerely, even zealously preach Bible truth and be rejected as a worker of iniquity?! They couldn’t imagine. Paul knew. Words are more than mere ideas. They convey spirit. What spirit is that? The spirit by which the speaker operates. Jesus said that his words were “spirit and...life.” John 6:63. Unless the gospel is impregnated with the very life of God and actively conveys His Spirit to the hearers it is powerless to save them. It may convert them to some form of religion but it cannot save them.

Human Wisdom

Paul spoke about “words of human wisdom.” What wisdom was he talking about? HUMAN wisdom. Human wisdom is utterly captive to human depravity. It is centered in self, man, and the things

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of this world. It looks at things from man's viewpoint, not God's. It promotes man's interests, not God's. It does things man's way, not God's. In short it is a fruit of what Paul calls "the sinful mind," that is "hostile to God." Rom. 8:7.

It is human wisdom that tailors the modern "gospel" to the natural interests of man. It is human wisdom that leaves out — or "soft-pedals" — those parts of the gospel that would confront the desperately rebellious and sinful condition of men's hearts, demanding true repentance and surrender. A wise woman once wrote to me, pointing out that what people are converted BY is what they are converted TO. You can't entice people into the church through natural means and then hope to somehow make Christians of them.

That is why Paul wrote in I Cor. 2:4-5, "My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power." What good is a so-called faith that rests on men's wisdom? Will God recognize it? Will it take you to heaven? No! We need the real thing.

One very reasonable question that may be asked is whether this preaching with human wisdom always means that the preacher is a lost hell-bound false prophet. I think the answer is no. While it is true that every devil-sent false prophet ministers in harmony with human wisdom it is yet possible for someone who genuinely knows the Lord to do so.

In Col. 2:8 Paul warns, "See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ." Paul is writing to Christians here. He is warning that it is possible for a Christian to be "taken captive," to be wrongly influenced by ideas and principles of human origin. Naturally, that includes outright false doctrine like that affecting the Colossian believers but it also includes anything from the realm of human wisdom — man's ways of thinking and doing.

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I believe that this includes many of the principles we can readily observe operating in the modern church world. Modern religion values education, psychology, and natural speaking ability over childlike dependence on God to reveal His Word, prayer, and the anointing. Many of today's churches are built and advanced through principles of marketing. Many religious activities rest upon their entertainment value with little or no real life. Some forms of religion rely heavily on intellectual respectability and appeal. And the list could go on and on.

A man may grow up in some religious system or other, by an act of God's grace be genuinely converted to Christ, yet be affected by the ways of religion all around him. To the extent he relies on such things and not on God Himself he may be very zealous and active in his religion and yet do little eternal good. This is what Paul warns about in I Cor. 3:10-15.

Wood, Hay, and Straw

“By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should be careful how he builds. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work. If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames.”

God has many ways of testing and proving the true spiritual character of religious works. Of course, when we speak of religious works we're really talking about PEOPLE. God doesn't care about fancy buildings and impressive organizations. The work of His kingdom is all about bringing lost sinners into right relationship with Himself through the preaching of the cross. God is far more

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interested in five people who really know and walk with Him than in some mega-church with five thousand people playing church.

While Paul does indeed seem to indicate that it is possible for a real Christian to build not only with gold and silver but also with wood, hay or straw it surely should be clear that a false ministry, one sent by Satan, will produce nothing but wood, hay and straw. He knows nothing of God's wisdom nor His ways. God's Spirit will be totally absent from his ministry — and its results. An evil tree simply cannot produce good fruit.

Letter or Spirit?

One of the ways in which Paul distinguishes his own God-given ministry with that of the false ministries is set forth in 2 Corinthians, chapter 3. His ministry was a ministry, “not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.” 2 Cor. 3:6. Again, Paul highlights the great danger of false ministries. Not only do they not minister life, they actually KILL! What Paul is saying is that a minister may actually use words from the Bible to kill his hearers spiritually. The words themselves may be true yet without God's Spirit of life in them they impart death and not life.

Genuine ministry is a ministry of revelation — revelation of our Lord's glory — that brings freedom and inner transformation. Believers who feed on such ministry grow ever more Christ-like. It does not impose “commandments” on them as did the law but rather pours the very life of God into their hearts, changing them from the inside out. It writes, not on stone tablets, but on the heart.

Let's note briefly some of the other things Paul either said or implied about these false ministries:

2 Cor. 2:17—“Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary, in Christ we speak before God with sincerity, like men sent from God.” (Money is a powerful motivation in much religion in our day.)

In 2 Cor. 3:1 Paul refers to their practice of relying on letters of

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recommendation whereas he relied on the results of his ministry of life being evident in his converts.

2 Cor. 4:1-2—“Therefore, since through God’s mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart. Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to every man’s conscience in the sight of God.” A very clear contrast!

2 Cor. 4:5-6—“For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake.” Think of all that is implied here! We have only one message — Christ! Paul wasn’t interested in them exalting him but that they serve Christ. He regarded himself as a servant — a slave — to that end.

2 Cor. 5:11-12—“Since, then, we know what it is to fear the Lord, we try to persuade men. What we are is plain to God, and I hope it is also plain to your conscience. We are not trying to commend ourselves to you again, but are giving you an opportunity to take pride in us, so that you can answer those who take pride in what is seen rather than in what is in the heart.” I wonder just how many ministers understand just what Paul was saying here.

2 Cor. 6:3-13—“We put no stumbling block in anyone’s path, so that our ministry will not be discredited. Rather, as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: in great endurance; in troubles, hardships and distresses; in beatings, imprisonments and riots; in hard work, sleepless nights and hunger; in purity, understanding, patience and kindness; in the Holy Spirit and in sincere love; in truthful speech and in the power of God; with weapons of righteousness in the right hand and in the left; through glory and dishonor, bad report and good report; genuine, yet regarded as impostors; known, yet regarded as unknown; dying, and yet we live on; beaten, and yet not killed; sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything.

“We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians, and opened wide our

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hearts to you. We are not withholding our affection from you, but you are withholding yours from us. As a fair exchange—I speak as to my children—open wide your hearts also.” The spirit of true ministry is surely evident here.

Yoked With Unbelievers

2 Cor. 6:14-16—“Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God. As God has said: ‘I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people.’”

This passage is followed by the oft-used exhortation to separation from the world and sin. However, in its context, I believe it most particularly concerns false ministry and the need of God’s people not to be “yoked together” with that particular kind of unbeliever. Their inability to discern the satanic origin of these ministries was a great grief to Paul. He longed to see them in proper relationship to God and free from such influence. We need God to lead us in our day that we might be free from all such yokes.

In chapter 10 Paul is forced to deal with the practice of these ministries to criticize and demean him in order to build themselves up. They relied on natural comparisons between ministries and the believers needed to see beyond such superficial things. They accused Paul of being bold when he was away and timid when he was there. They considered him to be a poor and unimpressive speaker and were obviously not shy with their opinions since Paul was able to quote them! Among other things this is a terrible spirit of division in the body of Christ, something God despises.

The Serpent’s Cunning

In chapter 11 Paul gets really plain. 2 Cor. 11:1-6—“I hope you will

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put up with a little of my foolishness; but you are already doing that. I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy. I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to him. But I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent's cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ. For if someone comes to you and preaches a Jesus other than the Jesus we preached, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it easily enough. But I do not think I am in the least inferior to those 'super-apostles.' I may not be a trained speaker, but I do have knowledge. We have made this perfectly clear to you in every way."

Now the real issue is out in the open! He speaks of the "serpent's cunning." He accuses these "super-apostles" of preaching a Jesus other than the one he had preached, of ministering a "different spirit," of preaching a "different gospel." Obviously this goes far beyond personality clashes between ministers. This was a matter of life and death. Paul discerned the efforts of Satan at work among the Corinthians and wanted to expose those efforts for what they were before any more damage was done.

In verses 13-15. Paul continues, "For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, masquerading as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. It is not surprising, then, if his servants masquerade as servants of righteousness. Their end will be what their actions deserve." This highlights the problems that Satan's tactics create in recognizing his evil work. Outwardly what he inspires appears to be "many wonderful works" done in Jesus' name. The only problem is that Jesus is not the author and the spirit ministered is not God's Spirit. How many know the difference? Not many, I'm afraid. That's why so many travel the broad road.

How Can We Tell?

How can we tell the difference? Jesus reveals the principle: John

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7:16-18—“Jesus answered, ‘My teaching is not my own. It comes from him who sent me. If anyone chooses to do God’s will, he will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own. He who speaks on his own does so to gain honor for himself, but he who works for the honor of the one who sent him is a man of truth; there is nothing false about him.’”

He spoke there of the motivation of a true “sent one”: to work for the honor of the one who sends him. However, the central point of what he said is that God will make it known to one who truly desires to do His will those who speak for Him and those who don’t. Merely speaking ABOUT Him, however impressive it may be, is no good. Only those sent BY Him who speak FOR Him can help people.

Modern religion is filled with substitutes for God’s simple plan and great impressive religious works have been produced. Multitudes have been gathered — but to whom and to what end? Psalm 127:1—“Unless the LORD builds the house, its builders labor in vain.”

It is very evident that those Paul was concerned about were given to boasting about who they were and what they had done in order to advance themselves. Paul, to achieve his ultimate objective of helping the believers, resorts to “boasting” about all the things he had suffered to advance the cause of Christ.

Glorying in Weakness

Yet in 2 Cor. 11:30 he introduces a principle that I’m sure was totally foreign to the false ministries: “If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness.” How many will boast about things like that?! This introduces the passage in chapter 12 where he discusses the great revelations he had experienced and what the Lord had to do to keep him in a humble and usable place. The Lord allowed him to be relentlessly and grievously attacked by a demon. This drove him to prayer until the Lord revealed to him the reason. He then told Paul that His strength was made perfect through Paul’s weakness! It was only then that Paul understood and was able to glory in the

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weakness that allowed Christ's strength to be seen in him. Human wisdom knows nothing of this.

Now listen to what Paul says in 2 Cor. 12:19-21: "Have you been thinking all along that we have been defending ourselves to you? We have been speaking in the sight of God as those in Christ; and everything we do, dear friends, is for your strengthening. For I am afraid that when I come I may not find you as I want you to be, and you may not find me as you want me to be. I fear that there may be quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, factions, slander, gossip, arrogance and disorder. I am afraid that when I come again my God will humble me before you, and I will be grieved over many who have sinned earlier and have not repented of the impurity, sexual sin and debauchery in which they have indulged."

Paul's real concern wasn't about himself but about them! How different from the false apostles that so concerned him. He was afraid of the fruits of their influence in the lives of the people and hoped to see God work in them before he came for his visit. This is evidence of the true spirit of Christ. He is deeply concerned for the spiritual welfare of His people. Christ is not concerned about numbers, nor about outward appearances but about inward spiritual reality.

Now do you see why Paul was concerned? Why he wrote what he did in 2 Cor. 13:5? "Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you—unless, of course, you fail the test?" He knew that the influence of false ministries — not sent by Christ — meant that it was likely that some to whom he was writing were products of those ministries and didn't really know the Lord. An evil tree cannot bring forth good fruit.

My aim and desire is to cause people today who profess to be Christians to examine themselves before it is too late. I do not want, however, to paint such a dire and extreme picture that some genuine Christians will be driven to despair. If salvation depended on "New Testament perfect" ministries then no one would be saved! God is in the business of saving His own in spite of conditions.

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I have witnessed men that had a measure of life and anointing on their ministries, yet who were clearly hindered by the ways and traditions of men. Though they are thus hindered, yet there is some genuine fruit. The fact is that there are no perfect ministries (just in case you didn't know that!). There is an awful lot of "wood, hay, and straw" around but there is also some "gold, silver, and precious stones." The Lord knows those who are His.

An Unusual Dream

My mind goes back to something Bro. Thomas experienced many years ago. He had an unusual dream and then was made to know that it was a picture of modern evangelism. As well as I remember it Bro. Thomas saw a very flashy modern fishing boat. It also had an unusual method of fishing. It would submerge, then allow a net to float over a certain place, then cleverly emerge from the water under the net, thus trapping its catch. As he observed this in the dream he saw what had been caught. It consisted of all kinds of creatures including vultures! He also noticed that among all of these creatures was one little flopping fish!

The basic lesson is obvious: the flashy, clever methods of modern evangelism may bring in large "catches" but the overwhelming majority of it is false. However, there WAS the one flopping fish. I see the mercy of God in reaching His own in spite of the way things are done. Somewhere, that "fish" encountered God's Spirit and had the seed of the Word sown in his heart.

The fact that there are some genuine conversions in no way validates the ways of the modern church. For every one that is genuinely saved, how many others are given a false hope? That is a sobering question—one I hope you will prayerfully and personally consider. God wants you to know — and you can!

Chapter Four

Why People Believe They Are OK

Thus far we have considered the teachings of Jesus concerning those who would profess to be his followers and found that he knew and expected that the majority of them would be false. We have also looked at the reasons that led Paul to write what he did in the scripture quoted above. There are plenty of other scriptures in the New Testament that bear directly on the subject but I believe it would be profitable at this point to consider some of the reasons people have for believing they are bound for heaven.

Earlier we focused on what Jesus had to say about the wide gate and the broad way that leads to destruction in Matthew 7. Consider with me for a moment those who travel that way. I believe you would have to agree with me that none of them expect to be destroyed! To the contrary, they are people who have been presented with a spiritual “gate” and told that it was the way to heaven. This accounts for their utter shock at being rejected.

It should be very obvious that, although they are deceived in their expectations, they nonetheless, in their own minds, have some reason for believing as they do. Indeed, many are very zealous in their religious efforts, even sacrificial. It is clear that, whatever their ground for hope, it is convincing to them.

I have, at various times, heard some amazing statistics as to the percentages of those in American society who not only believe in heaven, but who expect to go there. Especially is this true in the south where I live. Rarely could you attend a funeral in which it would not be clearly conveyed that the deceased had gone to heaven. But is it so? Why do they think so? Oh, I know that a funeral is a deeply emotional

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time in which the family grasps any source of comfort, but still, there are reasons why people have these expectations. How tragic would it be if those reasons turned out to be false. If Jesus is to be believed then we had best consider these issues while there is time.

There are, of course, many and varied reasons why people expect to go to heaven and I would like, with the Lord's help to try to examine some of these.

A Particular Church

There are many people in the world who associate salvation with a particular church or movement. Something — or someone — has convinced them that their church alone holds the keys to heaven and eternal life. It is their faith in their church rather than a true personal heart faith in Christ that is the foundation of their spiritual life. It could also be that their faith is centered in a particular minister or “prophet” whom they believe has some special or even exclusive revelation from God.

In either case their faith is actually in man in one form or another and that is a dangerous thing. Jesus warned of the blind leading the blind and both falling into the ditch. God isn't looking for “blind” followers who abdicate their personal spiritual responsibility to seek God and be persuaded by Him.

When most of the crowd in John 6 turned back from following Jesus he didn't get upset or try to intimidate his disciples into obedience. He simply turned to them and said, “Will you also go away?” KJV. He trusted his Father. He understood that it was his Father's job to reveal to men who he was that they might believe. Peter and the others didn't need any outward convincing. Though they didn't understand WHAT Jesus had said any more than those who had turned away did yet they remained convinced in their hearts just WHO Jesus was. They knew and believed that he had the words of eternal life.

To the unbelieving religious leaders who questioned the source of his message Jesus said, “If anyone chooses to do God's will, he will

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find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own.” John 7:17. He knew that if their hearts were truly seeking God and the reason for their wanting to know was SO THAT THEY MIGHT DO HIS WILL, God would bear witness concerning His Son.

That is a key point. Many people inquire intellectually into the things of God but unless their motivation is a genuine desire to do His will what good does their inquiry do? In fact, Jesus actually thanked his Father for hiding truth from “the wise and the prudent” and revealing it unto “babes.” Matt. 11:25-26, KJV. God, Who can see into the utmost depths of our hearts, responds only to true seekers. He is not in the business of satisfying intellectual curiosity and pride.

Paul commended the members of the synagogue in Berea for their willingness to search the scriptures to see whether the things Paul was telling them were so. He didn’t want anyone believing something just because he said it. Any true minister of God desires that people search the Word and seek God about what he preaches. He knows that he is but an instrument and that the God that has sent him will be faithful to confirm the message to those for whom it is intended.

“The Only Ones”

But there are many movements and preachers that rely heavily on convincing their followers that “they are the only ones.” There are many means used to achieve this. One of these might be a long and impressive tradition coupled with great numbers of followers. How could so many be wrong? Another related way that some people become convinced is for a movement to point to its rapid growth and success as though that were a sign of divine approval. Yet clearly, in Matt. 7, Jesus said that “many” would be on the wrong road and “few” on the right one! Think about that!

Some religious leaders even seize on this and build small and sometimes fanatical movements around some offbeat doctrine or principle. One example of this that comes to mind are those who lay

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great stress on using the correct “divine names” for the Father and Son as though the Father wouldn’t receive them unless they used precisely the right name! There are a number of such groups and they don’t even agree among themselves as to exactly what those names are! I’ve seen many variations of the Son’s name, for example, such as Yashua, Yehoshua, and so forth, each one claiming that their version of the name is the only one that will be respected. One thing they generally have in common, though, is the belief that those of us who worship “God” and “Jesus” are on the road to hell and it is their mission to straighten us out!

There are people who are attracted to such offbeat and exclusive beliefs as this and their hope is in their adherence to their special “revelation” and to the group that promotes it. We frequently have people write to us to try and straighten us out regarding their pet doctrine — as though God would send us to hell unless we saw and accepted it!

I’ve had people write to me trying earnestly to warn about the curse of observing Christmas. I’ve had others really strive to convince me that it was necessary to adopt a certain lifestyle — like not owning property, for instance — to be considered a true follower of Christ. Others — and this applies to some large movements — lay great stress on what day of the week is set aside for spiritual observance and worship. Others are just as fixated on a particular doctrine of the Godhead.

There is a spirit behind this kind of thing and it is not God’s Spirit. It is one that seeks to bring people into spiritual captivity and false hope through error and misplaced emphasis. “Christ and him crucified” is not the center of their message. “Evangelism” is pretty much an effort to convince people of the special doctrine as though that were the key to everything. They are among a favored few headed for heaven — and you could be too if you would only embrace their doctrine and church or become a follower of their prophet!

Often a human personality is at the center of such things. By whatever means, intimidation often being one of them, the followers

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are convinced that their spiritual destiny lies in obeying and following without question. Their place is not to question, not to pray, not to search the Word, not to honestly seek God from their hearts, but simply to believe and do as the leader says. A cult-like devotion to that kind of leader is just another of Satan's devices to lead men astray that they might ultimately be destroyed. This kind of leadership is a twisted counterfeit of the genuine heaven-sent kind that loves and serves and encourages people to seek God for themselves. It perverts the character of real spiritual authority.

Second-Hand Faith

These are but a few examples of this kind of "faith" but the common denominator is simply this: the person's "faith" and hope are in their church, their movement, their denomination, their pastor or prophet, their adherence to some special doctrine, etc. At its best it is a "second-hand" faith, a human persuasion to follow another's conviction. This violates completely what Paul said in 2 Corinthians 13:5 when he exhorted us to "examine yourselves" and "test yourselves." Pointing to someone else and saying, "He led me astray," will not be a defense on the judgment day. What God wants is to bring people into a personal living faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. When that happens there is not only a vital relationship with the Father and His Son but also with every other genuine believer in the world, whatever label they may wear.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not suggesting that any and everything that calls itself Christian is OK. Not by a long shot! The world is full of error and apostasy. Yet at the present time there is a true remnant of believers scattered throughout the many religious systems. Among them you will no doubt find a great variety of belief depending on their religious exposure but the absolutely necessary common denominator is a living personal faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. I believe doctrine is important and that the Lord desires to teach us and to deliver us from the traditions of men but I don't believe the Lord will ask anyone on the judgment day whether they

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are Calvinist or Arminian, or whether they worshipped on Saturday or Sunday, and so forth. The burning issue will be whether they bowed the knee to Jesus Christ, trusting in His death alone for their righteousness and the gift of eternal life.

Growing Up in the Church

There is a particular variety of “second-hand” faith that is, I fear, all too common. This occurs in places where there is some true faith and is most manifest in following generations. It is often found in those who grow up in the church and “learn to be Christians” without ever being born again. They learn what to say and do. They learn how to act. They grow up to embrace — mentally at least — the doctrines to which they are exposed. They engage in religious activity — even ministry. They respond to gospel appeals and are baptized. They may even express their religion with great emotion. To all outward appearances they are Christians.

But are they? As it has often been said, “God has no grandchildren.” Mama’s faith won’t take you to heaven. Real Christianity is not a lifestyle to be learned and practiced. I don’t care who your preacher is or what great Christians your parents or grandparents are. Unless you are personally born of God’s Spirit you are on the road to hell.

That is clearly one of the central points that Jesus made in the parable of the ten virgins of Matthew 25. Each one needed his own oil. A mere lamp of religious profession wasn’t enough. It didn’t matter that the foolish virgins were outwardly living a “virgin” lifestyle, appearing to onlookers to be real believers. What mattered was what they didn’t have on the inside. And the great tragedy is the warning of Jesus that many will only wake up to their lost condition when it is too late to do anything about it.

There are a number of causes of this kind of condition. One of the most common is a careless presumption on the part of the true believers. The relative prosperity and ease of American society tends to beget a spiritual laziness. We tend to think that “good services”

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and “good Bible preaching” are enough. After all our kids “come forward” and “profess Christ” and live reasonably moral lives. What’s the problem?

Unfortunately this is a perfect description of the kind of spiritual slumber of which the scriptures warn. There is no real sense of the spiritual warfare to which we have been called. I Timothy 6:12. There is a failure to appreciate what it takes to see people truly come to Christ in saving faith. It is only when Zion travails that she brings forth.

Listen to how Paul describes salvation in Col. 1:13: “For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.” Satan’s power is real and being born into a Christian home or a Bible-believing church does not exempt people from his dominion. Such people need to be rescued just as much as drug addicts, adulterers, and murderers — perhaps more!

In 2 Cor. 10:4 Paul said, “The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds.” Paul was referring to such weapons as persevering prayer and anointed preaching. It is through anointed preaching that God saves sinners but preaching that is not solidly backed with prayer is not enough. There is demonic power that holds sinners captive, including sinners that have been brought up in the church. Nowhere in the scriptures are we led to believe that we can sit back and let the preacher save our kids.

No Understanding of Sin

Another great factor in second-hand faith is that people who grow up in church do not really know they are sinners. They grow up to some degree in an atmosphere of moral principle and thus avoid much of the more obvious moral corruption of the surrounding world. Satan takes advantage of this to hide from their eyes their true condition.

They come forward to “accept Christ” without ever really being

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sinners in their own eyes and having a true understanding of their peril and why they need a Savior in the first place. One has only to compare the modern gospel with, say, the memoirs of Charles G. Finney to see the difference. There was such an anointing, such an atmosphere of travailing prayer in his work that sinners were brought to a state of deep conviction, groaning, weeping, and crying out to God for mercy. Often, they couldn't even lift up their eyes, so conscious were they of their utter sinfulness before a holy God. It was only when they were brought to such a state that they were introduced to the Savior and the blessed hope of the gospel. How perfectly prepared were they then to gladly bow at His feet!

Christ did not die to cover your mistakes and fill in the gaps in your righteousness. You have no righteousness. He died to save sinners. And God doesn't make a difference between "good" sinners and "bad" sinners. There is no such thing. Romans 3:22b-23 says, "There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Until we see that without Christ we are just as deserving of hell as the worst sinner we can think of we just haven't got the picture.

I'm sure that Isaiah had a reasonably good "self-image" before his vision in chapter 6. After all, he was a prophet of God, warning of sin and judgment and promoting righteousness. But when he saw that great vision of the glory of God every illusion of self-righteousness was completely shattered. Then he understood. Isaiah 6:5 says, "Woe to me! I cried. 'I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty.'"

Just telling someone that they fall short of the glory of God doesn't really convey much unless they have some sense of just how incredibly pure and holy that glory is. Heaven will not suffer the least taint of so much as one impure thought, one wrong motive or action. God means to eradicate sin from His universe. Multitudes who expect to go to heaven have not the least clue of their unfitness to go there.

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In most places today the preachers are afraid to preach about sin, judgment, hell, the cross, and the blood of Christ as the only atonement for our sins. It does not fit in with their “seeker-friendly” view of things. But even where the truth is preached, unless people are brought to a true conviction of their lost condition where they see that unless they fall at the feet of Jesus in heart surrender they will be justly cast into hell by a holy God, their “faith” will be superficial and false. I’m not suggesting that everyone must be brought to a certain state of emotional upheaval, that is, have exactly the same experience, to be saved. What I am saying, however, is that these truths cannot be bypassed. I am also saying that for these truths to be pressed home to people’s hearts by the Spirit of God there must be heaven-sent, anointed preaching, backed up by prevailing prayer. Nothing less will break Satan’s power.

Unless these conditions prevail two things will result — and I’m not sure which one is worse. Some will grow up, appear to be Christians, only to be drawn away by the world. Others will remain in the church, some even joining the ministry, until the handful of older members who have real faith will wake up one day and wonder what happened. What happened is that while the true remnant slept the devil took over. Second, third, and fourth-generation “Christians” are now running things and those who come in from the outside have been converted to their empty faith. This tragedy has been repeated countless times in our land. How the devil must be rejoicing.

What about you? Do you have “second-hand faith”? Has God really changed you on the inside? Read Hebrews, chapter 11. Do you have the kind of faith recorded there? Are God and His kingdom so real to you that the world, and sin, and even your own life have lost their hold on your heart?

A Choice

Real faith is fundamentally a choice. It begins when God reveals Himself to our hearts. He brings His truth and will to bear on our lives, not as something merely intellectual, but in a way that

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confronts our wills. We are brought to a clear fork in the road. In one direction lies the path of continued self-will and rebellion that leads to destruction. In the other lies the path of surrender and faith that leads to eternal life.

We must choose and that choice affects everything thereafter. If we serve God we cannot do as we have done, live as we have lived, serve what we have served. That choice sets us forever at variance with the world and its ways. We cannot say yes to God without saying no to the world. Through the very act of believing God we are joining in His condemnation of the world and all it stands for.

Noah expressed his faith through building an ark, ignoring the ridicule of the unbelieving, soon-to-perish world. The word says, "By his faith he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness that comes by faith." Heb. 11:7.

Abraham's faith impelled him to abandon homeland and family and to live his life as a stranger in a foreign country. It brought him to the very brink of offering the son of promise as a sacrifice, God intervening as Abraham held the knife above his son. He saw a reality to which others around him were blind. His trust in God's Person and His promises was complete.

Moses, raised in the luxury and privilege of the courts of Egypt was brought to a choice. Hebrews 11:25-26 tells us, "He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a short time. He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward."

Throughout the remainder of Hebrews 11 you will see what it cost people to serve God in a hostile world as they made clear choices to serve Him against the pull of every earthly desire and the threat of every earthly danger. Think of Daniel. Think of the three Hebrew children cast into the fiery furnace. Think of all the others described in verses 32-40.

Contrast them with the rich young ruler. With divine wisdom,

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Jesus touched the very center of the man's earthly affection and he chose to go away sadly.

Consider the Israelites who perished in the wilderness. They had a kind of faith for a time. They saw the miracles. They danced on the far shore of the Red Sea when they saw the pursuing Egyptian army destroyed in the sea. They followed Moses. Yet, at best, their faith was of the "second-hand" variety. They were outwardly convinced by the miracles and by the conviction of Moses and glad to leave a life of slavery. However, at heart, they were unbelievers and their second-hand faith couldn't stand up to the tests to which God subjected them.

Nothing short of the real thing will keep us in this world and take us to heaven. And no one is more interested in our coming into possession of real faith than God.

Experiences

Another class of people on the broad road are those who "had an experience." They saw something. They heard something. They felt something. They had a vision. They spoke in tongues. And so forth. Their "faith" is heavily dependent on a God they can detect in some way with their senses.

Such people can often be found among those who emphasize the experiential side of religion. Their services tend to be measured by the level of emotion and by the "manifestations" produced. Real religion to them is something they can see and feel. Often they are disdainful of those who emphasize the Word and doctrine. I remember many years ago visiting this kind of church and hearing the minister say, "You've got the doctrine, but I've got the experience!" There may be an element of truth in what he said but the fact remains that there are plenty of lost church members in both categories!

I remember a woman many years who was strongly attracted to this kind of religion. She lived a life of awful spiritual bondage yet clung to a profession of salvation. It seems that some forty years

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earlier she had been in one these churches and had had an experience in which she said, in her words, “I saw a light.” That was her testimony. That, to her, was proof positive that she had been “saved.” She loved religious services where people’s emotions were worked up into a deep fervor. Away from that kind of atmosphere her life was nothing but bondage and defeat. God alone knows but her evident lack of any real faith did not exactly encourage confidence in the reality of her experience.

Paul described this kind of “experience” mentality in I Cor. 1:22 where he said, “Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom.” Actually, this verse describes two different false approaches to real faith in Christ. The mentality of the Greeks caused them to approach faith through their intellects, trying to understand the things of God through human reason. Of course, Paul, being himself a Jew, understood how the Jews in general thought. They couldn’t be convinced of anything in the spiritual realm unless it was accompanied by something they could see or feel — something that they believed was a supernatural “sign” from God. Thus Greeks had to understand their religion while Jews had to feel it.

Of course, God is indeed a God of miracles and He can and does sometimes invade people’s lives in ways that affect their physical senses. The trouble is that Satan can and does do the same things! In fact there are many warnings in scripture concerning Satan’s efforts to deceive through signs and lying wonders. Matthew 24:24 is just one example. In view of such warnings, how do you know your experience was really from God? Experience is no foundation for faith. Faith that rests on experiences and feelings is no faith at all. It has no real spiritual substance. It can come and go as feelings rise and fall.

I am not saved because I “feel” saved. In fact my feelings are often just the opposite. Real believers are called to “walk by faith” and to “live by faith.” 2 Cor. 5:7, Hebrews 10:38. Real faith can express itself through our emotions but emotions are no proof — one way or the other — of the reality of faith. Genuine believers may struggle

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through seasons of darkness and doubt as God allows their faith to be tried. On the other hand religious people may ride waves of emotion and supposed divine manifestation, appearing outwardly to be deeply spiritual and yet have nothing of real spiritual substance.

Like Drug Addicts

I am persuaded that many people in this religious category are not really any different from drug addicts! The addict uses his drug to get “high.” Then he comes down from that high, often to a terrible low, and is driven to use more drugs to restore the high he has come to crave. A lot of religious people are like that. Their religion consists of participating in highly emotional services and coming away all pumped up—in other words, high. They “feel” full of faith and victory. Then the high wears off, the feelings sink, and they must pursue another religious “fix.” They are convinced that all that positive emotion is evidence of God’s Spirit at work and furthermore that they are very spiritual for having experienced it. Yet they have no real anchor for their souls, no stability, and no ability to walk by faith alone because they have no real faith!

Saving faith is not a human thing at all, but is supernatural. It is a gift of God bestowed on undeserving sinners who repent and believe the gospel. It is based solely on the grace of God and not on anything we do in the way of righteous works. Eph. 2:8-9. It resides deep on the inside, in our spirits, far deeper than the realm of mere emotions and sensations and is independent of them. It is the fruit of a Divine work in the heart and causes us to trust in Christ and Christ alone. As the old song says, “All other ground is sinking sand.”

Signs and Wonders

Closely related to those who lean on experience and feeling are those who major on the miraculous, of whom we spoke earlier. Their spiritual world centers on signs, wonders, and miracles. They gravitate to those who produce them or else they may themselves perform miracles. Clearly, from the teachings of Jesus, none of these

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things is any evidence of saving faith. Don't forget the "evildoers" of Matt. 7:21-23 who will say, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?"

Satan uses the natural attraction of human beings to the miraculous to serve his own evil ends. If he can convince people that his miracles actually come from God then he can work to convince those who follow them that they are true followers of God.

The love of the miraculous is a misplaced emphasis. Signs and wonders are not the pinnacle of spirituality. Jesus didn't perform miraculous signs to entertain, nor were they an end in themselves. A sign — assuming that it is a genuine sign of Divine origin — is just that — a "sign." The job of a sign is to point to something. Suppose you wanted to go to New York and as you approached the city you came upon a sign that said, "New York, 10 miles." Would you stop and jump up and down with glee at the sign? Would you treat the sign as your destination? Of course, not! The function of the sign is to help direct you to your destination, New York.

It is true that many of the miracles of Jesus expressed the compassion of God towards a needy people but their true function was to bear witness to who he was. Why was that important? It was important because of the message he preached. The MESSAGE, the WORD OF GOD was the thing God wanted people to receive. The thing that held the disciples when so many went back in John 6 was not the miracles but their conviction that Jesus had "the words of eternal life." Verse 68. Believing in the miracles was meaningless unless it led to heart faith in those words from God.

That's why I have little confidence in those who glory in the miraculous, yet have little or no patience for the ministry of the Word of God. God gives birth to His children through His Word and in no other way. James 1:18, I Peter 1:23-25. Those born of that Word have an appetite for it. They can be thankful when God moves in an unusual way but they understand that man lives by "every word that comes from the mouth of God." Matt. 4:4.

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Mark 16:20 says, “Then the disciples went out and preached everywhere, and the Lord worked with them and confirmed his word by the signs that accompanied it.” That’s the function of the miraculous. It points to the message — the Word of life. That Word is the heart and center of God’s work in the earth. People may even become followers of genuine miracles and yet never really understand, never really embrace that Word from their hearts. That certainly was the case with multitudes of people who followed Jesus at various times.

Christian Service

Closely related to this is Christian service. What Jesus said in Matt. 7 applies to more than just a miracle-oriented ministry. It includes any kind of so-called Christian ministry carried out by the broad-road crowd, moved by zeal and religious self-will and not by Christ. It could include most anything from preaching to teaching Sunday school to leading or singing in the choir to working in a ministry office, and so forth.

Never before have there been so many large and outwardly impressive ministry organizations as we see in the land today. We see multi-million-dollar budgets, outreach that spans the globe, mega-churches, books on best-seller lists, movies, a thriving gospel music business. And on and on. Is Christ the author of all of it? He is the ultimate judge but I believe we would be shocked to see just how much modern religious activity will be disavowed on the judgment day.

“What do you mean you never knew me? Don’t you know I preached to millions? Don’t you remember how I sang for you in great concerts? Didn’t you see all the money we raised? how many orphans we supported? What about that ten million dollar church we built for your glory? And television! Don’t you remember all of our great television productions? the market share we achieved? Don’t you remember my dedicated sacrificial work in the office,

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mailing out literature, answering the phone? What do you mean you don't know me? How can this be?

What were the folks in Matt. 7 trusting in? What was, to them, the evidence that they were the Lord's and headed for heaven? It was what they did! It was their Christian service! Unfortunately — and especially so in this day — it is all too easy to rise to great popularity and achieve great things in the realm of religion without ever being born again! The modern gospel has opened the gates wide to all kinds of people, many of them very talented people, and God alone knows who among them really knows Him. Clearly, however, Christian service is no evidence of salvation.

The problem is that the kind of religious activity of which Jesus spoke is really a form of self-righteousness. Those people never were brought to the feet of Jesus as penitent broken sinners. Instead they come offering their services, in effect selling their services to Jesus in return for salvation. Of course, they would never conceive of it that way but that's what is happening. What penitent broken sinner would actually argue with the Lord, pointing to their works? On the other hand what penitent broken sinner would the Lord ever despise or reject? No, the crowd Jesus describes are just lost sinners in religious clothes — or as he put it, “wolves in sheep's clothing.” And the worst thing is that they don't even know it.

“Good” People

Another class of people who expect to go to heaven are those who think of themselves as “good” people. These are people who go to church, pay their bills, give to charity and are, in general, characterized by good moral principles. They pride themselves on good works and are very resistant to any attempt to show them their true sinful condition. Their optimistic self-evaluation is the result of comparing themselves with others. When someone else falls they may even harbor feelings of smug self-satisfaction on the inside, saying, “I'm glad I'm not like that.”

Jesus described this kind of person when he spoke of the two men

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who went up to the temple to pray. Of the first one Jesus said, “The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’” Luke 18:11-12. What nauseating self-righteousness! And notice how he compared himself with the other man—very favorably, of course!

Many evangelicals will, naturally, declare that they know better than that. They know that we are not saved by works, but are sinners, saved by the grace of God—that is, they mentally acknowledge those doctrines. But I am persuaded that many people have never had their true condition exposed by a revelation of God’s holiness. If you were to ask one of them if he considered himself to be a “good person” he might well say yes. Of course, he might know enough not to say so yet still feel that way on the inside! That is totally contrary to the Word of God! Jesus said, “No one is good—except God alone.” Luke 18:19.

They make the tragic mistake of comparing themselves with other men instead of comparing themselves with God’s holiness. It is only when they can be brought to do the latter that they can be made to throw up their hands and feel their utter need of a Savior. There is so much pride in religion that it must make God sick.

We all battle pride but a true believer knows what he is. He would never claim to be “good.” Consider the words of Paul who said, “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst.” I Tim. 1:15. The message of the gospel is not to elevate people’s behavior so God will accept them; it is to shine the light of God’s holiness into the darkness of human hearts that they might fall in grateful surrender before the feet of an all-sufficient Savior.

“Accepting Christ”

Perhaps there is no category of “broad road” travelers more tragic than the multitudes whose hope of heaven is based upon a “decision” they made sometime in the past to “accept Christ.” I am by no means saying that God has not saved people who have “gone forward”

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during an “altar call” and “accepted Christ.” What I am saying is that this process has become overwhelmingly superficial and empty.

In far too many places the basic facts of the gospel have been distilled into an over-simplified formula that serves to do little more than to fill church rolls with members who have a false hope of heaven. We have touched on this before, but when preachers, moving by tradition and human ability, many of them not even saved themselves, preach a simple salvation “formula,” and the convicting power of the Holy Spirit is absent, people can make “decisions” and pray little formula prayers all they want to and nothing eternal will happen. The result of this propagation of “easy-believism” is, on the one hand, a lot of disillusioned people who become gospel-hardened, and on the other, deceived church members.

The worst thing is that in many places this method of producing converts is coupled with the Bible doctrine of the security of the believer. The result is that millions of church members have been indoctrinated to believe that because they came forward and “accepted Christ” they are eternally secure. On top of that many preachers are careful to divorce the “free gift” of salvation from any real obligation to live for God! Discipleship is optional! And so churches are filled with people whose hearts are unchanged yet believe they are Christians and bound for heaven when they die. In a real sense, those who remain professing Christians are just as gospel-hardened as those who go out in disillusionment. It is well-nigh impossible to awaken them to their true need. They “accepted Christ” and were “saved.” The preacher said so.

And the preachers who preach this kind of gospel are often fired with great zeal and fully believe that they are setting multitudes on the road to heaven. If they can just get people to “make a decision” then their eternal destiny will be secure. They tally up all the souls that have been “saved” and imagine that their reward will be great.

When I speak like this I am certainly not talking about a true preaching of the gospel where God is at work and people are brought to repentance and faith, but rather a superficial counterfeit.

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Preachers go to school to learn how to save souls like a mechanic learns how to fix car engines. No divine call or anointing required. I remember years ago encountering the teachings of a minister who had constructed a soul-winning script. He taught that if people sincerely took prospective converts through the script and they prayed the prayer at the end, they would be saved! It's too bad the apostles didn't know about his script! It would have made their work a lot easier! And poor Finney! Here he thought he needed the power of God's Spirit and mighty prayer warriors!

Holy People

There are many religious people who look with disdain at the promoters of easy-believism, who unfortunately go all the way over into the other ditch. What they emphasize is "holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord." Heb. 12:14. In many cases they are part of churches and religious movements whose roots go back to some real men of God. They were men who saw the error of empty profession and so were moved to emphasize the need for changed hearts and separated lives.

Unfortunately, as time passed, the tendency has been for "holiness" to be defined much as the Pharisees defined obedience to the law: in a lot of outward do's and don'ts. Their religion is characterized by certain ways of dressing and wearing their hair and by a list of habits and activities they avoid. This to them constitutes holy living and makes them acceptable to God. Like the Pharisees they are able to mask wicked hearts with external behavior that conforms to their particular concept of holiness. Attitudes of the heart all-too-often go unchallenged.

Another reaction to those in the other ditch is a rejection of the security of the believer. They rightly see the error of easy-believism, yet reject the truth that believers are "sealed for the day of redemption." Eph. 4:30. In effect, they are saved by grace, but kept through holy living—as they have come to define it, of course. As long as they "walk the straight and narrow" they consider themselves

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to be on the road to heaven, yet they are taught that they can fall away and go to hell. Some even teach that they can be saved, lost, saved again, and so forth.

The religion of many of these people is just prideful self-righteousness. God hates it. Whereas some make the mistake of divorcing salvation from works altogether, they make the mistake of believing that their own works are part of their spiritual foundation. They are depending on them to get to heaven. But you cannot mix grace and works, not in the foundation. If you are on any foundation other than Christ then you have no foundation.

The grace of God is not extended to those who work but to those who believe. Rom. 4:5. Yet it is not faith WITHOUT works but a faith THAT works. James 2:14-26, Gal. 5:6. Saving faith is life-changing. Yet the change it produces is one of the heart. It is from the inside out, not one of outward conformity to a religious standard of “holiness.”

Intellectuals

Another category of religious people often found on the broad road are those who try to approach the things of God through their own intellects. We have already referred to Paul’s assessment of the Greeks who “look for wisdom.” Certainly God does not bypass our minds but the error of these people is they elevate their own ability to think and reason to a place of pride and presumption that God never intended.

They have no idea what it means to receive and enter into the kingdom “as a little child.” Luke 18:17. They seem not to grasp the truth that God has “hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children.” Matt. 11:25. They miss what Paul said in I Cor. 8:2 that “Knowledge puffs up.” Unlike Paul they value “eloquence” and “superior wisdom.” I Cor. 2:1.

I have met many people who were obviously very proud of their efforts to study the Bible. They loved to read the scholars, the theologians. They loved doctrinal debate, relying on their scholarly efforts to establish their superior knowledge of truth. They felt very

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superior to “ordinary” Christians who didn’t dig into the Greek and the Hebrew as they did. Yet these are the very kinds of people that God hides truth from.

It’s not that Bible study is bad but there is a great difference in a prideful reliance on one’s own intellect and in humbly looking to God. How many of these know enough to just wait on God with the attitude, “Lord, I don’t know anything as I ought to know it. I can’t know anything at all unless you show me. Please open my eyes to the things you want me to see and if it pleases you not to show me something then I’m willing to trust you and remain ignorant”? And beyond that, WHY do you want to know? Is it so you can love and serve Him better? Is it out of a genuine and humble desire to help the Lord’s sheep? As we said earlier, God’s truth is not for the intellectually curious, nor is it available to those who desire to possess it for any other prideful, selfish reason such as to be known and praised for their knowledge.

But the man who doesn’t understand and relies on his own mind will try to figure it out anyway! He thinks that God has placed spiritual knowledge within the reach of man’s natural intellect and all that is required is a diligent effort to obtain it. Jesus spoke to some of this type in his day: “You diligently study the scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life.” John 5:39-40.

In spite of all their study of the very scriptures that spoke of Jesus, they were completely unable to recognize him when he came. I have met a lot of people in whom I detected no real spiritual understanding, yet who exhibited great pride in all they “knew.” I’ve known people, for example, who just love to dig into obscure passages of the Old Testament prophets to try to figure out the next thing that’s supposed to happen in the Middle East. That’s another subject, but to many such things are largely an intellectual game. They love study and debate yet show little or no evidence of the grace of God at work in their lives.

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Worship

This is not so much a category of religious types as it is a facet of the modern church world that bears comment. In modern church culture “worship” is a certain kind of music, a style of singing (and performing), and, in many places, a popular activity. People go away to schools and seminars to learn how to be “worship leaders.” They learn the techniques that enable them to guide people through an emotional time of musical expression they call worship.

Now I want to hasten to say that there are no doubt people involved who are genuinely worshipping God. Praise God! He knows who you are. But I’m afraid that much of it feels more like technique and religious culture than it does real worship. You say, “How can you say that? Don’t you hear the words? Can’t you feel the deep emotions being expressed?” Of course I do but like so much that is religious a lot of it feels more human and natural than it does spiritual.

Consider the scriptures. King David, among his many qualities and abilities, was a fine musician who loved to worship God. His love of music dated from his youth when he would play and sing to the Lord while tending his father’s sheep. Of course, we know him best as the author of most of the Psalms, which were the hymns of his day. After he became king he established many worship activities which became an ongoing part of the religious life of the Jews. They had choirs and musicians of all sorts. Read I Chronicles 15 and 16. From time to time we see later references to these activities such as during the dedication of Solomon’s temple in 2 Chronicles 5 and 6.

Yet look at the prophecies of Amos later on during a time of great apostasy in Israel. The songs were still being sung. The instruments were still being played. Had you asked the people what they were doing they would no doubt have said that they were worshipping God. But how did God feel about it? In Amos 5:23 He said, “Away with the noise of your songs? I will not listen to the music of your harps.” In chapter 6 there is a prophecy of woe to those who are

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“complacent” in Zion. In verse 5 the Lord says, “You strum away on your harps like David and improvise on musical instruments.”

Obviously, there is a lot more to worship than certain kinds of music and emotional expression. Such things can be done on a purely human level and enjoyed by great throngs of people. Does that necessarily mean that God recognizes all of that expression as worship? I’ve seen things classified as worship that felt more like entertainment to me. And you don’t have to be a Christian to love to sing and to be stirred emotionally. The point is that it is all too easy to enjoy and participate in such activities and to feel really good afterwards and not necessarily know the Lord. I’m sure that there will be people who will be very upset with me for saying so but it needs to be said. Too much is at stake.

No doubt a lot more could be said to set forth things that people wrongly rely on as evidence they are headed for heaven but perhaps this will be enough to provoke thought and prayer. As I said earlier, no one is more interested than God is in you having genuine faith and a solid hope of heaven. He is not looking to keep people out of heaven on “technicalities.” But there is no substitute for the real thing and Satan has promoted so many would-be substitutes that there is a need for truth in this area.

Recently, I obtained an interesting book by George Barna. He is the Directing Leader of the Barna Research Group, Ltd., a research company that studies, among other things, religion in America. The particular book was “The State of the Church 2002” and was a summary of quite a bit of polling conducted throughout 2002 on such subjects as the churchgoing habits of Americans, their beliefs about God, Christ, the Bible, salvation, and so forth. At the end of the book the author wrote a chapter entitled, “Challenges to the Church” based on the research.

I found Challenge #5 to contain some particularly interesting observations on the modern church world. With their permission I would like to quote the section entitled

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A Costless Faith

“Americans know all about Jesus but surprisingly few know Him. Can you imagine really knowing Him and being merely lukewarm about being His disciple? That’s exactly what we have in the U.S., though, as evidenced by the preponderance of notional Christians — and even the lackadaisical spirituality of millions of non-evangelical born again Christians.

“My interpretation of this condition is that we have simply made it too easy to be part of the Church. Christianity has no cost in America. In fact, we’ve made it way too easy to be ‘born again’ — perhaps much easier than Jesus intended.

“Consider this: in the 1960s, Boomers” [people born in the years immediately following World War II] “were angry about the hypocrisy of religious institutions and individuals, and shunned the church world. Today, nearly half of the born again adults and a majority of Protestant pastors are Boomers. What happened? It has less to do with Boomers having children and wanting their offspring to have religion than it has to do with savvy consumerism. Boomers, after all, are the wealthiest, best-educated and the most consumption-oriented generation in the nation’s history. So when it came to the faith arena, what happened? They played Let’s Make A Deal.

“Boomers were exposed to faith-based marketing pitches that offered them eternal salvation as a free gift if they would simply say the required prayer. ‘God loves you, humankind blew the relationship, but He has a plan for your life; just saying the magic words triggers the contract’ was the essential message of the offer. Boomers studied the offer and realized it was a no-lose proposition: eternal security at nothing down, no future payments, just simple verbal assent. The deal specified nothing about life change

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— sure, there were some vague promises about this being the best decision one could ever make and how it would change a person's life forever, but there were no detailed requirements or sacrifices demanded.

“The result has been a transaction consummated with tens of millions of Americans in which the ‘free gift’ of salvation was claimed with no substantive reciprocation — no commitment, no change, no responsibility. In essence, we lost sight of the fact that to truly embrace this precious gift of God's Son, we must be like Him in personal brokenness. But our research shows that few ‘born again’ Christians, despite having some appropriate doctrinal notions and having said the requisite prayer, never experienced the deep spiritual brokenness that enabled them to realize Jesus Christ was, is and will forever be their only hope of experiencing genuine meaning, purpose and salvation. Instead of broken people eternally grateful for the sacrifice and grace extended to them, we have millions of people who have simply tried to exploit God — people for whom salvation is little more than a fire insurance policy they won't think about until the Devil comes knockin'. In the interim we witness a ‘born again’ population that is indistinguishable from the rest of the nation — and has very limited credibility when it comes to promoting genuine Christianity.

“The American Church is the world's primary exporter of cheap grace. At some point, though, poor products come back to haunt the producer. Welcome to the haunting time.

“At what stage do we bite the bullet and acknowledge that God does not need a majority to accomplish His will, instead He seeks people who will surrender their own grand plans in order to live for Him? When do we get to the point at which we accept smaller numbers of intensely

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devoted people rather than feverishly investing in filling auditoriums and stadiums with massive numbers of the lukewarm ‘Christians’ that Jesus promised to spew from His mouth (Rev. 3:16)? What might cause us to acknowledge that, yes, faith in God is good, but even the demons believe in God — and that it takes more than a naive, inch-deep faith in Christ to become part of a Church that truly honors God?”

Ouch! But I believe that he is exactly right. Is it not time to examine ourselves? But how do we do that? Can we have spiritual rest? Can we have confidence toward God? Can we know?

Chapter Five

How Do We Examine Ourselves?

Many years ago, Bro. Thomas and Bro. John B. Campbell were visiting a religious campground and fell into conversation with an older gentleman who had been caretaker there for some years. In the course of their conversation the man said something that Bro. Thomas has repeated a number of times since. He said, as well as I can remember, “There will be three great surprises in heaven.” Of course, Bro. Thomas and Bro. John wondered what was coming next.

He went on to say, “The first surprise is that there will be people you expected to see who won’t be there. The second surprise is that there will be those you didn’t expect to see who will be there.” He concluded by saying, “And the greatest surprise of all will be that you are there yourself!”

There is a lot of truth in what the man said! There are so many religious ideas abroad in our day as to what it takes to go to heaven it is no wonder that heaven will be full of surprises. I have no doubt that the man meant to convey a touch of humor in the third surprise yet there is an element of truth there as well. Here we are as God’s people, living by faith in the midst of this present evil world. Suddenly we are transported to realms beyond our power to imagine. Faith becomes sight! Whatever doubts and fears we may have battled are now swallowed up in glorious victory. This world is forever behind us. Surely it will require divine love and wisdom to help us make such a transition!

I believe we have established the need for the kind of self-examination of which Paul speaks. It is our responsibility before God, and no one else’s, to make sure we are ready to stand before the

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Lord on that great day. There is no greater folly than to be careless in this area, to take salvation for granted, to embrace some form of Christian religion and assume that everything is therefore OK.

The precise means God uses to call people to surrender and to embrace the hope of the gospel may vary. However, one thing is constant: that call is very personal. It often takes place in some public setting yet it remains personal. The gospel call is an unseen communication from Almighty God directly to the heart of the one called. It convicts of need and then lifts the eyes to behold a perfect salvation through His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. It calls upon that one to repent and believe from the heart.

Being part a certain group, following a certain preacher, or embracing certain doctrines are no substitute for a personal call from God to your heart and a personal response from you. And that is why self-examination is also a personal responsibility.

What is NOT Meant

First, I believe it is very important to convey some things that we do NOT mean by self-examination. The devil has used false ideas in this area over the years to bring God's children into great bondage and distress. Clearly, we are to examine ourselves, yet how we go about it makes all the difference in the world if we are to arrive at a true and honest result.

The devil's design is always to hinder, to discourage, and to destroy if he can. God's design is always to bring us to a place of confidence and rest in Him. The devil wants to destroy hope. God seeks to establish it upon a solid foundation. No one is more interested in bringing you and me to that place than our Heavenly Father!

Introspection

When we hear someone speak of "examining ourselves" in a spiritual sense, our first inclination as human beings is usually some form of introspection. That is, we attempt somehow to look inside

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ourselves to see if we can determine what is there. We try to put our thoughts, conscious motives, and especially our feelings under a sort of “microscope.”

This seems to us to be an appropriate and reasonable course of action yet I can think of no worse way possible by which to examine ourselves. Introspection virtually guarantees a negative result. Even the great apostle Paul was forced to confess, “I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature.” Romans 7:19. If we attempt to put ourselves under a “spiritual microscope” all we will discover is the reason we needed a savior in the first place! Nothing that originates in us is any good.

Satan loves to point out all the bad things, all the areas where we come short, and then oppress us with doubt. “How could you be a Christian? Look at what you did! If you were a Christian you wouldn’t have such bad thoughts; you wouldn’t feel as you do. Just look at Bro. So-and So: he’s full of peace and victory and you struggle and fail all the time. You’re just a hypocrite.” And on and on his wicked lies go.

False Expectations

What Satan often does is to take advantage of our ignorance. He encourages false ideas and expectations regarding salvation and then condemns us for every shortcoming, real or imagined. I include “imagined” because one of his favorite tricks is to give us a wicked thought and then condemn us for having it!

One simple illustration I’ve heard Bro. Thomas and others use over the years is this. We can’t stop a bird from lighting on our heads. But we CAN stop him from building a nest on our heads and raising a family. It’s that way with thoughts. Satan loves to inject evil thoughts into our minds. What Christians need to learn to do is to recognize where they come from and to cast them down. Simply having a bad thought is no sign of anything.

There are several things that real salvation does NOT do and if we do not understand this Satan has much room to work. Salvation does not cause our flesh to stop loving sin. Flesh is flesh. It loves the things

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God hates. There is no magic experience that will suddenly transform our flesh from its sinful inclinations and cause it to desire to please God.

What salvation DOES do is to give us a brand new life on the inside. That new life has a heart that loves God and His kingdom. Salvation gives us the means to progressively overcome sin, to gain the rule over our earthly vessels so that we are able to serve God in spite of our flesh. Salvation opens the door to our becoming the master over our flesh instead of its slave. Even so this is a lifelong process, an ongoing conflict in which we often find ourselves in need of God's forgiveness and cleansing—and always, His grace and strength.

If you try to examine yourself by looking deep inside it won't take you long to discover that your flesh still loves sin. By itself this doesn't prove a thing. The most "spiritual" saint on the planet has exactly the same kind of flesh that you do! Nowhere does the Bible promise that in this life our flesh will be changed from loving sin to loving God. Rather, we are encouraged through both precept and promise to draw strength from God's grace that we might "put to death" the deeds of our flesh. Colossians 3:1-17.

The hope of the believer is not that his flesh will be changed and made holy in this life but rather that when Christ returns he will receive the same kind of "glorious" body that Christ had when he was raised from the dead. Then the war will be over! In this present world we are engaged in a "fight of faith." I Timothy 6:12. Our fleshly desires will always be at odds with serving God. If we somehow expect something different all we do is to open the door for Satan to keep us in a state of confusion and even despair.

Renewing of the Mind

Another thing that salvation does not do is to suddenly transform all of our thought life. There is much about our thinking that needs changing and that is at the heart of what the Christian life is all about. Read what Paul said in Romans 12:1, 2: "Therefore, I urge you,

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brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will."

This was written to Christians! Paul was well aware—from his own experience—that learning to think and see as God would have us is the work of a lifetime. Again, Satan would focus our attention on all of our shortcomings to discourage us. He loves to point out other Christians and paint a rosy—and undoubtedly unrealistic!—picture of their spiritual state in order to compare us negatively in our own minds with them. What we don't realize is that often he is telling them the same thing about us! What a wicked game he plays. I'm glad his day of reckoning is coming.

It is very true that our mind is a real battleground. Satan plants his evil thoughts and we don't always cast them down as we should. I'm glad that Christians have a throne of grace where they can find help in time of need. I'm also glad that there is a place of forgiveness and cleansing for every believer! We don't have to wallow in defeat. The moment we are aware of sin and failure we can at that very moment come to Christ in repentance and faith, confident of being received and forgiven. I John 1:9.

It is easy for any honest heart to look into the scriptures and to see the difference between us and God when it comes to our thinking. After all, did not the Lord say through the prophet, "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts"? Isaiah 55:9. Those differences do not by themselves prove anything.

In salvation, our flesh does not change at all and our thinking only changes progressively. And another factor that comes into play is the quality of the ministry of God's word available to the individual Christian. Satan has filled the earth with corrupted and false religion.

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Through their religious exposure he “spoils” many Christians, that is, he brings them into spiritual captivity through false doctrine.

God gave us His Word that it might be a means of setting us free but all too often the scriptures are used to bind and hinder. Multitudes of false believers have resulted from this but there is also a remnant of genuine believers that have been scattered and rendered ineffective. The cry of our hearts ought to be that God will raise up ministers of His Word, anointed, and capable of giving out real “sheep food.” The hour is late and God would deliver His people from such houses of bondage.

Feelings

I know of no greater source of trouble for Christians than their feelings. We know through the Word that we are called to live by faith, yet we continually allow our feelings to get in the way. Often, the first reaction of someone who hears that they ought to examine themselves is to look inside to see if they “feel” saved! While it seems natural to us in reality it is sheer nonsense. Nothing will tend more to spiritual instability than for us to go by our feelings.

It should go without saying but our feelings and emotions are a very changeable, reactive part of our earthly makeup. They can change from moment to moment. They are affected by virtually everything: what we eat or don't eat; the weather; how much rest we've had; what our circumstances are; what we're thinking about; what someone said to us, or about us; and on and on. Yet somehow we instinctively tend to rely on them as a kind of spiritual “barometer.” If we feel good then God loves us and all is right. If we feel bad then God is displeased with us and everything is wrong!

Our emotions are a barometer of exactly nothing when it comes to the things of God! Faith in God is not a feeling but a choice we make to rely on the promise of God when He makes it known to us. Nor are feelings an indicator of faith. We think that if we have truly believed God and that He has recognized our faith that we ought to

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feel a certain way. If we don't then we despair and think that God has not heard us.

Overcoming our feelings is one of the great battles in Christian living. It is true that sometimes our feelings do seem to coincide with our spiritual experience. We may at times feel the joy of the Lord or His peace, but there is no Christian on the planet who lives like that all the time. Nowhere are we told to wait for feelings of joy, but rather to “rejoice.” Phil. 4:4. Nowhere are we told to wait for some kind of inner feeling of “faith,” but rather to “believe.” Everywhere we look in the Word we can see that what God desires of us is not feelings but choices. Choices are not matters of feeling but of will. Our wills usually must be exercised towards God in spite of our feelings and not because of them.

One of Satan's greatest tactics—as we indicated earlier—is to promote religion that exalts feelings and conveys the idea that one's relationship with God is to be gauged by one's emotional state: that is, that being right with God means having feelings of love, joy, peace, and even exhilaration. When those feelings evaporate—and they will—something is wrong and the spiritual priority is get them back somehow. Needless to say, people in that type of religious environment will be, at best, unstable. And any genuine Christians who happen to be there will be greatly hindered in their walk with the Lord.

We need to learn to rise above our changeable emotions and go by God's Word. It doesn't change! Nor does the Author. His promises are the same no matter how we feel. Living for God is based on choices we make to believe God's Word and to rely on His saving grace whether our feelings cooperate or not. The moment we begin to rely on our feelings rather than faith, we get on shaky ground and give Satan a great weapon against us. So do not make the mistake of trying to look inside to see if you “feel saved.” Believe God's promises.

Not a Religious Standard

Earlier we spoke of the tendency of some to base their hope of

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salvation on their adherence to certain doctrines, certain religious lifestyles, a certain religious movement, or a certain preacher. If you fall into this category then your tendency will be simply to look at your life and compare what you believe and how you live with your particular religious standard. Unfortunately, that will not do the job. Everything depends on the standard. If it is false, where does that leave you? And you are relying on what someone else says and not taking personal responsibility for your relationship to God. Being in good standing with a religious movement is not the same thing as being right with God and having a true hope of heaven.

What Then?

If we don't determine our spiritual state by looking inside, then how? Here is a simple illustration. Most of us, when we get up in the morning and are preparing for the activities of the day are concerned as to what we look like. We naturally want others to think well of us—or at least not to be too shocked!—and so we take certain steps relating to our appearance. What do we do? Do we carefully feel our face and hair, trying to see that everything is at it should be? Of course not! Self-examination by introspection would be something like that. Imagine what we would look like to others if we relied only on what our hands were able to tell us!

We all know what we do: we use a mirror. A good mirror accurately reflects back our image as it is seen by others. It is an objective witness, not dependent upon feelings, wishes, and personal prejudice. Then we are able to properly wash our faces, comb our hair, and whatever else is needed. Few of us would dare to venture out without first getting a good look at ourselves in a mirror.

There are really two things at work here. The first, of course, is the mirror. Without a good quality mirror we will not see ourselves properly. However, we also need the ability to see properly! The best mirror in the world wouldn't help if we had terrible eyesight and refused to wear our glasses. It also wouldn't help if we lived in some sort of fantasy-world and saw only what we wanted to see and not

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what actually was. Nor would it help if we had some kind of special glasses that altered our true image before it reached our eyes.

This is essentially, in the spiritual realm, what we need for spiritual self-examination. The only true mirror is, of course, the Word of God. In the first chapter of the book of James, the writer speaks of the tendency of some to be hearers of the word but not doers. He says, “Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like.” James 1:22-24.

The Word of God has the power to show us what we are spiritually. No other standard will do. Religion tends to place a kind of filter over the Word. It filters out some things and magnifies others out of proper proportion. Just as we must take an honest and clear look at a natural mirror, so must we be willing to take an honest and clear look at God’s Word.

God will not disappoint any honest seeking heart that looks to Him. But we must be open and honest. We cannot come to God with the attitude, “I already know everything I need to know,” and expect to learn anything. What folly it is for you to assume that you are right and everyone else is wrong. How do you know? What does it hurt for us to honestly seek God with a childlike attitude that says, “Lord, I don’t know anything as I ought to know it but I’m looking to you; please open my eyes to the truth and help me”? That is exactly the kind of person to whom the Lord will be drawn!

The Author

Remember, the Bible is not just a book. That book has a living Author. Earlier I stressed the point that salvation is a very personal thing. It is a very real transaction that takes place between you and God. If it were just us and a book we could—and almost certainly would—deceive ourselves. We would read selectively, twisting and bending what we read to our liking. But that is no good. We must deal face to face, not only with the Bible itself, but also with its divine

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Author. There is no deceiving Him. He sees to the deepest recesses of our very souls.

In Romans 8:16, Paul says, “The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children.” Here we see another dimension to the whole issue. When one is truly God’s child, there will be a joint testimony of the two who are involved in the salvation transaction in the first place. Until that takes place there is a war between God and our inner man. We try to run, to hide, to resist, to deny, anything to dodge the issue. But when surrender comes, peace with God comes with it.

Now, when God’s truth is revealed through the Word by His Spirit, there is something deep on the inside that has the capacity to respond and agree. The enmity, the natural hostility we have against God’s truth, is gone. There is no more need to run and hide. Even when the truth confronts us in ways that are unpleasant to our fleshly nature and we struggle, yet deep on the inside we know that He loves us and that there is no other way to go. That bridge has been crossed—and burned behind us! We are His, come what may.

I must confess that beginning this chapter of “Examine Yourself” has been very difficult. I have a great desire to help real Christians to come to a greater rest and understanding. I also have a great desire that some who don’t know the Lord will be awakened and brought to faith while there is yet time. I know only the Lord can help me to do an honest and effective job. My desire is for truth that is as balanced as it can be. I have no desire to cause distress and needless doubt to true believers nor to give false hope to the lost.

I’ve seen the Word of God used in all kinds of ways in my time. Many times I’ve seen it used in the wrong way to bring people into great bondage. I’ve heard preachers who, without any real understanding of the heart of God that lies behind the Word, have seized on verses of scripture and turned them into legalistic clubs with which to try to beat the sheep into submission and to cause needless distress. My desire is to use the scriptures wisely, under the Spirit’s direction, to shine a true light that will help and deliver.

How Do We Examine Ourselves?

I've also met all kinds of professing Christians. I've met quite a number who, for varying periods of time, seemingly gave every outward evidence of being genuine Christians, yet who finally rebelled and went out. I've met others whose lives were in many ways a mess, yet gave me reason to believe they were genuine.

One Lady I Remember

I remember one lady who has been with the Lord a number of years now. Our people will know who I mean. I don't believe she'll mind my telling you about her. She was a very emotionally sensitive soul who also had a drinking problem. There was a tenderheartedness about her but she was also prone to being hurt and easily offended. This served to make it specially difficult to talk to her and try to help her with her problems.

Because of the weakness for alcohol, periodically she would get started drinking and just not stop, often for weeks at a time. When her "drunk" would finally run its course she would naturally feel very condemned and beat down. The devil is merciless. Someone would reach out to her and back she would come, humbled, sheepish, yet you had to be very careful what you said to her and how you said it. It wasn't that she wanted to be that way. It was more weakness than real rebellion. She was always genuinely sorry afterwards. To say the least, she didn't have a very happy life nor was she a particularly effective Christian.

Towards the end of her life the Lord allowed some physical infirmities to take her through a period of intense physical suffering, yet she did not react in bitterness or anger but in humbleness and submission. The Lord gave grace and brought her through and there was a real measure of deliverance. I'm sure she thought she deserved what she was experiencing and that the Lord was punishing her but I believe the Lord in many ways sought to reassure her of His love. What she experienced was necessary for her deliverance.

Near the very end of her earthly life she was a changed woman. There was a sweetness and humbleness that blossomed. She showed

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every evidence that, indeed, she truly had come to know the Lord through the new birth so many years before. The foundation was there. It is that foundation we need to know about.

She was confined to bed at the end and our ladies shared the job of taking care of her. Sometimes she lay there more in the other realm than in this one. It was at this time that the Lord did something very special. As our ladies watched her she suddenly became animated and entered into a conversation with someone unseen. They heard only her end of the conversation but it quickly became apparent that she was talking with a sister in the Lord she had known in past years but who had gone on to be with the Lord. From the things she said it was very evident that the Lord had sent this sister on a special errand to minister comfort and assurance shortly before she was finally called home. She knew what her life had been like. No one had to tell her. But the Lord wanted her to know how much He loved her and that she had exactly the same hope of heaven as any other believer. It brings tears to my eyes just thinking and writing about it. How great is the love and grace of our Lord! Shortly afterward she passed peacefully into the presence of the Lord.

I was thinking about her and also about how some preachers would have reacted to her. I have no doubt that there are many who would have zealously pointed to this scripture and that one and just written her off. And yet I believe that many of the preachers who would be so quick to write off someone like that will find themselves shut out on that day as workers of iniquity. Yet there she will be, a shining, eternally grateful trophy of the grace of God!

Truly, there is a great need to rightly understand and apply God's Word. My desire is to present from the scriptures a picture of Biblical salvation in such a way that as you read with an open heart, the Lord, as it were, looking over your shoulder, you will be able to see yourself in a true light. And no one is more interested in you being truly "in the faith" than the Lord!

Chapter Six

Light and Darkness

John, the beloved disciple, lived an unusually long life. It was towards the end of the first century that, as the last surviving original apostle, he wrote several letters to churches he was concerned about. As we noted earlier, the general apostasy of the church was well under way by the time Paul wrote to the Corinthians and dealt with their many problems. By the time John wrote his letters things were much worse and it was getting more and more difficult to distinguish between true and false believers.

One of the principal reasons why John wrote his first epistle was to address this issue for the sake of true Christians. He wanted them to be able to tell the difference. He also wanted them to be able to know that they themselves were believers and to have the confidence to stand in the face of false doctrine and false ministries.

God's Life Revealed

The book of I John begins with John recalling his own personal experience of having the very life of God revealed to him through his contact with Jesus Christ. He walked and talked with Jesus for some three-and-a-half years as God revealed Himself through His Son. John and the rest of the disciples saw in him a life that was unlike any they had ever known. It was “that which was from the beginning.”

Being human, the disciples were very familiar with human life. Although men may differ from one another in many outward ways they are still “made from the same stuff.” All men get their life from Adam, a life that has been irreparably corrupted by sin. It is a family relationship: we all are born into Adam's family and share his life.

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They knew what Adam's family was like. But in Jesus, they saw something completely different. They knew his life didn't come from Adam! This life came from above, from God Himself. They saw and felt the love, the compassion, the purity, and the power to change lives that flowed from Jesus.

They lived through the shock and sorrow of seeing their beloved Lord tortured and murdered on a Roman cross at the behest of the howling mob. Yet, in spite of the unspeakable suffering Jesus experienced, they saw that life never waver. They heard him offering hope to a dying thief and praying that his enemies would be forgiven.

They felt the despair and confusion as his broken body was laid in a tomb, sealed by a boulder and guarded by soldiers. John and the others waited through three agonizing days and nights before the glorious triumph of the resurrection. They had heard Jesus speak of "eternal life" and had seen great miracles but now they saw that life in all its glory, victorious over death itself.

They saw and touched the amazing new body that Jesus had. He appeared and disappeared and walked through walls yet he ate and drank with them. It was a real flesh and blood body, yet it was wonderful—totally different from anything they had ever known. They listened to his final instructions to wait in Jerusalem for the power they would need to be his witnesses and then saw him rise from the ground and ascend into heaven before their eyes!

A few days later they experienced the power Jesus had promised and the church was born as thousands were mightily convicted and brought to repentance and faith in Christ. A new fellowship was born. It was a fellowship of those who had been "born again." They were literally born of God's own life—the life they had witnessed in Jesus—and brought into His growing family.

And this was a family that "stuck together." They continued in daily fellowship with each other and with the apostles. They were transformed from a wide assortment of ordinary human beings to an inseparable union based on the love of God. Among them were foreigners—Jews who had traveled from other countries to attend

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the feast of Pentecost—who simply didn't go home! This was too wonderful, too real! Every day their numbers grew and God confirmed His Word with great miracles.

As time went along, John and the others saw the young church spread far and wide and stand up against persecution and even death. John's own natural brother, James, was killed with the sword (Acts 12:2).

He knew what he was talking about. He had been there through it all. He knew what it meant to be a Christian. It was armed with this knowledge and experience that he wrote as he did in I John. He wrote of the new fellowship, a fellowship that began with the Father and His Son, and then was expanded to include the apostles and true Christian believers everywhere. He desired every reader to share in what he had come to know in Christ.

The Foundational Principle

In I John 1:5, he set forth a foundational principle that is incredibly profound, yet so simple that a child can understand it: "This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all." Virtually all spiritual truth flows from this simple declaration. Misunderstand here and everything will be wrong.

We're talking about fellowship with God, a deep personal relationship. It is a family relationship in which this God becomes our Father and we are born of His life. What could be more central to that than a true understanding of Who He is and what He is like?

"God is light." Three little words. Yet anyone with an honest heart and an enlightened conscience can readily understand. How simply they tell us that God is utterly pure, holy, good, right—in short, everything we are not! Lest anyone should misunderstand John goes on to add, "...in him there is no darkness at all." It is like a great expanse of purest white in which even the tiniest spot or blemish is completely unthinkable.

How difficult it is for us to conceive of such purity! We know He

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must be great to create the universe yet we imagine that He is a sort of higher version of ourselves. In our sin-darkened minds we create Him after our image and likeness! What nonsense! He is holy; we are sinful. He is good; we are evil. He is right; we are wrong. His every thought and motive are pure; ours are hopelessly polluted by love of sin and self.

Here and there in the scriptures we see an account of a man who actually had a special encounter with God that opened his eyes to God's true nature and character. We referred earlier to the vision of Isaiah in chapter 6 of his book. We all tend to compare ourselves with other men and I'm sure that Isaiah was no different from us in that respect prior to his vision. By that measure he would have been reasonably regarded as a righteous godly man.

But what a difference a little reality makes! Recall his words upon encountering even this limited view of God's glory: "'Woe to me!' I cried. 'I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty.'" Isaiah 6:5. All illusions about himself were completely shattered in the pure light he saw that day. In seeing God, he saw himself as he truly was.

Those who have read the book of Job know what struggles he went through trying to understand what had happened to him. Here he'd been trying with all his heart to serve God faithfully and suddenly all of his children were killed, everything he had was gone and his body was covered with painful boils. His wife counselled him to curse God and die. On top of that he had some "religious" friends who insisted that God must be punishing him for something he had done. He came perilously close to believing that God had done wrong, so sure was he that he had done nothing to deserve what he was getting.

In the end of his trial, however, he experienced a deep revelation of God and ultimately was blessed with family and possessions in a measure greater than before. Listen to what Job tells God in Job 42:5: "My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore

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I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes.” Once again, we see the effect of a true vision of God upon a man’s self-image.

Light Reveals

Light is the great revealer—and the great divider of men. Remember the words of Jesus to Nicodemus in John 3:19-21: “This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God.”

In John’s gospel, chapter 1, verses 4-5, we read, “In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.” The “him” referred to by John was, of course, our Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus gave out the truth in the form of words, yet light is more than mere words. It was the divine life that was in Jesus impregnating those words that exposed the darkness in men.

That is what is lacking in so much religion. There are many words yet there is little or no life. Jesus spoke not only true words but he also uttered them by the Spirit’s power. The divine life that was in him flowed out in every word. Such words are able to pierce to the very center of our beings. Most men run from such light out of fear. They see it as a threat to their love of self and sin. A few run to the light and are saved from their sins.

Everyone who has ever had a true revelation of God has had a corresponding revelation of their own sinfulness. Every such revelation drives home the truth Paul gave us in Romans 3:23: “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” No one can in any measure see His glory without becoming aware of just how short of that standard they come.

What we’re talking about is a personal family relationship between us and an unimaginably pure and holy God. Do you think

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that He will lower His standard to accommodate our sinfulness? Of course not! We are the ones who need changing—radical changing. When God finishes the work He is doing in those who are being saved they will be as holy and pure as He is!

Words like “salvation” and the “new birth” have all but lost their meaning in the maze of modern religion but real biblical salvation is an amazing thing! There is no greater miracle. Raising someone from the dead is nothing beside the miracle of the new birth! Raising a man from the dead is only postponing the inevitable. Sooner or later he will just die again. But for a helpless, hopeless sinner to be cleansed from their sins and born of God’s own life, now that’s really something! That lasts forever.

It is only as we begin to understand about God that we also begin to understand about ourselves and our real state before Him. Without a true knowledge of our own sinfulness salvation has no meaning. As long as there is the least shred of self-righteousness and self-confidence in us with respect to God then we are nothing but hell-bound deluded sinners. The light of His life that exposes our sin is our only hope.

Two Kinds of Professing Christians

It is in the light of John’s declaration in verse 5 that he begins to set forth its implications in verses 6-10. In them he describes two very different kinds of people, both of whom claim to know God and be Christians. Yet at heart, down deep where it matters, they are as opposite as they can be. One is on the road to heaven and the other, the road to hell.

The difference lies in their consciousness of sin and the resulting way they live. In verse 6 he says, “If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth.” Clearly, John is describing people whose walk does not match their talk. They claim to know God yet live just like people of the world.

Certainly we know that Christians are not perfect but the type of person John describes in verse 6 goes beyond weakness and

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imperfection. Their life betrays a condition of the heart, an insensitivity to sin.

This is a condition of spiritual blindness, of delusion. Such a one claims fellowship with God but has no real idea what He is like. This person may be a fornicator, an adulterer, a liar, dishonest in business, proud, self-righteous, vindictive, selfish, and the like with no real inward consciousness of his sinfulness before a holy God. He may even conform in some ways to a religious standard but his conscience isn't bothered by the way he lives. Any alteration in his behavior and lifestyle is merely a response to some external pressure and not the result of a work of God in his heart.

It may be that such a man is simply part of a religious environment that is devoid of any real life and that he has embraced religion without ever having his inner man confronted and brought to conviction and repentance. It may be that he has had some real light but has chosen to resist it and cling instead to an empty religious profession that allows self to continue to reign within. Either way he knows nothing of God's holiness, and therefore his own sinfulness. This allows him to rationalize his lifestyle and delude himself into thinking he is a Christian.

The Other Kind

Verse 7 introduces the other kind of person: "But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin." Notice first of all that this is not describing a sinless person. In fact there is an ongoing need for cleansing from sin. What it is describing, however, is a person who has not only been exposed to the light of God's life and therefore has some knowledge of what He is like, but who also is seeking to conform his life to that light. He lives to please and serve God rather than self. When God speaks, he listens.

Such a response is not natural. We are not born like that. All have sinned. No one seeks God naturally. How, then does the person in verse 7 come to be that way? Clearly, something supernatural has

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taken place and the characteristics described are evidence of what has happened on the inside.

2 Corinthians 5:17 says, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!” That is the difference! Through the natural birth we became a part of the first creation, a creation that is destined to be destroyed by fire. Real salvation is a miracle of God’s grace that takes place deep on the inside. It is a literally a miracle of creation, the impartation of that eternal life of which John wrote. It starts the process that will ultimately make us fit to be a part of a new creation that will last forever, untainted by sin and death.

Becoming a Christian is not from the outside in: that is, we do not change what we are on the inside by what we do on the outside. Rather it is from the inside out. It begins with the miracle that gives us a new heart and a new spirit. God begins to write His laws in our hearts, to teach us His ways. That new heart and life within loves and responds to the light of God. Instead of running and hiding, it comes to it, desiring to be changed, delivered from sin.

Such a walk, a way of life, leads to two things: it leads to fellowship with others of the same Spirit, and it also leads to the continual cleansing we need as we learn and grow. It is not a path of unrealistic perfectionism but it does lead away from sin and the world and towards Christlikeness.

Self-Deception

In verse 8 we read, “If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.” Verse 10 is similar: “If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives.” Now we’re back to the other type of person who lacks a consciousness of sin before God.

At first glance these verses sound as though they don’t apply to very many people. After all, how many people are so foolish as to claim sinlessness? Actually, I’ve met a few that did, but I believe there is more to these verses than first meets the eye.

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A man who is religious without a true revelation of his own sinfulness is particularly prone to the condition described by John. Religion without Christ in the heart is nothing more than one form or another of self-righteousness. Self-righteousness and a penitent consciousness of sin and need do not go together! Religious self has a strong inclination to denial, defensiveness, and self-justification when it comes to sin.

The fellow in verse 7 knows he is a sinner, but he also knows that the remedy is to be found in openness and honesty. He knows the glorious truth of verse 9: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness." Notice the contrast: denial in the one and confession in the other. Confession is much more than mere acknowledgement of sin. Real confession is when God convicts us of sin and we give up any opinions we might have and humbly agree with His assessment. And that agreement takes place in the heart and is not merely external. Both the denier and the confessor are sinners but one is forgiven and on the road to heaven while the other remains on the road to hell.

An Indicator

This differing response to sinfulness before God is set forth by John as an indicator of the true condition of the heart. Yet how often is it difficult for someone looking on to tell the difference. It is when something is wrong and it needs to be dealt with that it becomes evident. How many times have we seen someone react with a very defensive spirit to the suggestion that they have done wrong? Their first instinct is to deny, deny, deny. They didn't do it. They can't believe you think they did. They get upset and accuse someone else. I've had people look me in the eye and swear up and down they're not guilty. And on and on.

Finally, after a pitched battle in which they finally are forced to admit that, well, yes, they actually did do it, their tune changes. Their motive wasn't what you thought it was. It was someone else's fault. They were even justified because of this or that. Someone else did the

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same thing or worse. Or else, they'll resort to self-pity and cry and try to make you feel sorry for them. I'll tell you, self is an incorrigible adversary who will defend himself come hell or high water. As long as he remains on the throne of the heart you've got a major problem. And self will never willingly surrender that throne. It takes One stronger and greater to depose him and gain the rule.

It is fundamentally against its nature for self to be humble, take responsibility, and truly repent of sin and wrong-doing. Self hates God's light. It runs, it hides, it resists, it denies, it blames, it points the finger at someone else. And especially is this so when it takes on religion. Humble contrition just doesn't fit the picture.

Peter failed miserably when he denied the Lord—but when he realized what he had done he went out and wept bitterly. In his heart he wanted to do right but failed through weakness. That's why Jesus died! He died because we need a Savior. Peter found a place of forgiveness and cleansing and went on to a powerful place of service in the kingdom of God.

David was a man after God's own heart. Still, he sinned grievously when he committed adultery and then murder to cover it up. He was in such a condition that he wasn't even conscious of what he had done. But when the prophet put the finger on his sin, that was when his heart was revealed. As king he could have had the prophet immediately killed. There were other kings who did just that. But David repented with all his heart. Read Psalm 51 for the kind of heart that God gives His children.

Read Luke 18:9-14 for an example of the two kinds of people John is describing: "To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: 'two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: "God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get." But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast

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and said, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner." I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

The sad truth is that the Pharisees, in spite of their religious pretensions, were wicked sinners before God in many ways. It was just that their religion blinded them to their condition and gave them a publicly recognized way to appear righteous before men. They knew nothing of God's holiness and therefore nothing of their own sinfulness and need.

But, like the tax collector of whom Jesus spoke, God's children know they are sinners and that their only hope is God's mercy. They trust, not in themselves but in God's promise and in what Jesus did on the cross. When they fail and the light comes searching, there is a capacity on the inside for genuine repentance.

The self-righteous have no real conscience regarding sin and if they face it at all it is with great resistance and reluctance and only because someone else pretty much forces them to face it! Oftentimes, the Lord's children will find that their conscience so pricks them about needs in their lives that they will humble themselves and repent about things no one else even knows about! It's all about who occupies the throne of the heart.

When someone has truly been made a new creation in Christ, there ought to be some evidence of that in their life. This matter of one's response to his own sinfulness is a very telling indicator. It goes to the very heart of whether one has been convicted and broken and brought to genuine repentance or not.

I should point out that it is possible for someone to profess a form of religion where it is "fashionable" to confess to being an unworthy sinner and so forth. But there is a great difference between such a profession and the real thing. And where there is light and life God knows how to make that difference manifest.

Sinners, religious and otherwise, are just not comfortable with the idea that they ARE sinners and they especially don't like to be

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confronted with that fact by someone anointed of God to do so. It all goes back to Who God is and what He is like. But those who embrace the truth find hope and mercy and learn to love the light and the One Who gives it, even when it shows them their need.

Where do you stand on this? Do you know in your heart that you are an unworthy sinner, having absolutely nothing in yourself to commend you to a holy God? That fact is the very foundation of salvation. Only the light of God shining into the dark recesses of our hearts can show us our hopeless condition and need of a Savior. As we bow to that truth and embrace Jesus from our hearts something changes on the inside forever.

Think of the amazing transformation that took place in the Apostle Paul. He grew up a Pharisee. His religion brought him to a place of great pride and self confidence before God based on his observance of the law. It took a special revelation to shatter that self-confident delusion and cause Saul, as he was known then, to see himself as God saw him. From that point on he had no hesitation at all in confessing himself to be a sinner, confident only in the grace of God.

Listen to his words in I Timothy 1:15-16: “Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life.” What a wonderful testimony—and promise! Could a self-righteous Pharisee ever have made such a statement? Paul could, after God transformed his heart.

I was recently blessed by the testimony of a brother in one of our assemblies. He grew up in a religious environment but didn't know the Lord. After he had come awhile one of the brethren ministered on an unusual subject: the man in the Old Testament who was stoned for gathering sticks on the Sabbath. The man's inward reaction upon hearing this was to become very angry. How could God authorize such a thing?

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But then the Lord began to speak to him and convict him. He said, “If that was my standard back then, what about you?” Instantly he saw his need as a helpless, hopeless sinner and, without any invitation being given, came forward professing his need of God.

What about you? What does the mirror show? Has the light of God ever brought you face to face with your own lost sinful condition and caused you to surrender and repent, turning your back forever on your own life and the world, and trusting completely in Jesus Christ for time and eternity?

Chapter Seven

The Test of Obedience

The scriptures are full of truth that uncovers the differences between those who have been truly born of God's Spirit and those who have only an empty profession. God has given us this truth with one aim in mind: that we might come to a place of assurance and rest concerning the destiny of our souls. It is never God's desire that we live in a tortured state, full of doubt and uncertainty.

It is notable that the very willingness for honest examination is itself an important indicator. In John 3:20-21, Jesus told Nicodemus, "Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God." If there is in you a great fear of this subject or an unwillingness to honestly pursue it you may be one of those most in need of it.

As we have already indicated, salvation is at its heart a personal relationship with an utterly pure and holy God and His Son, Jesus Christ. I John 1:5-10 makes this clear and also shows the difference between believers and unbelievers with respect to their attitude toward and their consciousness of personal guilt and their need for a Savior. The one covers up and denies; the other repents, walks in the light and finds forgiveness.

As chapter 2 begins John expresses the reason for writing as he has: that believers not sin. There is no room for a careless, permissive attitude toward sin. Still, to guard against the other extreme of bondage to an unrealistic standard he points to Jesus, who pleads our case before the Father when we do sin. God faithfully works in us that

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we might grow up in Him and overcome sin. Yet as long as we are in the flesh and this growth process continues we find times when we need forgiveness and cleansing. It is a wonderful balance.

Knowing We Know Him

I John 2:3-6 is a key passage setting forth many truths that are central to our subject. Verse 3 states the basic truth while the other verses serve to shed further light on what is meant: “We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands. The man who says, ‘I know him,’ but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But if anyone obeys his word, God’s love is truly made complete in him. This is how we know we are in him: Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did.”

“We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands.” Here is a direct statement from scripture meant to help us know whether we have come to know God or not. I trust that the Lord will help us to set forth what is and isn’t meant by this important passage.

The phrase, “that we have come to know him,” expresses a personal relationship between us and God. Note that this phrase implies that there was a time when we did NOT know Him. At that time we were strangers, blindly living in sin and unbelief. We may have heard about God. We may even have been religious but we did not know Him personally. Our hearts were unchanged. We were lost and bound for hell.

Then, at some point in time, all that changed. The veil was lifted and the eyes of our understanding were opened. We saw our need. We saw the Savior. We bowed the knee and believed in Him from the heart and everything changed. The greatest miracle of all occurred. We became “new creatures” in Christ Jesus. We entered into the most important relationship there is. We came to “know God” for ourselves and not merely as someone we heard others talk about.

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“Knowing” Someone

On a human level we understand the difference between knowing about someone and actually knowing them personally. Perhaps there is someone of whom we have heard much. Others, who know him personally, tell us about him and we begin to learn about him and to form opinions based on that knowledge. Still, it is second-hand knowledge. It may even come from someone who himself possesses only second-hand knowledge. All you really “know” is what you have been told.

Then one day you actually meet him face to face. No longer are you at the mercy of the opinions of others. You see him with your own eyes. You hear him speak. You feel the warmth of his hand as you shake hands in greeting.

Words are exchanged, yet more than mere words. Every tone, every gesture, the very look in his eyes, conveys volumes of information about the man you have met. You begin to get an inner sense of what he is really like as a person.

As your acquaintance grows you spend time together, speaking often. You go through various experiences together, each seeing how the other acts and reacts. You may even share deeply personal thoughts and feelings.

Now when someone asks you about him, you will not have to say, “Well, I heard this or that.” You will be able to tell things about him from real-life person-to-person experience. That makes all the difference.

It makes all the difference when it comes to the Lord, too! Merely knowing “about” the Lord is the same as not knowing Him at all. That kind of “knowing” will leave you lost and headed for hell.

God’s Desire

It has been God’s desire and intention from the beginning that we should know Him individually and personally. That was the kind of relationship enjoyed by Adam and Eve before they sinned. Somehow God actually would walk and talk with them in the beautiful garden

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He had made. It seems incredible when you think about it that a God great enough to create this vast universe would actually desire a personal acquaintance and fellowship with lowly creatures such as we are—but it's true!

It amazed David so much that he wrote, "When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, What is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him? You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor. You made him ruler over the works of your hands; you put everything under his feet: all flocks and herds, and the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, all that swim the paths of the seas." Psalm 8:3-8.

Despite the fact that sin entered and we became estranged from God, He has never abandoned His desire towards us. Sin so ruined us, so turned our hearts away from God that not a single man would ever seek or desire God apart from God first reaching out to him. What amazing love and grace! How we ought to worship and praise Him!

He could have abandoned us to our fate, cast us into hell. But how amazing are the lengths to which He has gone in order to open up a way for us to be completely redeemed from sin and restored to perfect fellowship with Him, even sending His only Son to live as a man and then suffer the awful agony of the cross! Can there be any excuse for not falling at His feet in repentance and surrender?

Real Life Examples

This amazing desire of God for fellowship with man is seen everywhere in the Bible. Enoch was a wonderful example of this, a man who stood apart from his generation and left a testimony that remains to this day. While the rest of the world was falling further and further away from God, this man's life was defined in these simple words: "Enoch walked with God." Gen. 5:22-23. So special was Enoch's relationship with God that he was even allowed to

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bypass death, going straight to be with the Lord. Not only does Enoch's life testify to the kind of a man he was, it also testifies to the kind of God he loved and served! While others were running from God and sinking deeper and deeper into a fatal rebellion, Enoch was daily experiencing the love of his Creator and Friend.

By Noah's day, only Noah had a heart toward God. He was the only man with whom God could communicate and God was faithful to give Noah and his family a way of escape from the coming destruction of the flood.

Abraham was known as "the friend of God." James 2:23. Throughout his life God led him, blessed him, and talked with him. God wouldn't even destroy the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah without first telling Abraham. And He even listened to Abraham's questions and concerns about it!

What was it that made Abraham so special? Did he earn God's favor by living a perfect life? Did he seek out and pursue a relationship with God? No! He was living with his family in Mesopotamia, minding his own business, when God initiated contact with Abram, as he was then known. The defining characteristic of Abraham's life was incredibly simple: "Abraham believed God." Romans 4:3. When God spoke, Abraham believed him! That was his secret.

And that belief went beyond theory, beyond mere mental assent. It resulted in unquestioning obedience. Unquestioning obedience is simply this: "trust." Abraham came to know—and trust—God as a person. Faith enabled him to leave his family and homeland and follow God not knowing where He might lead. It enabled him to believe the wonderful promises of God to his unborn seed. It enabled him to believe he would father an heir by Sarah even when it became biologically impossible.

It even enabled him to raise a knife over the son of promise, fully intending to offer him as a sacrifice in obedience to God. Of course, we see that God intended this as a test of his faith and stepped in to

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prevent him from actually carrying out the sacrifice of his son by providing a ram as a substitute.

The Footsteps of Abraham

Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph in their turn followed in the spiritual footsteps of Abraham, enjoying a similar special relationship with God. Throughout the history of Israel as a nation other heroes of faith are singled out in the biblical record as people who knew and believed God.

They stand in stark contrast to the spiritual condition of the nation as a whole which was one of persistent apostasy and unbelief. Such things as faith and love for God were never in their hearts. At times they could, as a result of some external influence, seemingly serve God. However, when conditions changed, so did they. They never understood God's loving intention and desire towards them. They never learned God's ways. They never really believed. They rejoiced when God opened the Red Sea before them yet complained bitterly at the hardships of the wilderness journey.

One of Israel's greatest prophets was a man named Samuel. He was the answer to the fervent prayers of his childless mother, Hannah. Hannah had vowed that if the Lord would answer her prayer and give her a son that he would be given to the Lord's service all his life. And so there came a day, while he was still a boy, that Samuel was left at the tabernacle to help the priests who carried out the various aspects of tabernacle service.

I have no doubt that Samuel learned many things "about" God while still a young boy. However, there came a day when it was time for the Lord to begin to use him and the scripture record says something interesting: "Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD: The word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him." I Samuel 3:7.

Now I understand that Samuel's calling was unique and special but his life at this time clearly highlights the difference between

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knowing about and knowing the Lord. From that day forward God was real and personal to him. He came to know God's voice.

God Speaks to Men

His experience also serves to illustrate the transition from not knowing to knowing God. That transition was marked by Samuel's first personal encounter with God. Not only that but the defining characteristic of that encounter was simply this: God spoke to him. And it wasn't just a general word that Samuel happened to hear. Rather God spoke directly and personally to him.

Has God ever made Himself known by speaking directly to you? I don't mean that you necessarily heard some kind of audible voice or had some great mystical experience. Most people don't. But God knows how to speak to a human heart.

What we are really talking about is God's call. On the day of Pentecost, the birthday of the church, Peter spoke of the promise being for all those the Lord would call. On that particular day about 3000 people not only heard God's call—personally and individually—but they also responded to it in faith and repentance.

A large crowd heard Peter's words, but more was at work than just Peter's words. God's Spirit was actively at work speaking to and convicting people in their hearts. They heard not only Peter's voice—but God's. Have you?

It is impossible to know God without first meeting Him. And it is impossible to meet Him apart from hearing His voice in one way or another. The critical moment comes when He does speak to us. How will we respond? What will we do? Will the entire course of our life be forever changed or will we go on as we are?

The Apostle Paul

Consider the Apostle Paul. Saul, as he was then known, grew up in a Jewish home and displayed an unusual religious zeal from his youth. As a young man he sat at the feet of one of the great Jewish teachers, a man named Gamaliel.

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His religion was that of the Pharisees and he was determined to be the greatest Pharisee that ever lived! The hallmark of Phariseeism was a self-righteousness built upon traditional interpretations of the law of Moses. In Saul's mind, God had made His requirements for righteousness known through the law. It was now up to him, through his own efforts, to so honor and observe the law that God would recognize him as a righteous man. He certainly thought he was and was very proud of it! I have no doubt that had God not intervened Saul would have easily risen to the highest ranks of his religion. He loved God intensely—or so he thought!

Phariseeism produced a fanatical zeal in its followers. It was this zeal that brought about the crucifixion of Christ whom they perceived to be an affront to God and a threat to their religion. As the young church grew rapidly following the day of Pentecost they continued to oppose and persecute Christ's followers by every means possible.

It was during this period that Stephen was stoned to death. He had, with a mighty anointing, given a ringing testimony exposing their true spiritual condition as God's enemies until they could take it no longer. As they stoned him to death a young Saul held their coats so they could throw their stones more effectively and thus he collaborated in his murder. As others were persecuted and even killed, Saul was right in the middle of things. Acts 26:9-11.

What a classic picture of the condition that people can get in spiritually! Despite the outward appearance of righteous living and zeal for God, Saul was in the iron grip of satanic delusion. Although utterly sincere, he was totally deceived and on the road to hell.

Saul's Encounter With Christ

Then one day Saul received reports of the church's activity in Damascus and his indignation burned against it. How dare they oppose his religion and his God! Armed with letters from the religious council he led a band of men toward Damascus to do something about it.

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But something happened as they went. Suddenly a brilliant light shone down on him and he fell to the ground, blind. Then he heard a voice that said, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” Acts 9:4. Dazed, confused, Saul knew he was being addressed by a supernatural being and so he called him “Lord” saying, “Who are you, Lord?” Can you imagine the shock and terror he felt when he heard these words: “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting”? In Saul’s wildest imagination nothing could have been more unexpected—but there it was!

The men with him saw the light and heard a noise but Paul alone heard the words. They were addressed only to him. The voice told him to go on to Damascus and await further instructions. Now blind, Saul had to be led by the hand for the remainder of the journey.

For three whole days he waited in darkness. I can only imagine what must have been going on in his mind during this time as he tried to make sense of it all. Everything he had believed and trusted in had been a lie. Here he thought he had been faithfully serving God and now it had turned out that he was really God’s enemy.

No doubt all of his self-righteous trust in the law now turned on him with a vengeance, threatening to overwhelm him with thoughts of condemnation and despair. He stood guilty before the very law he had thought to honor. Saul realized with horror that he was a murderer in the eyes of God. And it wasn’t just any sort of murder. He had murdered a servant of God! What must God think of him? What would He do to him? He knew all about the penalty for breaking God’s laws!

And on and on his thoughts and emotions churned, thoughts of self-loathing, self-hatred, wishing he’d never been born, wishing he could do something—anything—to change things. He had never felt so helpless and low. Was all hope gone?

And yet there were fleeting thoughts that perhaps not all was lost. That voice—by Paul’s concept of righteousness, that voice should have thundered at him in unmistakable tones of condemnation!

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Considering the greatness of his offense, why hadn't he been struck down dead on the spot?

Yet the voice—it hadn't been so much condemning as it been—sad—almost—was it possible?—compassionate! How could that be? Perhaps he thought back to Stephen's death. What had he said as the stones rained upon his broken body? "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." (Acts 7:60.) What power was it that could forgive at such a time? Could he yet find a place of forgiveness?

And then the guilt flooded in once again as he thought of how he had closed his ears and hardened his heart before Stephen's prayer. How could there be any forgiveness and hope for such a sinner as he?

A New Day Dawns

For three long days Saul remained in this terrible—but necessary—dark night of the soul, waiting, wondering. As the time for the glorious dawning of a new day drew near, Saul was transformed from a proud, confident, self-righteous Pharisee into a needy, trembling soul. All self-confidence was gone. He stood before God a helpless, unworthy sinner, naked and undone before the blazing light of His holiness.

Yet it was not God's design in all of this simply to make Saul squirm and somehow "pay" for what he had done. Quite the contrary! God longed to wrap his great arms of love around the tortured soul and reveal His amazing grace and mercy. But He knew that no man is a candidate for that grace and mercy who has not first seen his need of it. The words to the great hymn—"Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me"—are empty and meaningless unless God has revealed to us our true wretchedness before Him.

Even while Saul was experiencing a "crash course" in being an unworthy sinner, God was preparing to lift him from his prison house of despair. In view of Saul's reputation, it took some convincing, but finally—at just the right time, when Saul was fully ready—a believer named Ananias was sent to bring him into the

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glorious light of God's love and forgiveness. God's timing is perfect. He is never even one minute late!

In a short time Saul had been saved, forgiven, healed, baptized and filled with God's Spirit! A whole new world of wonder and amazement opened before his spiritual eyes. Forgiveness! Could it be true? Yet the awful crushing weight of sin and guilt was gone! Before, he hadn't been able to escape it. Now, he couldn't even find it! The soul so recently sunk to the depths of despair now soared to heights of joy and rapture. The love of God flooded his soul and provoked a love for Christ more intense even than his recent hatred had been.

Saul had met Jesus Christ—personally—and Jesus had lovingly brought him before His Father's throne, a redeemed soul! No longer was God a distant Monarch merely to be feared and His laws obeyed. He was now a Father to be loved and pleased. As God revealed His plan for Saul's life all of the zeal with which he had formerly sought to excel as a Pharisee was now applied to the incredible truth of the gospel. What a message he had to proclaim! Love, mercy, forgiveness! If God could save Saul, He could save anyone!

I Want to Know Christ

In Philippians, Chapter 3, Paul, as he came to be known, recounts the transformation that took place in his values, in his fundamental reason for living. He first lists all of his qualifications as a Jew and a Pharisee, all of the things in which he had proudly trusted. Then he tells what he thought of all those things after coming to Christ. In comparison to Christ he calls them "rubbish" (verse 8).

Imagine how he would have reacted before meeting Jesus to someone calling his religious qualifications "rubbish"! But everything changed when he met Jesus. His religion had honored a law that was without mercy. Now he had met someone who not only showed him a mercy he knew he did not deserve, but did it at the cost of an unfathomable personal sacrifice! That Jesus, the divine Son of God, should have even come to earth to live as a man was pretty

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amazing. But that He had willingly suffered the agony of crucifixion! There were no words adequate to describe love like that!

And so, on a personal level, Paul expresses in verse 10 what his life came to be about: “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death.” Of the four things he mentions, the last three are really extensions of the first and most important: “I want to know Christ.” All of the amazement and gratitude he felt after meeting Jesus produced in Paul an insatiable desire to “know” him, the kind of knowing that only comes from an ongoing intimate personal acquaintance.

He saw this “knowing Christ” as a limitless thing and longed that other believers should enter into it. Listen to his prayer in Eph. 3:16-19: “I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.”

Many other things could be said about “knowing God” but I hope that what I have written will help to show the difference between knowing Him and knowing about Him. We know that few have an experience of coming to know God comparable to Paul’s. God deals with people as individuals according to their need and His purpose. Nonetheless some basic principles can be seen. We see a man who knew—or thought he knew!—about Jesus. One day he met him and that confrontation resulted in Paul seeing his need as God saw it. Only then was he shown the hope of the gospel and brought to repentance and faith.

Proof That We Know Him

Of course, John’s purpose in I John 2 is to give us truth that will enable us to know that we know Him. He gives us a test that he

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expresses in simple terms: “...we obey his commands.” Knowing God is characterized by obedience.

A relationship between us and God is not a relationship between equals! When you consider who He is—a holy, all-powerful, all-knowing, all-wise, loving God—and who we are—ignorant, weak, sinful, needy creatures, what other relationship could there be but one of obedience? Will we try to make Him our servant? Do we expect Him to use his power to serve our selfish ends? Or, could a man rightly claim to know Him while ignoring His instruction? Verse 4 tells us that such a man is a liar.

John’s statement clearly implies that we understand who we are, who He is, and what our proper response therefore ought to be when He makes His will known. It is not for Him to obey us but for us to obey Him.

Let’s consider for a moment, what the word “obedience” means. Wherever there is obedience there are two wills involved. And furthermore these two wills are at variance with each other. One wants one thing and the other wants something else. There is a built-in disagreement, a conflict, if each of the two parties clings to his own will. If the two wills are already in agreement what need is there for obedience?

Obedience is a way to bring about harmony where there would otherwise be discord. One of the parties is willing to give up his will and submit to the will of the other. That is what must take place between us and God. Our war with God will end one way or the other: our surrender or our destruction. Knowing God is not characterized by stubbornness and rebellion.

Our Example

We have no greater example than our Lord, himself. Hebrews 5:8-9 expresses an amazing truth: “Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.”

Think about it! Surely no one has ever been any more in harmony

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with the Father than our Lord Jesus! He was there with the Father before the world was and it was through him that everything and everyone else was created. He was freely willing to come down and become our Savior. How then could the writer have said that he “learned” obedience?

Remember what we said about there being two wills involved in obedience? When Jesus lived on earth, he lived as a man and experienced many desires that were contrary to His Father’s will. Hebrews 4:15 says, “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin.” Nowhere is this more clearly seen than in the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus wrestled in prayer with his human desire to escape the cross. Victory came as he found grace to say. “...not my will, but yours be done.” Luke 22:42. Do you see the two wills there? In order to carry out the Father’s plan Jesus had to give up his own will.

Never before had there been even the slightest inclination to be out of harmony with his Father. The days of his flesh brought him into a brand new experience. Part of him cried out to go another way yet he was able with God’s help to overcome every contrary desire and to serve Him anyway. That is the essence of obedience. And it was in dealing with those contrary desires that Jesus “learned” obedience.

It was only after Jesus had been fully tested and made perfect (complete) that “he became the source of eternal salvation.” But notice who this salvation was for: “all who obey him.” Once again we see the direct connection between obedience and salvation.

Distortions of Truth

Satan loves to distort truth in our minds in order to cause us to miss what God intends. One way is to view divine truth through a filter of legalism. I can just hear some reader exclaiming, “See! I told you we have to keep the commandments!”

When the mind is governed by legalism it causes that person to

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view the things of God much as Pharisees like Saul did. They see God as a lawgiver and therefore believe that their standing before God depends on their efforts to keep His laws.

Now many such people will readily admit that salvation is by grace through faith. After all, Ephesians 2:8-9 is still in the book! Therefore their legalistic mentality is applied to the Christian life. In effect they believe we are saved by God's grace but kept by our works. They are made to fear that if they stray from the "straight and narrow"—usually thought of as things to do and other things not to do—God will then reject them and they will lose their salvation.

What a terrible place to be! No matter how much they use words like "grace" and "faith" the devil has them persuaded that, to one degree or another, the salvation of their souls depends on them and their efforts. But the truth is that there is absolutely nothing in the make-up of any member of Adam's race that makes him capable of rendering the kind of obedience John is talking about. That's why we need a Savior!

The obedience John is talking about comes only as a RESULT of salvation. It is the natural expression of a changed heart. It is the fruit of the inward transformation wrought by the Spirit of God. That is why obedience can be a test of truly knowing God.

It is true that someone who doesn't know God at all might succeed to some degree in conforming their outward behavior to a set of do's and don'ts, but their hearts will remain unchanged. Do you think God is satisfied with that? Is He only interested in enforcing certain standards of behavior on rebels? Of course not! The truth of the matter is that God knows how to make that unchanged, disobedient heart manifest.

Anyone not changed right to the core of their being will never be part of the eternal kingdom God is establishing. That puts the whole matter hopelessly beyond our reach. Salvation is not a do-it-yourself affair. It only comes when we freely and humbly recognize our need and put ourselves in God's hands that He might produce in us the necessary changes. Then we become "God's workmanship, created

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in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” Eph. 2:10.

All or Nothing

Another legalistic distortion occurs in the minds of those who tend to see everything as “black and white,” “all or nothing.” There is no in-between, no room for error. When they read a biblical statement like, “We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands,” it hangs over their heads as an absolute condition of divine favor.

This opens the door wide for Satan. All he has to do is to point to the slightest shortcoming, the smallest failure of obedience in us, to minister fear and doubt. “See there,” he will say, “there is a plain unmistakable statement of scripture. You believe the Bible, don’t you? Well, just look at how short you come! How can you claim to know God?”

Every statement of scripture is turned into an absolute law we must live up to—an impossible standard! What this mentality really does is to cause sincere souls to vainly try to live for God in their own strength. Paul’s experience in Romans 7 should be enough to show the impossibility of such an approach. It is difficult for such a person to truly see the grace of God. Anything short of perfection seems like compromise. After all, look what the Bible says!"

The Bible does indeed say many things and it does lift up a standard of righteousness that is not to be taken lightly. The question is: how do we get there? In view of our weakness and inability, what is God’s plan for saving us? Once again the answer is divine grace that transforms us from the inside out. The new life that is begotten in a genuine born-again believer has the power to please God.

But we must again emphasize for the sake of legalistic “absolutists” that this is a lifelong process. We have already referred to the scriptural balance that would draw us away from all sin and uncleanness while at the same time offering us a place of forgiveness and cleansing for every shortcoming along the way.

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Time Needed To Grow Up

In the natural world we understand that it takes time for children to grow up. If we're good parents we constantly hold up as a standard what we desire them to become but we also understand that getting there is a long process with many failures along the way. In Psa. 103:8-14 David wrote, "The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. He will not always accuse, nor will he harbor his anger forever; he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us. As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him; for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust." Wow! What a glorious picture of the compassion and love of God!

It should be clear that obeying his commands is not set forth as an absolute standard of perfection. Rather, it is the pattern and rule while sin is the exception. The true believer has a desire to please God and do what is right that comes from the inside.

If the pattern of a man's life is one of self-will and sin and he only does what is right as a result of some external influence then "the truth is not in him." Such a man cannot rightly claim to know God.

Under the first covenant of laws the people were instructed how to live for God. It came from outside. The new covenant is not like that. Listen to these words from Heb 8:10-12: "This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest. For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more." What a glorious covenant!

Has God written His laws in your heart? Are you merely conforming to someone's concept of a so-called "Christian lifestyle?"

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What are you like when no one is looking? What do you think about? When you do wrong—even when no one else knows about it—does it bother you? Are you a Christian from the inside out?

Commands

Some brief comments are in order concerning the word “commands” or “commandments.” Many of us, when we encounter words like these in the scriptures, tend to think of them the way we think, for example, of the ten commandments. We think of a list of “thou shalt nots,” edicts imposed upon us by a lawgiver.

But this is not the picture being painted by John nor is such a picture part of New Testament Christianity. Because Jesus went to the cross and bore the punishment we deserved the law has been fully satisfied and the door is opened for us to enter into the kind of relationship God has always wanted. He doesn’t want to be a mere lawgiver and judge but a loving Father.

The commands referred to by John are not the edicts of a lawgiver but the instructions of a loving Father to His children. These commands are not directed to the lost but to those who know Him. They are meant to instruct and guide His children that they might grow up and become all that He has purposed.

I John 5:3 says, “And his commands are not burdensome.” One example is found in John 13:34-35: “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” Jesus was expressing the heart of His Father teaching us to be like Him and His Son.

True believers are the only ones with either the inward desire or the capability of obeying commands like this. We will understand I John 2:3-6 much better if we see “commands” as part of a Father-child relationship rather than viewing them through a veil of legalism.

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God's Motive

Another key aspect of truth revealed in this passage is in verse 5: "But if anyone obeys his word, God's love is truly made complete in him." Did you see it? This gets to the heart of the relationship God desires with us.

The first thing that is revealed here is God's motive for giving us "commands." Is He just a great bully Who lords it over us because He can? Is it some kind of ego game? Does He derive a sadistic pleasure out of taking away all our fun? Is He an angry, impatient monarch just looking for an excuse to cast us into hell? What is His motive? This verse reveals it. The glorious truth is that His motive is love!

And this love is not like any earthly love. Do you want to know what it is like? In I John 4:8 he tells us that "God is love." Then in verses 9-10 he says, "This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins." In Romans 5:8 Paul puts it this way: "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

Far from being self-serving, God's love is sacrificial. At great cost it is bestowed on the undeserving. No matter how vacillating we are in our affections, His are constant. Every thought, word and action towards His children is motivated by an unchanging love, an unflagging desire to deliver us completely from this present evil world that He might bring us to unending joy in the next.

Love Made Complete

Notice again what John says of the one who obeys God's word: "God's love is truly made complete in him." Love that is not returned is a terrible and unsatisfying thing. But this is love that has been made "complete." What does this mean?

It means that God expresses His great love towards His children by instructing them with needed truth. His children not only recognize their Father's word as truth but they also know inwardly

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that it is an expression of His personal love for them. Unlike the world, which sees God's Word as an unwelcome interference with what they want to do, the Christian, though his fleshly desires may fight to have their way, sees His Word as the expression of love that it is. The obedience that results, therefore, is the way God's children "love Him back."

This lifts "obedience" to an entirely different dimension. Surely we recognize that true obedience cannot be merely superficial. But an "obedience" that results only from fear or self-interest (what we hope to get from God as a result) falls far short as well. Only a new-born heart is capable of rendering obedience that is motivated by an inward love for God. He desires nothing less.

In Romans 5:5, Paul says, "...God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us." In Galatians 5:22, Paul lists the various aspects of the "fruit of the Spirit." The very first one is love. Perhaps the greatest witness of all that we truly know God is the inward knowledge—revealed to our hearts by God, Himself—that He loves us, together with the resulting capacity to love God as well as others.

A Summary

The last phrase of I John 2:3-6 is a summary of John's thought and holds up our Lord as an example. "This is how we know we are in him: Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did." Surely we recognize that John isn't suddenly holding up a standard of absolute perfection! Rather he is pointing out that Jesus is the perfect example of one whose life of obedience demonstrated his relationship with God.

Clearly, the proof is not in what we say or profess; it is in how we live. Real Christianity involves a supernatural transformation that brings about a changed life. I trust that the picture is getting clearer. God wants you and me to know. With His help I plan to continue painting that picture by drawing our attention to other important aspects of this truth.

Chapter Eight

The Test of Fellowship

As we continue with our discussion of scriptural principles by which we can, in harmony with the witness of God's Spirit to our hearts, examine ourselves we come to what we might call "The Test of Fellowship." This test is much more critical than you might think. After all, salvation is not just about "you and God." There is more to God's plan than that. There are a lot of deluded individuals running around claiming a private relationship with God who would fail this test in a minute.

You may remember what John said in I John 1:3 concerning his reason for writing his letter: "We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ."

Please also recall the wonderful promise of 1 John 1:7: "But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin." Thank God that we can be made pure from all sin by the blood of Jesus! But note that there is another fruit of walking in the light: "We have fellowship with one another."

This word "fellowship" lies near the heart of Biblical salvation. There is no such thing as one without the other. And so it is very important that we understand what is meant.

I have often heard Christians —and professing Christians— speak of "having fellowship." They might say something like, "We're going over to So-and-So's house to "have fellowship." They might be planning to share a meal, sit and talk, have a prayer meeting, or even watch a ball game. The point, I fear, is that too many think of

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“fellowship” as basically an “activity.” It is seen as something that happens only when people get together to do something. When they go their separate ways after the activity then the fellowship is over.

It certainly is true that fellowship can and ought to be EXPRESSED through shared activity but that is not what it is. At its heart, fellowship is not simply an activity but a living RELATIONSHIP. It is a relationship that exists between any two genuine believers whether or not they ever meet, let alone share an activity.

If this were not so then some believers would be all but barred from the fellowship of which John speaks because of their circumstances. I would not be at all surprised if there were some readers who are essentially alone in their faith. In the providence of God they find themselves in places where there are few, if any, other believers and no opportunities for “fellowship,” as the word is so often used. Their relationship with God is, of necessity, private and personal. Are they cut off from what John was talking about? Of course not!

They may have little or no opportunity for many of the practical expressions of fellowship such as worship services or just “getting together,” yet they are just as much a part of the fellowship of the saints in the earth as are those who are blessed with an abundance of fellowship activity. I believe there are heroes of the faith who are simply called to stand faithfully in places of great spiritual darkness and opposition to Christ. It is not that they have an independent spirit and prefer to walk alone; it is simply that they lack opportunity. Such people are our brothers and sisters and we should pray for them.

No, fellowship is more than an activity; it is a relationship that exists among all believers. Of course, religiously speaking, people are brought into many kinds of relationships and engage in a wide variety of activities called “fellowship” but such fellowships are not necessarily what John was talking about. The relationship John speaks of is not based on creed. It is not based on nationality or race.

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It is not based on whether or not you are a Baptist — or any other brand you may care to name. It is not based on earthly interests we have in common. It is based on one thing and one thing alone: being literally born into God's family by His Spirit.

God has a family. In Ephesians 3:15, Paul speaks of the Father's "whole family in heaven and on earth." And so this family, this fellowship, includes not only every genuine born-again Christian on earth but also every believer who has preceded us to glory. What a reunion awaits those who love Christ's appearing!

The relationship of those who are part of God's family is greater than any other relationship that may exist. Those in God's family have been called out of the world, separated in spirit from every other earthly tie that they might become a part of a family that will live forever.

Peace on Earth?

As I write this paragraph we have just come through another Christmas season. So often at this season we hear people express their hope for "peace on earth" as though that is what Christ came to bring. Listen to these words of Jesus: "Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn 'a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law — a man's enemies will be the members of his own household.'

"Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." Matt 10:34-39.

On one occasion during his ministry the natural mother and half-brothers of Jesus came to see him. When this was brought to his attention he said, "'Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?' Pointing to his disciples, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my

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brother and sister and mother.” Matt. 12:48-50. Jesus knew that the only relationship that counts is the heavenly one. All merely earthly relationships are temporary.

Far too many people have “family religion.” They would never allow the gospel sword to divide them from their earthly families. They are born, live, and die in the family church, the family denomination. They have no concept of what Jesus meant in Luke 14:26 when he said, “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple.”

Now it should be obvious that Jesus was not insisting that his followers hate their natural families in the sense in which we generally use the English word “hate” today. He wasn’t advocating that we have a malicious hateful spirit towards them. Not at all! However, he WAS teaching that we should hate them in the sense that we “love them less” than we love him. Anytime there is a test of love and loyalty that pits Christ against our earthly family, Christ must come first. That will surely seem like hate to a worldly family member, one that doesn’t know Christ.

Abraham’s Example

What an example Abraham, the father of faith, has set for us! Listen to God’s call to him (Gen 12:1-3): “The LORD had said to Abram, ‘Leave your country, your people and your father’s household and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.’”

Notice that the first step in God’s plan was for him to leave family (and, no doubt, friends) behind and to set out for an unknown destination — unknown to him, at least. So real were God and faith to him that he willingly went. I’m sure many of those he left behind thought he was crazy. But God had a different destiny in mind for

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Abraham, as he later came to be known. The path to that destiny necessarily involved separation from all earthly ties.

Before it was over Abraham had stood firm in his faith toward God to the point of demonstrating his willingness to sacrifice the very son of promise at God's command. Genesis 22. Of course, it was only a test but what a test! Giving up father, mother, brothers and sisters is one thing. But surely when it came to Isaac, the son of promise, Abraham would sooner have given up his own life than to kill his beloved son.

Was he a fool? Was his faith in God justified? You tell me: in place of a small, temporary family that lived and died in ancient Mesopotamia Abraham is today the father of all those who believe, the greatest family that has ever been or ever will be, a family that will honor his earthly walk of faith throughout the ages to come.

Moses

Consider Moses. In the providence of God he grew up as a member of Pharaoh's household in the palaces of Egypt. His was a life of luxury and privilege. The riches and pleasures of Egyptian royalty were his to enjoy. Since the Egyptian Pharaoh was believed to be a god his household lacked for nothing the world had to offer.

But Moses was not an Egyptian. He was of the seed of Abraham, heirs of God's covenant of promise. And even though the Hebrews, Abraham's descendants, languished under Pharaoh's yoke of slavery, Moses still felt the kinship of his true heritage.

Still, who would have blamed him had he stayed in the palace. Surely, he could have rationalized, he would be able to do more good for his people by staying near the seat of power than by openly identifying himself with them and giving up any potential influence he might have had. How noble that would have seemed—not to mention how convenient and self-serving!

No, the plight of God's people demanded something different. It demanded a total commitment, a clean break from the heathen idolatry of Egypt. And so we read in Heb. 11:24-27, "By faith Moses,

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when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh's daughter. He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a short time. He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward. By faith he left Egypt, not fearing the king's anger; he persevered because he saw him who is invisible."

This is characteristic of God's people. Their eyes have been opened to realities beyond the capacity of worldlings to see. They are able to see beyond this present evil world. They know that their eternal destiny lies with the people of God, however hated and despised they might be here.

Remember the words of Jesus in John 3:3 where he said, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again." God's kingdom is no less real because most men are blind to it. It takes a miracle of God's grace for a man to be born into that kingdom and gain the kind of sight that Moses had.

And the separation that takes place as a result is no less real. Just as Moses turned his back on Egypt and was joined to his fellow Hebrews, so does every born-again believer turn his back on this present world to be united to the eternal family of God. Nothing—and no one—of this earth can be set above God and His kingdom.

Do Not Love The World

That is why John wrote as he did in 1 John 2:15-17, "Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world—the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does—comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever."

A man, however religious he may be, who has nonetheless stopped short of the new birth, is still dominated by the basic

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principles of this world. And his fellowship will reflect it. You will not find him seeking out the company of those whose hearts have been turned heavenward and who love the things of God. He will rather be drawn to those Paul described in Phil 3:18-19, “For, as I have often told you before and now say again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is on earthly things.”

People are naturally drawn to their own spiritual kind. Darkness and light are incompatible. My mind goes to the testimony I often heard Bro. Thomas relate. Before he was saved he had a circle of friends who enjoyed the same things. They ran around together, drinking, partying, hanging out at various “joints” and generally chasing what they considered to be a “good time.” But when the Lord came in and he tried to tell his friends about Him they quickly said, “See you later.” Of course they never did. The gospel sword had made a clean division.

His interests, his values, his very reason for living had all changed. It wasn't that he had simply “turned over a new leaf” and adopted a “Christian Lifestyle.” Rather, he had been given a new heart. Christ had come in to live and the presence of Christ in his life radiated a light that they would not stay around.

In John 3:19-21, Jesus said, “This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God.”

Love One Another

The love and the reality Bro. Thomas had experienced in Christ did not result in just a private, vertical relationship with Jesus in heaven. It also caused him to seek out the fellowship of others who

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had come to know Him and to share in the “horizontal” love of Christ that His people know.

One of the great themes of I John is “love.” Remember that John was there when Jesus said, “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” John 13:34-35. It is no wonder then that he devotes so much attention to the subject. It is a distinguishing characteristic of God’s children.

In I John 3:11-15 we read, “This is the message you heard from the beginning: We should love one another. Do not be like Cain, who belonged to the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own actions were evil and his brother’s were righteous. Do not be surprised, my brothers, if the world hates you. We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers. Anyone who does not love remains in death. Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life in him.”

Cain and Abel

Earlier we noted that Christ had not come to bring peace but division. Wherever and whenever men and women have come into contact with God a division has resulted. They have been forced to choose between surrendering and serving God or continuing in rebellion against Him. This fact is readily seen in the first two children born into the world, Cain and Abel.

Cain and Abel were probably like most human brothers who experience natural sibling rivalry. However, prior to the incidents recorded in Genesis 4:3-16, there is no reason to believe that there was any serious conflict between them. The real difference between them came out when they interacted with God.

It is obvious that God was aware of that difference before it became evident to others because He received Abel’s offering but rejected Cain’s. Notice that John referred to Cain’s actions as “evil.”

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And it wasn't the murder itself that John had in mind but the actions that LED to the murder. In other words, even his offering to God was included in those "evil" actions!

God does not judge men based on their outward actions alone but on the condition of their hearts. As God told Samuel when he went to anoint David to be king, "The LORD does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart." 1 Sam 16:7. Cain's heart was evil and the hatred that whelmed up in his evil heart caused him to commit the first murder, and that against his own innocent brother. It just takes the right circumstances to bring out what is in people.

Notice Cain's reply when the Lord questioned him about Abel's whereabouts: "Am I my brother's keeper?" Genesis 4:9. What a reply! Think about it. Here he is talking with the Lord and he essentially REBUKES the Lord for asking such a question! No fear of God. How clearly is the utterly self-centered and wicked heart of ungodly men revealed in his words.

Notice also how John says that Cain "belonged to the evil one." How easy it is in considering mankind to forget the spiritual dimension: all men either belong to God or they belong to the devil. See how Paul described salvation in Colossians 1:13: "For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves."

There are no other choices; it is one or it is the other. A man has either been supernaturally rescued and brought into God's kingdom or else he remains under the dominion of darkness. Cain and Abel represented two different kingdoms and even as Satan rose up against God, so his servant, Cain, rose up against Abel.

All self-centeredness, hatred, murder, and wickedness of every kind ultimately comes from Satan and is reflected in the hearts and lives of lost mankind. All genuine love and righteousness comes from God and is reflected in those who abandon the service of Satan and serve God from their hearts.

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God's Love and Man's Love

This love of God, the love John speaks of so much, is as different from any kind of human “love” as day is different from night. In one way or another self-love and creature-love are at the center of human “love.” We “love” those who “love” us or are like us. We “love” our own — children, family, friends. This kind of “love” can be very strong, so strong in fact that it keeps many people out of the kingdom of God since they set earthly love ahead of love for God.

This kind of love is really an expression of what Paul was talking about in Romans 1:25. It was in the context of describing how men had turned away from a true knowledge of God in order to pursue earthly lusts that Paul said, “They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator — who is forever praised.”

Earthly love can even be sacrificial in some ways but it always remains a form of “creature love” that actually stands in direct opposition to God and His love. Cross it just right and watch how quickly it turns to hate.

How different is God's love as demonstrated in Christ! Now only did He unswervingly seek the welfare of those who could not have been more unlovely and undeserving but He did it at an unimaginable cost!

Watch our Savior as He patiently endured every form of insult, humiliation, suffering and agony the devil could inspire in his followers and then listen as He prays, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” Luke 23:34. Here He was, the divine creator (John 1:10), willingly submitting to unspeakable cruelty at the hands of his sin-blinded creatures, yet His love was unswerving. Has there ever been an earthly “love” that has even been of the same kind, let alone to the same degree? Of course not! The two kinds of love are different, right down to the roots.

True Love Comes From God

No man is born with this kind of love in his heart. It only comes

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from God. If a man is to possess it God must give it to him. I John 4:19 says simply, “We love God because he first loved us.” Paul said, “...God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us. You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” Rom 5:5-8.

One of the great marks of the change brought about through the new birth is God pouring out his love into hearts. It changes everything. It changes how we see everyone. Those changes don't always happen all at once but they do happen. There is no way that we can be conformed to the image of God's Son (Romans 8:29) without becoming like Him in love.

This is why John is able to say, “We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers.” I John 4:14. In I John 4:20 he says, “If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen.” In I John 5:1 he says, “...everyone who loves the father loves his child as well.”

In 1 Peter 1:22-24, we read, “Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for your brothers, love one another deeply, from the heart. For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God.”

Notice the word “sincere.” In the King James it is “unfeigned” or not pretended. Only true born-again believers are capable of this kind of love. It comes from the heart because Christ is there. As He does with us, it looks beyond fault and sees need.

Religious men may appear to “love” — in a human sense — but it is, as we have said, rooted in self. What then, is true love? How can we tell? Hear John's answer in I John 3:16-20: “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. If anyone has material possessions

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and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?

“Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth. This then is how we know that we belong to the truth, and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence whenever our hearts condemn us. For God is greater than our hearts and he knows everything.”

An Incident From My School Days

I remember an incident that happened when I was in high school. I had a friend at that time who was vehemently opposed to the things of God. His emotions ran strong and his words were often hot yet we talked many times about God. During our talks it came out that he had once responded to an invitation given in a church that apparently preached “easy-believism.” This is the kind of message that simply says, just come down to the altar, pray a little prayer inviting Jesus into your heart and everything will be settled.

Unfortunately in most instances that kind of preaching has become an empty form. It is one thing if God is present and at work with hearts but all too often such a message leaves its hearers empty and that is what happened to him. He felt betrayed and angry and thereafter he wasn't shy about expressing that anger.

We often debated about different Bible-related subjects. I'm sure it was a source of wonderment to him how I, as a reasonably intelligent person, could actually believe such things! After all, he had “tried it” and it hadn't worked. One day was a little different, however. For some reason I found myself reading to him from I John 4:7-12.

“Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for

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our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.”

When I read those words God touched a nerve. He became very agitated. It was one thing to debate intellectually whether the gospel was true, whether the Bible was the Word of God, whether other religions were valid ways to God, and so forth, but when I just read the simple truth about God’s love and the difference between those who know God and those who don’t it bothered him greatly. I saw firsthand the truth that scripture contained. He knew nothing of that love and he knew it. I wish I could say that he turned around and surrendered to it but at least on that one occasion I saw God press that simple truth home to his heart.

When the love of God is shed abroad in a human heart by His Spirit that love connects us to everyone who belongs to God. We may have a lot of spiritual growing up to do and we may need someone, as Peter did, to exhort us to properly express that love but the connection is there. It is there simply because we have been born of God. That makes us part of His family.

Most people never come to know His love and they remain in Adam’s family. Which family are you a part of? Adam’s family will perish. God’s family will live forever. Has His love been shed abroad in your heart?

Where is your true fellowship? Is it with the people of this world and centered in earthly things or are you more connected to those whose hearts are set on things above? Col. 3:1-4. Are you a Christian from the inside out or are you just religious?

One thing I’ve observed over the years concerns some among God’s people who appear to the casual observer to be very much in fellowship with them. However, when you look a little closer you discover that their fellowship is not really on the basis of spiritual things at all but rather on carnal things. The connection is purely natural. It is based on things like compatible personalities or common interests.

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The sad fact is that most people in churches are merely religious so “fellowship” with church people is no guarantee that one knows God. But even where there are real Christians many of them are so immature that it is possible for someone who doesn’t know God at all to have a considerable amount of “fellowship” with them. It might revolve around things like sports or hunting or gardening or children or books or most anything that pertains to this life.

But let God really get ahold of that immature Christian and stir him to begin to “grow up” spiritually and you will see a separation begin to take place. Just as their destinations are completely opposite so it is that their roads will necessarily diverge.

Which road are you on? Are you walking in true fellowship with those whose hearts have been turned heavenward? Or is your heart here in the things of this life? This is a real test. It is impossible to know God without becoming one with His people.

Chapter Nine

The Spirit of Antichrist

One of Satan's greatest tactics in opposing the church of Jesus Christ has been to infiltrate through people who have never been born again yet who masquerade as believers. That, of course, is one of the main reasons for John's letter, to help believers to know the difference. Satan has been so successful that multitudes have passed themselves off as Christians for years if not for their entire lives. Oftentimes they themselves have been deceived—but God is not. He knows those who are His (2 Tim. 2:19).

Jesus taught that His kingdom on earth would be a mixture throughout the age but that there would be a separation that would take place — by the hand of angels — at the end of the age (Matt. 13:24-30 and 37-43). If a church is full of life and power, walking in truth, it is much harder for unbelievers to get in or to remain. The church right after Pentecost is the prime example. Look what happened to Ananias and Sapphira in Acts chapter 5 when they deliberately played the part of hypocrites. They were struck down dead.

That modern churches are so full of lost church members testifies to their spiritual condition. It may not be our place to set up committees and seek to ferret out all the unbelievers but we can seek God for a greater measure of life and truth to prevail in our churches and Satan's influence will grow correspondingly less.

As we said above, often, in the best of churches, we see people pass themselves off as believers for years only to be unmasked as unbelievers at heart. It just takes the right circumstances. It was this fact that moved John to write as he did in I John 2:18-19.

Antichrist

“Dear children, this is the last hour; and as you have heard that the antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come. This is how we know it is the last hour. They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us.”

One of the ways such people are unmasked is when something crosses them just right and they go out. John says, “...if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us.” As long as we remain in the flesh there will be all kinds of problems to face and deal with. However, true believers will react as Peter did when Jesus asked his disciples if they were leaving when so many others were in John 6:66. On that occasion Jesus had said some things that were hard to understand and receive and as a result the crowds left him.

But in John 6:68-69 Peter said, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.” It wasn’t that Peter understood everything Jesus had said or that his flesh agreed with staying. Rather there was a conviction born in his heart through divine revelation that gave him the faith to stay when every natural consideration said, “Go.” That revelation concerned who Jesus was and the fact that God’s commission and authority stood behind what Jesus did.

God doesn’t always explain everything to His children. Ours is a walk of faith. There are many mysteries that we are not given to understand. Rather we are called to trust Him, content to leave those mysteries He has not chosen to reveal safely in His keeping. Deut. 29:29.

It is interesting that John used the term “antichrists.” We noted earlier that all men either serve God or Satan. Serving God involves bowing to His Son, Jesus Christ. The word “Christ” means “anointed, chosen.” It is, of course, God Who has done the choosing. He has conferred upon His Son both the authority and the power to

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eradicate sin from the universe and to establish a holy and righteous kingdom that will never end.

In Isaiah 9:6-7 we read these prophetic words: “For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David’s throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this.” What a wonderful, positive promise! No devil in hell can prevent God from fulfilling that promise.

Christ’s Authority

In Matt. 28:18-20 Jesus told his disciples, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

Thus Christ stands absolutely opposed to everything this present evil world order stands for. Satan and his evil hosts understand all too well the implications of Christ’s authority: it means their certain end. It should therefore be no surprise when they, together with all those who prefer darkness to light, hate and oppose Him and all those who stand with Him.

Towards the end of the ministry of Jesus many of his followers, misunderstanding the nature of his kingdom, thought he would march into Jerusalem and establish it in a literal and earthly sense then and there. Of course he had earlier said, “The kingdom of God does not come with your careful observation, nor will people say, ‘Here it is,’ or ‘There it is,’ because the kingdom of God is within you.” Luke 17:20-21.

Later he was to say to Pilate, “My kingdom is not of this world. If it

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were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place.” John 18:36.

And so when he knew of the misunderstanding of his followers he told them the truth in a parable form. One of the central points of his parable concerned what his servants were to do in his coming absence. But a secondary picture was included in the parable concerning the reaction of the world to his being made king.

In Luke 19:12 Jesus began by saying, “A man of noble birth went to a distant country to have himself appointed king and then to return.” In verses 14-15 he continued, “But his subjects hated him and sent a delegation after him to say, ‘We don’t want this man to be our king.’ He was made king, however, and returned home.”

At the end of the parable in verse 27 he said, “But those enemies of mine who did not want me to be king over them — bring them here and kill them in front of me.” These are the stakes in what we are talking about. They are eternal. Men’s destinies hang on whether they bow to Jesus Christ as Lord or not. The fact is that He is Lord and they will bow. For most, I fear, they will only bow when they come face to face with Him in judgment and it will be too late.

Religious Self-Will

When a man becomes religious without being born again he remains a child of this world at heart. Every part of his inner being stands in opposition to the rule of Jesus Christ over his life. The governing principle of his life is self-will which spawns stubbornness and rebellion whenever self is threatened. Such a man is rightly described as an “antichrist” since he is at heart “against” Christ.

Jesus Christ is Lord and when people try to obtain the benefits of heavenly citizenship without bowing to Him as Lord they are deluding themselves.

However, we must always remember that this issue concerns more than Jesus Christ; it also involves all who have been brought into fellowship with Him and with the Father. That is why

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“antichrists” go out. Their rebellious and independent spirits are not only against Jesus but also against those in whom He lives.

The true church of Jesus Christ in the earth is not something that just “happens.” It does not come about because people like the teachings of Jesus and decide to band together and establish for themselves a religion in His name. (Actually, that isn’t a bad description for many modern institutions that call themselves churches except that their understanding of His teachings has been perverted by false doctrine and tradition.) The true church is a result of divine purpose.

In Matt 16:18 Jesus told Peter and the other disciples, “...I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.” Those to whom John wrote were a product of that purpose. They hadn’t gathered themselves together. Rather, they had been gathered together as a result of the preaching of men that had been sent and anointed by Christ for that purpose. It was His church, not theirs. He lived in and through it. He had begun a work in them that He had promised to complete. Phil. 1:6.

It is not uncommon in our day to hear someone say, “Attend the church of your choice.” This sounds good but it is a concept completely foreign to scripture. We find God clearly instructing His people in Deuteronomy 12 against this kind of thinking. First of all the idolatrous Canaanites carried out their “worship” in many places of their choosing and the Lord specifically warned the people against this.

But also in verse 8 He says, “You are not to do as we do here today, everyone as he sees fit.” He went on to tell them that He, the Lord, would establish a place of worship for them. It was described as a “dwelling for His name.” It meant simply that He does the choosing with respect to such matters. A “dwelling for His name” implies a place established and recognized by Him, by His authority.

The same principle applied in John’s day — and it applies today. As we have said there was divine authority involved in the gathering of saints — the church — to which John wrote. That made it His. As

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they operated under the Headship of Christ they were much more than just a group of religious people. They were the Body of Christ. There was divine authority present.

Recognizing Antichrists

In chapter four of I John we find some interesting insights into what “antichrist” means. John first warns that there were many false prophets in the world. These were men who claimed to represent God but didn’t. The issue John focused on had to do with the spirit that inspired such men, not so much the technicalities of their teachings.

The one who is inspired by the Spirit of God will acknowledge — recognize and honor this fact — “that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh.” The spirit of antichrist will not. What does this mean? Does this mean that everyone who acknowledges that Jesus Christ was an actual flesh and blood man who walked the earth is of God? Not at all!

I am aware that there was, in John’s day, a false religion called Gnosticism that had begun to invade some of the churches. Those who were influenced by Gnosticism did teach that, since, in their belief system, all matter was evil, Jesus only SEEMED to be flesh and blood but actually wasn’t. But I believe that John had more than this in mind.

There are two principal reasons for this belief. One reason concerns the statement, “Jesus Christ has come in the flesh.” The tense of the verb “has come” is known in Greek as the “perfect tense.” It is not a simple PAST tense. John did not say that Jesus DID come or that He CAME but that He “has come.” There is a great difference.

The perfect tense connects a past action with a present result. If I am standing in a room and a man named Joe arrives it would be correct to say, “Joe has come.” In other words, at a point in time BEFORE that statement is made (i.e., in the PAST) Joe CAME. But that’s not all. The statement doesn’t stop with the simple fact that Joe came in the past; it also conveys the fact that HE IS STILL HERE IN THE PRESENT. Do you see the difference? Joe didn’t just come in the past and then

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perhaps leave again. Rather, he CAME and the PRESENT RESULT is that he is still here.

That's what John's statement implies: Christ CAME in the flesh and HE IS STILL HERE! But how could this be? Did He not come in flesh as Jesus of Nazareth, die, rise from the dead and ascend bodily into heaven? Indeed He did—and He will soon return as well.

The Body of Christ

But I believe that John had something else in mind. Is not the church Christ's body? Did He not inhabit His body on the day of Pentecost? Does He not live in His body—today? Surely the term “Christ” is rightly applied to Jesus in a unique way but its use is not restricted to Jesus alone.

In 1 Cor. 12:12-13 Paul wrote, “The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body — whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free — and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.” Did you catch it? The word “Christ” is applied not only to the Head but also to the whole body. Of course there is no virtue whatever to the body without the Head or the indwelling Spirit of Christ.

And so what John is saying of the false prophets is that they would refuse to recognize and honor the church in which Christ dwells. They might in glowing terms profess their love for Christ “in the sky” yet recognize no authority beyond their own mind so far as humanity is concerned.

But Christ's authority is resident in His church. How could someone He sends refuse or be unable to recognize and respect His presence in such a people? It wouldn't make sense. But a false prophet, one sent by Satan, would never recognize or bow to Him.

The Spirit of Falsehood

Notice, by way of confirmation, my second reason for my believing that John had reference to Christ's presence in the church

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brought out in 1 John 4:6 — “We are from God, and whoever knows God listens to us; but whoever is not from God does not listen to us. This is how we recognize the Spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood.” The difference between the Spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood did not have to do with what these prophets said ABOUT JESUS but whether they LISTENED TO “US.”

John’s indicator was the Body of Christ, a people brought together through the ministry and by the authority of Jesus Christ and indwelt with His Spirit. The spirit of antichrist will neither recognize nor bow to that Spirit. It is a rebel.

Despising Authority

In 2 Peter 2:10-22, Peter describes the various characteristics of those who go out, who turn away from truth. In verse 10 he describes them as “those who follow the corrupt desire of the sinful nature and despise authority. Bold and arrogant....” The King James translates the last part as “presumptuous and self-willed.” This is what is wrong with man in the first place. It is why we need a Savior!

It is clear at the end of this passage that Peter is talking about people who were never born again. They were among the people of God for a time and perhaps appeared to many to be real believers yet were not. In verse 22, Peter writes, “Of them the proverbs are true: ‘A dog returns to its vomit,’ and, ‘A sow that is washed goes back to her wallowing in the mud.’” A sow that is washed is still a sow. It’s just been cleaned up on the outside but its nature is unchanged. That nature still prefers to wallow in the mud.

True believers are followers of Jesus Christ, the One Who when He faced the awful prospect of the cross prayed, “Not my will but yours be done.” Luke 22:42. It is true that believers are a “work in progress” but it is also true that a fundamental change has taken place in their hearts. When Christ ascends to the throne of the human heart it is the beginning of the end for self.

There is something very wrong with a man who always finds a reason to walk alone, who will not be corrected or governed, who

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follows only the dictates of his own mind and heart. Remember 1 Cor. 12:13: “For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body — whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free — and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.” Baptism has many aspects. It is not just about you and Jesus. It also brings you into a relationship with Christ’s body on earth. All “drink” of the one Spirit.

Looking for the Perfect Church

I remember an incident that took place many years ago. We had a man visit us at the Bible Tabernacle. I believe it was during a convention. At the time we were experiencing a most unusual visitation of God that had attracted wide attention and so he had come to see what was going on. At some point he made it known that he was looking for the perfect church.

Now that seems like a spiritual endeavor—on the surface. He tried to make it sound as though he was just so hungry for spiritual reality and so dissatisfied with most churches that he was on a quest to find that special church where everything would be just as it should be. Bro. Thomas, of course, saw right through him and let him know very quickly that if he ever did find the perfect church he should, for heaven’s sake, not join it because if he did it wouldn’t be perfect any more!

In reality the man had found a way to appear to be very spiritual and yet remain a rebel, answerable to no one. Jude 13 describes many such people with these words: “wandering stars, for whom blackest darkness has been reserved forever.” A wandering star has no fixed orbit. They are also described in verse 12 of Jude as “clouds without rain, blown along by the wind.” Such words describe a state of spiritual deception and rebellious independence. Being “blown along by the wind” speaks of the true source of their inspiration. I’ll give you a hint: such inspiration is not from God! God brings his children together.

The body of Christ is a place of submission, of unity, of walking together, of people watching over one another in love. There are

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many gifts and abilities there and all are needed. No one can say to another, “I don’t need you.” It is sometimes a place of rebuke and correction, even of judgment. It is the highest court of appeal on earth. Jesus said, “Tell it to the church.” Matt. 18:17.

A man who is basically “self-willed” will not forever stay among the true people of God where Christ is the Head. Sooner or later he will be offended by something that crosses self and he will choose the way of self rather than the way of the cross.

When a man truly surrenders to follow Christ he embraces a death sentence. He joins with God in pronouncing that sentence against “self.” He may not understand all of the implications of that sentence right away but it is in force nonetheless.

That death sentence is not meted out all at once but gradually, over a lifetime. Self is put to death a little at a time that the new life within may grow up and flourish. A religious man may exhibit many outward signs of a Christian but if self has never been surrendered then he is merely like a sow that has been washed. There is no new life within him to grow up. Under the right conditions his “hog” nature will assert itself.

The sad truth with respect to this particular spiritual test is that those who fail it are the least likely to recognize it. The self-willed man is never—in his own mind—the source of his problems. It is always someone else. He has never been born again and thus is unable to see the kingdom of God (John 3:3).

But there is a class of people who may indeed be affected by what I have written and I would like to address them particularly. I am referring to the true believer who finds himself in the false church system. A born-again believer will have a conscience and an inward desire to please God and honor His Word.

If such a man is trying to serve God in the midst of a lot of mere religion he will, to say the least, find it difficult to flow with it. He will often sense things that are wrong and oftentimes the devil will seek to convince him that the problem is in him, that he is just being rebellious.

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In some religious settings he may struggle with those in leadership who employ true Bible principles of authority and submission, not in the Spirit of Christ, but to keep the people in line and under their influence. Satan will then take advantage of a tender conscience to accuse and confuse.

But a true believer is not seeking a rebellious independence but rather to find his or her place under the genuine, shepherd-like rule of Jesus Christ. Such a one needs to have the freedom and responsibility to seek the Lord from his heart and to have a good conscience in what he does. That conscience may well lead him in time to depart from a place where Christ is not the Head yet it is not his desire to forever walk alone.

We hear from such people all the time. “Where can I go? All the churches around us are dead. Help!” All I can do is to encourage such people to seek God with all their heart that He might lead them to some true fellowship in the Lord. He sees such hearts and knows how to lead His own in His own time and way.

But John is talking about another kind of person, the one who is a law unto himself, who fears and shuns the light, who will rise up and rebel against the counsel and discernment of the Body of Christ rather than give up self-will. If Christ has truly come into your heart then there will be a capacity there for surrender, for humbling oneself, for dying to self. A true Christian will have many real battles to overcome self but the critical issue is that there is an inner desire to do so!

Who occupies the throne of your heart—does Christ, or does self? The answer to that question has everything to do with how you respond when Christ expresses His authority on earth to cross your will. Is it, “my will,” or “not my will, but yours be done”?

Chapter Ten

The Spirit He Gave Us

We have taken note that a central theme of 1 John is that his readers might know that they have eternal life (1 John 5:13). In his letter he sets forth a number of tests that help to highlight the differences between those who have truly been born of God and those who are merely religious.

In 1 John 4:13 he highlights another important truth: “We know that we live in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.” This verse echoes the verse in the previous chapter: 1 John 3:24—“Those who obey his commands live in him, and he in them. And this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us.”

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The truth involved here is simple: those who are God’s children have His Spirit living within and those who are not don’t. There is a profound simplicity in these statements of John that I fear has been lost in much of the modern church world. John knew in a deep and personal way that he had received God’s Spirit and that by that Spirit he enjoyed an inward oneness of spirit with God Himself.

It was the presence of God’s Spirit within that alone made possible all the other aspects of this truth that we have discussed: walking in the light; obedience; love for one another; a sense of connection with every other believer that enables unity and submission. But John, in the statements above, looks beyond the outward characteristics of having God’s Spirit and speaks of a direct knowledge that he, personally, had been given the Spirit by God.

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Of course, it would be easy for us to think of John as a special case. After all, he was one of the disciples who, on the day of Pentecost, received the Spirit in a very dramatic and manifest way. Of course he knew! Who wouldn't after having such an experience? He and the others had been enabled to proclaim the wonderful works of God in languages they had not learned. Peter had powerfully preached Christ resulting in thousands added to their number in a day. He had been there as the church had grown rapidly and experienced great miracles. No doubt he himself had been used to perform some of those miracles.

But John did NOT say, "I know it by the Spirit he gave me." Rather, he said, "We know it by the Spirit he gave us." Naturally he includes himself in what he says yet he writes as if this knowledge is something every believer has. Satan has made it his business to greatly confuse this subject over the centuries but at the point in time when John wrote his letter he expected his readers to know what he was talking about. No long explanations: just a simple statement, "We know it by the Spirit he gave us."

I believe that this is something that God desires every believer to have a clear knowledge of. The truth that every individual believer is indwelt by God's Spirit is absolutely central to the new covenant established through the cross, the resurrection, and the exaltation of Christ. It is a fundamental difference between the old and new covenants.

The Old Covenant

The old covenant was a covenant of laws imposed upon the people from without. It was given to restrain evil and also to teach men that they were sinners in need of salvation. Titus 1:9-10. Romans 3:20. Those under the law performed ceremonies and offered sacrifices that had no power in themselves but rather pointed to the one sacrifice for all time that was later to be offered by Christ himself. See Hebrews, chapter 8 and following.

Believers in the Old Testament era looked ahead to what was to

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come. Heb. 11:13 says of them, “All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth.”

The blood of bulls and goats could not take away sin nor could that blood cleanse the sinner’s conscience. But the blood that Christ shed did all that and more! His blood has the power to cleanse us to the core of our beings that we might be sanctified — set apart — so that God could come by His Spirit and live within.

The New Covenant

Whereas the old covenant was an external covenant of laws, the new covenant is everywhere spoken of as an inward work—in the heart. And that is the need. So long as a man’s heart is unchanged he is not saved. We find such expressions in the prophets as these: Jer. 31:33, “I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.” Twice this passage is quoted in Hebrews (8:8-12, 10:16-17). Ezekiel 36:26 says, “I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you....” Verse 27 begins, “And I will put my Spirit in you....”

We need more than laws to observe and forgiveness of our sins; we need a new heart and power that comes from the inside to live for God. Anything short of that is not salvation.

It was John who was present and later recorded an incident in the life of Jesus in John 7:37-39. “On the last and greatest day of the Feast, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, ‘If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him.’ By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified.”

Notice carefully what was said in verse 39: “Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified.” That clearly indicates the fundamental change that came about after

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Jesus ascended to heaven and poured out the Spirit on the day of Pentecost. Everything up till that time had been preparation but on that day the eternal covenant came into full force and people began to enter in and be indwelt by the Spirit.

Jesus and the Father

It is evident throughout the gospels that Jesus' disciples did not understand many things. One example is found in John 14:8-10 where we read, "Philip said, 'Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us.' Jesus answered: 'Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, "Show us the Father." Don't you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you are not just my own. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work.'"

The relationship that Jesus was describing between Him and His Father was far beyond the understanding and experience of the disciples. They had seen God's power at work and had themselves been used to perform miracles by that power. But what Jesus was describing had more to do with BEING than merely with DOING.

He enjoyed an inward oneness of life with His Father that was continual. This oneness was so complete that the things Jesus said and did were not really Him at all but rather flowed from the Father Who lived in Him. He willingly gave up His own individual earthly life to become an instrument for the infinitely greater purposes of God.

As we said, the disciples knew what it was to perform miraculous acts through God's power. They had healed many sick people and cast out many demons. Still, they were mystified by words like, "I am in the Father," and "the Father is in me."

"I am in the Father," is indeed a strange sounding statement. I think of what Jesus told the woman at the well in John 4:24: "God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth." The very substance and being of God is spirit.

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He is the great God of creation and is thus greater than His creation. In one sense the whole universe is “in Him” but clearly that is not the kind of relationship Jesus meant. Since God is everywhere then all men are in that sense “in him” (Acts 17:28), yet the awful reality of sin has made it impossible for them to be one with a Holy God. Isaiah 59:2. Most live in spiritual blindness as if God did not exist.

But, through Christ, God was making a way to cleanse unworthy helpless sinners that He might bridge the terrible gulf created by sin and become one with His creatures in life and spirit. No longer would God be just the awesome God of the universe—somewhere, out there.... He would come in to live and become Father, Friend!

In John 14:17 it said of God’s Spirit—referred to here as the Spirit of truth—“But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you.” Here is a key to the great transition that was about to happen.

With Us and In Us

There is a great difference between God’s Spirit being WITH us and IN us. The Spirit had been WITH the disciples to perform miracles but did not yet live IN them. The influence up to this point had been an external one only.

We can see an illustration of this in the life of Saul, the first king of Israel. In 1 Samuel 10, when Samuel the prophet anointed Saul to be king, he was given signs that God would be with him. One of these signs was that God’s Spirit would come on him and he would prophesy. That happened in verses 10-12.

Later on, after he had disobeyed the Lord and been rejected as king we see the Lord allowing a demon to torment him. Under the influence of that demon he did many evil things including trying to kill David, whom the Lord had anointed to become king in his place.

In 1 Samuel 19 we see Saul plotting to kill David who fled to stay with Samuel. Saul heard where David was and three different times sent men to capture him but when they came near where Samuel was the Spirit of God came upon them and they prophesied. Then Saul

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himself went and, in spite of his spiritual condition, he too prophesied before Samuel under the influence of God's Spirit. Thus we see in Saul how the same man can come under the influence of both God's Spirit and a demon at different times. The influence of God's Spirit was an external thing only.

Consider Judas Iscariot. It is clear that he was never a believer. John 6:64-65, 70-71. Yet, to fulfill the purposes of God, he was chosen to be one of the disciples. As a disciple he was commissioned to preach and heal and cast out devils just as the rest were. There was nothing about him to arouse suspicion. When Jesus told them at the last supper that one of them would betray him they could not imagine who he was talking about. We then see the awful end of Judas, yet for a period of time God's Spirit had been WITH him!

I believe that this aspect of truth is the source of much confusion in people's minds. In the first place, I am convinced that in our day there are great numbers of wicked religious demon spirits at work to deceive and that multitudes have had all kinds of religious experiences that have convinced them that they are right with God. Such people are almost impossible to reach with the gospel because they are certain that they have no need. Yet they are utterly deceived.

But there are others who, like Saul, have experienced the genuine presence of the Holy Spirit—but who nevertheless have stopped short of being actually born again. They may have been among the people of God and yielded themselves to a spirit of worship. They may have experienced joy, healing, amazement at the power and light in anointed preaching, even exhilarating feelings and experiences, and so forth. But someone can experience many such things and it all be external.

I Will Come To You

At the time of Jesus' words in John 14:17 that is all the disciples had experienced. But that was soon to change! Listen to some other ways that this was expressed by Jesus: John 14:18, "I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you." John 14:20, "On that day you will

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realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you.” John 14:23, “If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.”

Now wait a minute! This is getting confusing! Jesus promised that “the Spirit of truth” would be in them. Then He says, “I will come to you.” Then He turns around and says, “...WE will come,” referring to His Father and Himself.

The fact is that these are all different ways of expressing the same thing. God and His kingdom consist of many persons who share a common life, a common Spirit, and are thus vitally connected together. If that Spirit is in you, you are one with God and everyone else who is one with Him. If that Spirit is not in you, no matter how things may appear on the outside, no matter how many experiences you may have had, you are a stranger to God and His kingdom.

I would like to comment on one aspect of this truth that I feel is very necessary. I have encountered many over the years that seem to believe that the Holy Spirit comes in to live much as someone would move into a house and become a resident. Among these are people that believe that salvation is something that can be lost.

In their minds, they believe they are saved by accepting Jesus and as a result the Spirit comes in to live. However, whether the Holy Spirit continues to “live in the house” depends on whether they “walk the straight and narrow.” If they do, OK. If not, then the Spirit leaves and they become “lost” again. Worse still, some seem to have no real limit on how many times someone can be “saved” and “lost.” In effect, they believe they are saved by faith but kept by works.

But this concept misses the real nature of what happens in salvation. At its heart, salvation is a birth. The spirit of a lost sinner, dead in sins, is literally resurrected from that state of death. And the life by which it is raised is the very life of God Himself. That new life makes us just as one with God as Jesus is! It is the same life. Furthermore, as it is God’s own life, it is also a life which cannot die. That is what is at stake in this issue: eternal life. Life and immortality

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have been brought to light through the gospel. John 8:24-25. Ephesians 2:1-10. 2 Timothy 1:8-10.

The Vine and The Branches

In John 15 Jesus gave us an earthly illustration that portrays some aspects of this union: the vine and the branches. He spoke of himself as the vine and his disciples as branches. Thus, although they were in one sense individuals, they were vitally joined together and shared a common life. In fact, the very ability of a branch to produce fruit depends upon that relationship.

Those not abiding in him, who do not bear fruit and are cast away and ultimately burned, would include those who have only a temporary, external relationship to Him. There is never that inward vital connection and thus, no fruit is produced. This explains many who fall away.

And so Jesus completed his earthly mission by going to the cross, crying, "It is finished" (KJV), dying as a sacrifice for sin, being buried, and raised from the dead. After spending many days instructing the disciples following the resurrection He ascended up to heaven to the highest place of authority next to the Father.

Pentecost

Then on the day of the Jewish feast of Pentecost, when thousands were gathered in Jerusalem from many nations, Jesus poured out the Spirit on the disciples as He had promised. Empowered and emboldened by that Spirit they stood up and began to proclaim the wonderful works of God in all of the foreign languages of those who were present.

That got everyone's attention and then Peter powerfully proclaimed the resurrection and glorification of the One they had so recently rejected and crucified. The Spirit that was anointing Peter to preach was also at work convicting the hearers with the result that they interrupted him to ask what they should do. Obviously they believed his message.

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In his response, Peter gave them two specific things to do as an expression of their faith: repent and be baptized. The promise was that if they would do those two things then God would do two things: forgive their sins and give them the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38). Notice how central to the gospel the “gift of the Holy Spirit” was. In John 7:39 the “Spirit had not yet been given,” but now Christ had been glorified and the promise of the Holy Spirit was for all who would be saved. In Acts 2:39 Peter said, “The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off — for all whom the Lord our God will call.”

This is an area where the devil has worked mightily to confuse something that was very simple: individual believers receiving the gift of God’s Spirit. People coming to Christ have some very basic needs that only God can supply: they need their sins forgiven; they need God’s Spirit to be IN them to change what they are from the inside out; and they need the Spirit to be WITH them to enable them to live for God and to serve Him. Of course, the Spirit being WITH them would also include the power they would need for whatever service God might call them to render as they grow up in Him.

There have been so many doctrines spawned in this area that it would be impossible to note them all. For one thing, “salvation,” “baptism,” and “receiving the Spirit”—sometimes referred to as “the baptism of the Spirit” or “being filled with the Spirit”—are treated as though they are separate things. People are “saved.” Then, subsequent to “salvation,” they are baptized in water—or perhaps sprinkled. Then “the baptism of the Spirit” is preached as a distinct experience to be sought beyond “salvation.”

For some, “the baptism of the Spirit” has to do with power while others emphasize “sanctification.” Still others teach these aspects of truth as not one, but two definite experiences beyond “salvation.” And, for good measure, the issue of speaking in tongues adds to the confusion.

Also, there are those who recognize, in some measure, what Peter was inspired to say in Acts 2:38 yet seem to treat it as almost a magical

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formula. And some of these leave speaking in tongues out of their formula while others insist upon it! For the latter, the net result is that speaking in tongues becomes a necessary sign of salvation!

It is far beyond my present purpose to attempt to explore all of these issues but I feel it is necessary to make at least some comments on the issue of tongues. Those who take a stand regarding tongues generally seem to fall into one of two categories: those who emphasize tongues as the sign of receiving the Spirit and those who deny that tongues are for today and that, therefore, all tongues are false and to be avoided and condemned.

Neither position is scriptural. The ability to speak in tongues CAN be a manifestation of God's Spirit, although any honest reading of the scriptures will place it far down the list in terms of importance. As for its value as a sign the one scripture that refers to tongues as a sign plainly says that it is a sign, "not for believers but for unbelievers." 1 Cor. 14:22.

Think about that for a minute. The modern notion that tongues are the evidence for having received the Spirit makes it a sign to believers! The experience is seen by many as proof positive that they have received the Spirit. This unscriptural teaching has opened the door for many false spirits to enter in and deceive people.

The manifestation of tongues on the day of Pentecost consisted of real languages understood by a crowd of unbelievers. It was a sign from God that helped convince them to listen to Peter's message. Later on it was the manifestation of tongues at the house of Cornelius that convinced skeptical Jewish believers that God had indeed reached out to Gentiles with the gospel. Acts 11:1-18.

In fact, when Peter was recounting the experience he said, "As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning." Acts 11:15. Notice, he said, "AT THE BEGINNING." Now, if speaking in tongues was the normal everyday experience—THE sign of receiving the Spirit—why did Peter have to go all the way back—several years—to the day of Pentecost to find a comparable experience? There was a particular reason for tongues

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on this occasion and it was given by God to overcome the prejudice and unbelief of the Jewish believers concerning the Gentiles.

There is no evidence that the 3000 who responded to Peter's instruction at Pentecost had any such experience—but they received the Spirit according to God's promise. The fact is that God can manifest His presence in any way He chooses—or not—according to the present need. There is no guarantee just because someone has experienced something supernatural that affects their senses that they have received God's Spirit. And the reverse is true. Just because someone has not had a phenomenal experience does not necessarily mean they have not received the promised Spirit.

It is very necessary to bring up this issue because so many people are affected. If you are depending upon the "sign" of having spoken in tongues as evidence that you have received the Holy Spirit then I would strongly caution you that you are on very shaky ground.

The Divine Seal

In Ephesians 1:13-14 Paul introduces an interesting and significant way of describing what had happened to his believing readers. It was the same thing that had happened to the 3000 at Pentecost—and what happens to all who respond with heart faith to God's call. He says, "And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession — to the praise of his glory."

There is a lot more truth locked up in this wonderful passage than we could possibly exhaust, however, let's examine briefly some of the key thoughts. Paul spoke of the relationship which we described earlier, that of our being "in Christ." That relationship is established when people hear the gospel and believe it.

The end result—the divine response—is that the believer is "sealed" with the Holy Spirit. The "sealer" is God Himself and the seal

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that is applied is His Spirit. This seal is spoken of as “a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance.” When we are born of God we become His children, “heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ.” Romans 8:17. Thus, whatever God has prepared for His Son in the way of an inheritance is something in which every believer will share!

A deposit is a down-payment. A down-payment is a partial payment that is made on something one intends to purchase. We are that something! Do you believe that God makes a down-payment on a purchase and then fails to complete that purchase? Of course not! When God makes a down-payment it is intended to guarantee the full purchase.

The reason that the promised Holy Spirit is spoken of as a deposit is because the complete purchase involves “the redemption of those who are God’s possession.” This redemption concerns our bodies, which, in the will and purpose of God, remain infested with sin so long as we live in this world. When God is through they will be made like the body our Lord now enjoys—free from sin and alive with the very immortal life of God! Romans 8:22-23. Phil. 3:20-21. 1 Cor. 15:51-53.

We are not the first to experience this seal. Our Savior has gone before us. In John 6:27, Jesus said, “Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to everlasting life, which the Son of Man will give you, because God the Father has set His seal on Him.” NKJV.

A seal is not only a guarantee of a future inheritance but also a mark of ownership. It is God saying, “This one is mine.” Matt 3:16-17 describes what happened when Jesus was baptized: “As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.’”

Notice what Paul said in 2 Cor. 1:21-22, “Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit,

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guaranteeing what is to come. “That is very plain, isn’t it! We see God actively carrying out His guarantee by making us “stand firm in Christ.” We may waver but there is an anchor that holds!

Eph 4:30 says, “And grieve not the holy Spirit of God, whereby ye are sealed unto the day of redemption.” KJV. Believers are strongly exhorted not to grieve the Spirit but the seal is still “unto the day of redemption.” God will finish what He has started! Phil. 1:6.

How, then, can we know we have received God’s Spirit?

Chapter Eleven

The Evidence of His Spirit

In Chapter Ten we began with 1 John 4:13 where John sets forth a very important truth: “We know that we live in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.” This verse echoes the verse in the previous chapter (1 John 3:24), “Those who obey his commands live in him, and he in them. And this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us.”

We then tried to explore just how central the “gift” or the “seal” of the Spirit is to New Testament Christianity. The seal of the Spirit marks those who belong to God and guarantees that He will finish what He started. The centrality of this truth and the simplicity of John’s statements beg the obvious question...

How Do We Know?

So how do we know that we have received God’s Spirit? John speaks of this as if it is something believers know. And surely the God Who inspired John to write as he did desires us to know as well.

I believe that the answer is two-fold: inward and outward. The inward evidence is known to the believer himself and is a fruit of the new union he enjoys with God. The outward evidence has to do with changes that come about in the believer’s life as a direct result of what has happened on the inside. We have already looked at several outward evidences: walking in the light, obedience, fellowship, and not walking in the spirit of antichrist. Let’s look then, at some scriptures that speak of that inward evidence.

Rom 5:1-5 says, “Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,

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through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.”

Peace

There are several clear references to inward evidences of the seal of the Spirit in this wonderful passage. The first is, of course, “peace with God.” The natural state of man is to be at war with God. His every inclination is opposed to God and His ways. Rom 8:7-8 says, “...the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God’s law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God.”

Consider what Paul said in Romans 1:18-32 describing how the human race rebelled against God and plunged into its awful state of depravity. To begin with men possessed a knowledge of God. However, as time went along they, with few exceptions, became more and more enslaved by their lusts and as a result deliberately suppressed that knowledge, willfully choosing darkness over light. God became the enemy standing in the way of what they wanted to do. They hated the light of God’s truth that exposed their wickedness. This continued until “God gave them over to shameful lusts.” Verse 26.

In Ephesians 2:1-3, Paul includes us all when he says: “As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath.”

There are only two possible outcomes to the state of war that

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exists between man and his Creator. Either we “lay down our arms” at the feet of Jesus Christ in unconditional surrender or we remain in rebellion to face Him at the judgment. Many are those who diligently practice their religion without ever coming to that point of surrender. As a result they never come to know the deep inward peace with God that seals them as His.

What a joy it is when that war is over! No more running from God. No more fear of facing the judgment. The dreaded Judge has become the greatest Friend one could ever know. The very moment we are brought to that surrender He comes in by the Spirit with the witness of peace.

Rest

Another closely related word is “rest.” Jesus said, “...I will give you rest.” Matt. 11:28. In Hebrews, chapter 4 this is described as entering “God’s rest.” The great concern of the writer was that his readers would not stop short of that rest.

The fact is that God has a perfect rest in His great heart concerning the salvation He has provided for us. It is perfect. It is complete. Nothing needful has been left out. Moreover, “...his work has been finished since the creation of the world.” Heb. 4:3. That is the reason that God is at rest. So far as He is concerned the work has all been done. What appears to us to be unfinished and uncertain has, in fact, been both finished and certain since the creation! Do you think that God is sitting in heaven somewhere wringing His hands, pacing the floor, and worrying about whether He can finish the job!?

All that remains is for us to become the beneficiaries of that completed work. Salvation does not come about through labor and struggle on our part but through the realization—as the result of God dealing with our hearts—that the “work” necessary to secure our salvation has all been done. Our response then becomes one of repentance and faith.

There is a process to the “outworking” of that salvation but the foundation has been laid by God Himself and that foundation is our

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Lord Jesus Christ and what He did on the cross. And yet, even though His death took place only about 2000 years ago so far as time is concerned, from God's point of view it was finished long before that! He Who created time itself is far above its limitations. "God ... calls things that are not as though they were." Romans 4:17.

As we cease all of our own efforts and struggles and put our trust in Christ we are enabled to enter into God's rest. That is, we literally begin to share the very rest that God Himself has regarding His own work. The effect of that is peace and rest on the inside. Heb. 4:10 says, "...anyone who enters God's rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his."

A Mistake to Avoid

There are many other inward evidences that we have been given God's Spirit but I should pause to inject a word of caution. One mistake that many make is the failure to distinguish between our emotions and the far deeper evidences of God's presence. Most of the time our emotions reflect the constant ups and downs of life in this world and are totally unreliable witnesses when it comes to eternal things. Emotions are usually very superficial and changeable whereas peace with God is a constant deep in our spirits.

It is certainly true that we can become so caught up in our emotions and in the trials of life that we don't enjoy the benefit of that peace at times but it is there nonetheless. In Matthew 11:28-30, Jesus spoke of two rests. The first one is given to those to come to him. This is salvation. The second has more to do with practical living, learning from him. God desires that we learn to find that practical rest that brings our external emotions more into line with His inward peace—but once there, that peace remains like a well-laid foundation. The war is over.

Hope

The last part of verse 2 says, "And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God." Right there we find reference to two more inward

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evidences of the Holy Spirit's presence: joy and hope. Hope, in the scriptures, is not the uncertain wish that we sometimes express when we say something like, "I sure hope it doesn't rain." Scriptural hope is a confidence based upon the sure promises of God concerning something that is yet future. There is no uncertainty in it.

When God comes in by His Spirit, He brings not only His peace but also an inward confidence, an expectation, regarding not just the future in general, but OUR future in particular. It is personal. We may battle uncertainty in our emotions at times while living down here but way down deep there is the inborn knowledge that we are in God's hands and that all will be well in the end. We can sing with joy and conviction the great hymn, "It Is Well With My Soul."

Joy

It is that knowledge that enables us to rejoice even in contrary circumstances. We are able to look beyond all of the difficulty and heartache of this present evil world and see the glory that will burst forth when God's eternal purpose reaches its fulfillment. With Paul, we are enabled to say, "So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal." 2 Cor. 4:18.

The joy I am talking about is more than just our emotional reaction to the hope we have in God. That may be part of it but the joy that is the result of having God's Spirit within comes from His own joy! Do you think that God has no feelings about what is to come? Of course He does! His own heart is filled with the joy of anticipation of that day and all that is to follow. His joy becomes a wellspring of hope and joy in our hearts from which we may drink throughout our earthly journey.

Perseverance

It is that wellspring within that enables us to learn perseverance in the face of suffering and even to be able to rejoice because of an inward knowledge that God uses such things to achieve His

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wonderful purpose in us. The quality of perseverance—patience, endurance—is very much a fruit of God’s presence within. No matter how weak we may be in ourselves, the Spirit that is begotten in us will never give up, never abandon hope or trust in God. We may be called upon to pass through deep waters but, as I said before, our anchor will hold!

What a wonderful example and demonstration of this we see in our Lord, “...who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.” Heb. 12:2.

Knowledge

The knowledge Paul spoke of in verse 3 needs to be noted. This is not mere head knowledge, learned from a book, or from a preacher. God certainly uses human instruments in teaching us but the knowledge to which Paul refers is an inward knowledge that results from our being taught of God. God desires to teach His children. He wants us to be willing disciples, learners, students.

Once again, Jesus said, “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.” Matt. 11:29. In John 6:45, Jesus quotes from Isaiah: “They will all be taught by God.” Heb. 10:16 likewise quotes the Old Testament when it says, “This is the covenant I will make with them after that time, says the Lord. I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds.”

In 1 John 2:27 we read, “As for you, the anointing you received from him remains in you, and you do not need anyone to teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about all things and as that anointing is real, not counterfeit — just as it has taught you, remain in him.” John is describing that same inward knowledge that comes when we are taught of God by His Spirit within.

Surely we understand that God has not given us His Spirit that we might walk alone, independent of the Body of Christ. Nonetheless, every member of that Body does have an inward ability to know as a

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direct result of the presence of God's Spirit and those who have that Spirit are thus enabled to recognize and fellowship others of the same Spirit. They are also enabled to recognize those that the Spirit anoints to minister in carrying out the various functions of the Body.

This inward knowledge—or at least, the inward ability to understand spiritual matters—is no small thing. It marks one of the greatest, most telling differences between the saved and lost.

The Spirit of Truth

Listen to these words of Jesus from John 16:12-15, spoken to his disciples shortly before his arrest and crucifixion: "I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you. All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will take from what is mine and make it known to you."

God's Spirit is referred to as "the Spirit of truth," so direct is the connection between truth and His Spirit. That Spirit is THE means for the communication of truth between our glorified Lord and His Body, the Church. Some of that truth may be expressed outwardly through preaching and teaching yet it can only be truly understood by those who have His Spirit living within. Others may hear the words yet have no more power to understand their true significance than did most of those who heard Jesus on earth.

Foolishness to the Perishing

In the first part of 1 Corinthians Paul spends considerable time expounding on this subject. In 1 Cor. 1:18 he says, "For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." Note the connection between the spiritual state of the hearers and the way in which they regard the message: same message, opposite evaluation.

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In the verses that follow, Paul discusses the difference between human and divine wisdom and how God deliberately frustrates the wisdom of the wise. Behind worldly wisdom lies sinful human pride and God will never cater to nor reward pride. He bypasses both the sign-seeking unbelief of the Jews and the intellectual pride of the Greeks. Instead He saves those who believe a message that the worldly-wise regard as foolishness.

In Matt 11:25-27, Jesus first addressed his Father and then taught his disciples something about how dependent we are upon him for true spiritual knowledge. He said, “I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure. All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.”

If we know anything of eternal importance it is by God’s grace and mercy. There will be no boasting on the judgment day. Little children who have simply believed God’s word will stand there robed in white while the intellectual giants of this world who trust in their own intellects and reject His Word will be cast into the fire.

And so Paul, in the light of all he has been saying in chapter 1, begins the second chapter by expressing his determination to simply proclaim the message with God’s power rather than depending upon any kind of human ability. NOT to do so results in people’s faith resting on men’s wisdom—not a good thing! And back in verse 17 of chapter 1 he gives us another bad consequence of relying on human wisdom: *the cross of Christ is emptied of its power!* No power, no salvation. Converted heads, empty hearts. And we wonder why churches today are filled with lost members!

God’s Secret Wisdom

But our present focus is on evidences of having received God’s Spirit, knowledge not available to the world being one of them. And

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this is precisely what Paul deals with next. He first makes the point that in his preaching he DID in fact speak wisdom, just not the wisdom of the world. He then says in 1 Cor. 2:7, “No, we speak of God’s secret wisdom, a wisdom that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began.”

What an amazing verse! Think about what Paul is saying here. He had the incredible privilege of proclaiming “God’s secret wisdom.” God had kept that wisdom hidden since the beginning of the world. He knew it all along but the world remained in total ignorance despite its professions of great wisdom.

The ancient world had its superstars in the realm of philosophy and religion, men like Plato, Socrates, Buddha, Confucius, and many others, who were celebrated far and wide for their supposedly wise insights. All the while God kept His peace as men professed themselves to be wise, yet became fools. Oh, it is true that He revealed many things to His followers, yet, even though the prophets, for example, were allowed to prophesy many great things, they still didn’t really understand what it was all about. 1 Peter 1:10-12. Only the ministry of Christ and all that has followed could begin to reveal God’s secret.

God’s wisdom is much more than just a lot of superior ideas. Nor is it just about having a better life here in this world. Rather, it embodies a plan, a purpose, a destiny, set forth by One Who has the absolute power to make it happen. And that destiny has to do with US, those who believe. Our destiny is to be glorified along with His Son.

No Eye Has Seen

In 1 Cor. 2:9, Paul quotes from Isaiah 64:4, “No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him.” Nearly always when I hear this verse quoted it is applied to believers and the wonderful things that God has prepared for them in the next world. That may be true but that is NOT what this verse is about.

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Paul is actually continuing his thought about “God’s secret wisdom” by noting that “No eye has seen...,” etc. That is, the eyes, ears, and minds of natural men have been clueless when it has come to divine truth. Man has no idea what God is up to. The greatest philosophers of history have completely missed it because God has kept it hidden and revealed it only according to His plan.

And that is exactly what Paul says next. 1 Cor. 2:10 continues, “...but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit.” See, the things that no (natural) eye has seen, and so forth, are not all of the wonderful things in our eternal future but what He is revealing here and now in this world, namely the cross that opens up a glorious destiny for those who believe.

How did Paul come to possess this secret knowledge? God revealed it to him BY HIS SPIRIT. It’s not how intellectually brilliant we are. It is what spirit we have. What the wisest of natural men can never know by their wisdom a little child can know because it is revealed by God’s Spirit.

That We May Understand

Only the Spirit of God knows these deep secrets of God. In the human realm the only one who really knows the secrets of a man’s heart is that man’s spirit. And so it is with God. Having made that comparison in verses 10 and 11, Paul says this in verse 12: “We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us.”

Now that brings us right back to our subject. There is a direct and necessary connection between receiving God’s Spirit and understanding “what God has freely given us.” It is not enough to merely possess those things; God desires that we come to understand them. And He has given us His Spirit that we MAY understand.

The clear implication of verse 12 is that others do not understand these spiritual truths. However, lest that implication be overlooked, Paul says directly in verse 14, “The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are

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foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.” Thus we can clearly see (if we have received God’s Spirit!) the relevance of this truth to our subject.

I’m afraid that one of the tragic features of modern Christianity is the building of great religious empires by “dumbing down” the gospel, removing its offence so that people will not be put off by such old-fashioned doctrines as the blood, the cross, dying to self, repentance, and so forth. In their place we find religious entertainment, psychology for living, engaging programs, superficial “believism,” and a false hope of heaven. It is nothing but the broad road that leads to destruction. Matthew 7:13.

Truly, as Jesus said in John 3:3, “...no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.” Prior to the new birth the only spiritual truths one is able to understand—and then, only as God reveals them and convicts him—are those truths that make up the gospel message showing the sinner his need and Christ’s promise of salvation through repentance and faith. It is only after the sinner bows to that truth and enters in that the great truths of the kingdom, those secrets God has hidden since the beginning of the world, can begin to make any sense at all. It is the indwelling Spirit of God that makes that possible.

That heretofore secret wisdom of God absolutely cuts across everything that man prizes so highly. Worldly wisdom prizes, “...the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does.” 1 John 2:16. In short, man places the highest value on whatever gratifies “self.”

God’s plan is to deliver man from sin and self. The cross is not just an instrument the ancient Romans used to execute Jesus; it is also the means of our deliverance today. We are called to walk in the words of Jesus: “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it.” Matt 16:24-25.

Such truths—together with a long list of great kingdom truths—make no sense at all to the natural man, however religious he

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may be. Oh, he may acknowledge them somewhat, intellectually, but he does not understand them in his heart let alone believe them. The bent of his heart will always be to walk in the ways of the world around him.

Spiritual Babies

Now someone will rightly point out that believers do not instantly acquire all of this wonderful knowledge when they are born again. In fact, Peter says in 1 Peter 2:2-3, “Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good.” Spiritual knowledge and understanding are only acquired over time and through experience.

Part of Paul’s prayer for those who had experienced the seal of the Spirit is recorded in Eph 1:17: “I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better.” Now Paul is certainly not talking about their receiving a different Spirit in addition to the One that had sealed them! Rather he is praying that they might grow in their spiritual knowledge as a result of that indwelling Spirit.

In fact, what follows in 1 Cor. 3 acknowledges this need as Paul points out that he cannot address the Corinthian believers as “spiritual” but as “worldly,” “mere infants in Christ.” They still needed spiritual “milk” and could not yet tolerate “solid food.” In many ways they behaved more like people of the world than they did as true followers of Christ.

Yet, Paul did not regard them as unbelievers but rather as immature believers needing to grow. There would have been no point at all in his writing to them to teach them needed spiritual truth if they had been “natural men” because they would not have had the capacity to understand. And that is precisely the point. Just because someone is born again, sealed by the Holy Spirit does not mean that they suddenly become theologians able to expound the deep mysteries of God. Rather the Spirit’s indwelling gives them the

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CAPACITY to understand. And beyond that, it gives them the ability to recognize those who minister by the Spirit of truth even when they don't understand everything!

We can see an example of this in the events of John 6. At this point in the ministry of Jesus great crowds were following him, having seen miracles such as the multiplying of the loaves and fishes. But Jesus understood their true condition. He knew their real need was to recognize and receive him as God's messenger. It was not the loaves and fishes he provided but the message of eternal life he brought that mattered.

And so he expounded this truth, deliberately expressing it in terms that would expose the true spiritual condition of his followers. Jesus never was interested in crowds. Actually, there was no one who heard him that day that understood the truth he shared yet there were two very opposite responses. The crowds—and even some of those who had followed him around and considered themselves to be his disciples—turned away from him.

Jesus pointed out that although the words he had spoken were “spirit” and “life” there were many among his followers who did not believe (Judas being one). In John 6:65 we read, “He went on to say, “This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless the Father has enabled him.” This enablement, this ability has everything to do with being taught of God (verse 45).

At that point Jesus addressed the twelve disciples to see how they would respond. Now it is true that the Spirit was WITH the disciples and not yet IN them but still that Divine influence caused them to stay. Even though they did not understand what Jesus had said, Peter spoke up quickly and said, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.” John 6:68-69.

They didn't understand what he had said—but they knew WHO HE WAS. How did they know? They knew it because God had revealed it to them, even as Jesus pointed out on another occasion in Matthew 16:15-17.

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And so receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit has everything to do with our ability to understand the things of God. The only thing necessary before that is for a sinner to know that he is a sinner, to know where the gate is that opens upon the narrow way that leads to life, and how to go through that gate. He cannot truly understand anything beyond that until he first bows to the gospel ultimatum and is born of that Spirit.

Chapter Twelve

Love, Witness, Hope, Purpose

So far we have seen in just the first 4 verses of Romans 5 a number of evidences of the presence of God's Spirit within: peace with God, joy, hope, perseverance, inward knowledge. But verse 5 adds perhaps the greatest one of all: "And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us."

The greatest attribute God possesses is love. John even goes beyond that when he says simply, "God is love." 1 John 4:8. Everything about His being longs to reach out, to embrace, to bless the objects of that unfathomable love. It is a love far beyond our ability to understand.

Listen as Paul tries to express the inexpressible to the Ephesian believers: "I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge — that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God." Eph. 3:16-19.

Once again, what Paul is describing here in Ephesians and also in Romans 5 is not mere religious knowledge of Bible teaching. This is a deep, personal, inward knowledge that only comes when God's Spirit comes in. It is not just the "head" knowledge that God is love; it is the "heart" knowledge that God loves YOU. And it is a direct communication of that love, His heart to yours. There is no substitute for this. It is the beginning of a relationship that will last

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forever. Anything short of this is just religion. Has God poured out his love into your heart?

What an amazing love it is that God has shown towards His own! It is a love that is unearned, undeserved, yet bestowed upon us because it pleases Him to do so. It goes to the heart of God's very character to faithfully seek our highest welfare, our highest good. I should point out, of course, that what constitutes our highest welfare is measured with eternity in mind and not by the natural self-centered values of this world.

There are different kinds of love. One kind might be called sort of a general benevolence toward others. This kind of love desires the welfare of others and yet is neither intimate nor personal. In fact, sometimes the oft-repeated humorous comment, "I love humanity; it's people I can't stand!" applies.

Another kind of love is the love of a friend. Here the relationship between the one expressing the love and the object of that love is very personal. Additionally it is very likely that such a love would go both ways as each friend desires the well being of the other.

A Father's Love

It would be wonderful enough if God's love for us was simply an expression of general benevolence and even more so if He regarded us as "friends" in a more personal sense. But it is far more wonderful than that! 1 John 3:1 says, "How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!"

Friendship is wonderful yet it does not begin to describe the relationship that salvation brings about. To be His child, literally "born" of His Spirit! That makes Him our Father.

Even here on earth, despite the ruin that sin has brought, fathers generally have tender feelings for their little children. They love them, provide for them, protect them, desire them to grow up to be strong and healthy. Yet the greatest fatherly love earth has ever seen

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pales beside the love of our Heavenly Father. It is that love that lifts the sinner from a hopeless prison and makes him His very own child!

I fear that we sometimes use such expressions as “Heavenly Father” and “child of God” so carelessly that they no longer amaze us – but they should. The knowledge that God is our Father should fill our hearts with peace and rest, knowing that His faithfulness guarantees our eternal destiny. It should fill our hearts with confidence to come to Him in times of need knowing that He cares about us.

I do not know if the following is just a story or if it actually happened but I remember hearing about an American president in the 1800s who had a young son. One day he was busy in a meeting with some of his top officials when in walked his little boy. The boy confidently walked up to his father who paused from his important business to speak lovingly to his son as all of the important officials respectfully looked on. To everyone else the man at the head of the table was “Mr. President.” But to the little boy, this was “Daddy” and he had a special relationship with and access to his famous father that others did not have.

The Spirit of Slavery

Listen as Paul writes in Romans 8:15, “For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, ‘Abba, Father.’” Here we see the truth of receiving God’s Spirit not just in general terms but rather specifically referred to as receiving “the Spirit of sonship.” The word “Abba” is an Aramaic word that expresses a special relationship like the one that existed between that president and his son. The great sovereign of the universe becomes not just “God” but “Abba.”

And furthermore Paul contrasts receiving the Spirit of sonship with receiving another kind of spirit – “a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear.” I fear that many religious people have received such a spirit, thinking they were receiving God’s Spirit. Paul knew all about

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religious spirits that bring slavery. His own background as a Pharisee was a prime example.

He had been taught that righteousness comes by obeying the law of Moses and so his life had been devoted to zealously living and promoting the religion of the Pharisees. In Christ, he came to see how desperately wrong he had been. In fact Romans 7:7-25 reveals something of God's dealings with Paul in this matter.

I believe that God allowed Paul to experience in a deep and painful way the utter futility of trying to serve God by keeping commandments. No matter how much he wanted to do right and how hard he tried he met nothing but failure. Every illusion that righteousness could be achieved by zealous religious effort was stripped away – forever.

The more he tried with his own good intentions to serve God the more he experienced the awful power of sin to enslave him. He was finally moved to cry out, “What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?” Romans 7:24. Of course, the glorious answer was Jesus Christ. By the way, have you ever seen yourself as Paul saw himself? Such a revelation is painful indeed, yet it is necessary if we are to cease from trusting in ourselves and to begin to trust in Christ alone.

That is why he describes the other spirit as one that “makes you a slave again to fear.” It is a terrible thing to know what God's holiness requires of us, and yet to discover that our best effort continually falls short. What fearful bondage that is! How can a person under such bondage ever have any confidence toward God, any spiritual rest?

A False Gospel

There are many preachers who pay lip service to the truth that we are saved by grace yet, by spirit and precept, convey to their people that the Bible is a book of rules. Keep the rules and you get to go to heaven. Their sermons are filled with rules about how people must dress, wear their hair, what ornaments they can and can't wear and

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other such legalistic precepts. Hellfire is dangled over the heads of those who would dare to violate their rules.

If a woman so much as cuts her hair she had better pray that Jesus doesn't come before her hair grows out or she will be left behind! I'm not making that up! Bro. Thomas and others actually heard a preacher say that on one occasion. **This is a false gospel.** Paul felt so strongly about it that he actually expressed the wish that such preachers would go to hell!

In Galatians 1:6-9, Paul wrote, "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel— which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned!"

That is strong language – but the issue is just that important. Either we are saved by what we do or we are saved by faith in what Jesus Christ did. No one knew better than Paul how men can be saved. He saw all too clearly how damnable it was for preachers to send their hearers down the road to hell under the guise of preaching truth.

All the law can do is to bring a curse upon us because no one can keep it. That goes for any commandments and precepts that are presented as pathways to righteousness before God for those who keep them. That is why our only hope is based on the fact that Jesus became a curse for us, redeeming us from the curse of the law (Galatians 3:13). What He did for us opens the door for us to receive the promise of the Spirit **by faith** alone. As Paul said earlier in Galatians 3:2, "Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard?"

Apart from the gospel, all men are in slavery to the basic principles of this world (Galatians 4:3). But in Galatians 4:4-7 Paul

writes these glorious words: “But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons. Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, “Abba, Father.” So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir.”

That is the same kind of language that we find in Romans 8. In verse 15, which we quoted above, we note that it is **by** the Spirit of sonship that “we cry ‘Abba, Father.’” How else could a guilty sinner do such a thing? It is the same Spirit that convicts of sin and coming judgment. It is the same Spirit that testifies to us of God’s holiness and shows us the blackness of our hearts. When such conviction comes we see God as anything **but** Father! Judge, Executioner, maybe. How could such a sinner ever hope to call a holy God, “Father”?

The Spirit’s Testimony

Yet it is not out of anger and condemnation that this conviction comes. Rather it is God’s kindness that leads us to repentance (Romans 2:4). And once we are brought to a true repentance in our hearts the very Spirit that presses upon us our need now comes in with such love and assurance that we are indeed able to call Him, “Father,” not just as a kind of religious profession, but as a true expression of the heart. The sense that we are God’s children comes, not from religious doctrine, not from the preacher, not from a book, but from a personal inward witness. Paul further elaborates in verse 16, “The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children.” Notice that this a **joint testimony** by God’s Spirit **and** our spirit. It is evidence that we are at peace with God.

If you are trying to find peace with God by any means other than simply believing from your heart the gospel of grace Paul preached then you are attempting the impossible. There is only one way and it is through faith in Christ alone.

When God’s Spirit comes in the relationship between us and God

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changes forever. The great terrifying God of the universe becomes “Abba,” Father, and His love begins at once to dispel fear. As John says in 1 John 4:18, “There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment.” The barrier of sin that once separated us from God is gone and we begin to sense the new relationship. It is not that we suddenly experience a full-blown revelation of all that this new relationship will become. After all, we are but spiritual infants. Still, there is a beginning—and it is very real. It is as real as is the bond between a newborn and loving earthly parents, and yet the heavenly bond is infinitely greater than the earthly.

And what amazing privileges come with this new relationship! Romans 8:17 says, “Now if we are children, then we are heirs — heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.” There is a cost involved in following Jesus. His followers turn their back on the world and cast their lot irrevocably with Him. That is why Jesus warned us to “count the cost.” Luke 14:28-33. Abraham did not have the option of staying with his family in his native land and still being God’s heir.

Suffering

Not everyone suffers in the same way. Paul – and many of those to whom he wrote – suffered severe persecution and even death for the cause of Christ and many today suffer in the same way in various parts of the world. Others, however, may never be literally beaten or thrown into prison for their faith yet all are called to the same radical choice: it is either this world or it is Christ. You cannot simply **add** Christ to your life. Choosing to follow Christ is a choice to reject the world – and also to give up our very lives for Him, as He gave up His life for us.

Jesus is our example. He gave up everything this world had to offer – and gained all that heaven has to offer! But the wonderful thing is that He didn’t gain heavenly glory for Himself alone but also for us. What we could never earn or gain by any personal effort we may

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receive as a gift. But that gift is not given to those who mean to cling to their lives and continue in sin; it is given to those who repent, turning away from sin, self, and the world to follow Christ for time and eternity.

Moses faced a clear choice between identifying himself with God's people and continuing on in a life of luxury in the palaces of Egypt. He chose God's way. The rich young ruler was faced with a choice between his riches and following Jesus. He sadly turned back to his riches. I believe that everyone who truly follows Christ, in one way or another, faces the same choice. He is made aware of the promise and the hope of the gospel but he is also made aware of the cost. God may put His finger on a specific issue as He did with the rich young ruler but at the very least following Christ means surrendering our lives to Him.

A Glorious Inheritance

The gift of the Spirit of sonship that results from that surrender is the down payment on the glorious inheritance of which Paul speaks. As 1 Peter 1:3-5 puts it, "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade — kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time." Peter saw something, didn't he! It was something so wonderful that nothing could turn him aside from following Jesus.

It was the same for Paul. In Romans 8:18 he said, "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us." Yes, living for Christ in this world means turning our backs on the world – and even our own lives – but how can you compare the little that is given up with the eternal glory that is gained? And the same Spirit that bears witness that God is our Father also bears witness concerning the sure hope of that glory to

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come. And by the same Spirit we are made to know that it is worth everything to belong to Him.

In “Bible belt” sections of America it is often hard to convey just how radical the choice to give one’s life to Christ is. We are surrounded by religion, a lot of it just a powerless form. People have “gone forward,” “accepted Jesus,” and joined churches without ever being born of God’s Spirit. Their interest in Christian faith tends to be centered in the needs of this present life. Some even “try” Jesus, hoping that if they adopt a “Christian lifestyle” He will help solve their earthly problems and make their lives smoother and more meaningful. The idea of going to heaven is a bonus but their real focus is on life here.

But the one that is brought to godly sorrow and repentance and has been indwelt by God’s Spirit has a different view of things. He begins to see the vanity of this life, the corruption that sin has brought, the downhill course of this present world, and its certain end. His vision looks beyond this world to His true home. The sufferings of this present world will often turn aside the mere religious professor but God’s child is given strength and vision to keep on trusting in Him, knowing that all will be right in the end.

In Romans 8:19-22 Paul spoke of the creation itself that is in “bondage to decay” as groaning, yet having to wait in hope for God to finish what He is doing in His sons before being released from that bondage. How sad it is that men blindly live and die as slaves to sin in a world that is careening towards destruction. And yet, how interesting it is that Paul is able, by the Spirit, to see in this present creation a kind of mirror of what is taking place in God’s sons: suffering, longing, and hope of deliverance to come.

Saved In Hope

And so, having spoken of the creation, Paul continued on in Romans 8:23-25 to say, “Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we

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were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what he already has? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.” Here we see some of the same themes regarding hope that we saw in Romans 5. But here the hope is characterized as much more than a confident expectation of something in the future. Here we see a desire so intense that the believer is said to “groan inwardly,” and to “wait eagerly.”

The presence of God’s Spirit within provokes a deep longing for our salvation to be complete. It is not enough just to be “saved” and expect to go to heaven someday, rather our very affections are more and more turned away from the world and towards our true home. Particularly as the believer grows older this world becomes less and less attractive, more and more of a wearisome place. The body grows more infirm and the sense of the utter vanity of this life grows more pronounced. He longs for the day when he can leave it forever behind. Death for him is not a fearful precipice from which he will be hurled headlong into the unknown but rather a joyful step into the presence of the Lord.

Hope is at the very center of salvation since most of what God has for us lies in the future. God’s Spirit within enables us to look beyond what we can see with our natural eyes and to stake our eternal future on God’s promises. Notice the seeming paradox in what Paul says above about that hope. On the one hand we are made to desire the object of that hope to the extent that we “groan inwardly” and “wait eagerly.” And yet “we wait for it patiently.” Think about that! Human beings aren’t naturally built like that. If we want something to the point of “groaning inwardly” we are generally not very patient! This is one indicator as to just how supernatural salvation is. It takes divine enablement to be able to combine intense desire with patience. These are marks of the Spirit’s presence in a life.

Contrast that with so many religious people who “try Jesus.” They embrace a kind of belief in Him based on certain expectations—usually centered in earthly desires. When their carnal

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expectations aren't met their "patience" quickly runs out and they are gone.

In Romans 8:26-27 Paul continued, "In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will." The inward longing that the Spirit imparts for God and also for deliverance from this present evil world is itself a form of prayer, prayer that God understands perfectly. Just as He hears and understands creation's groans under the bondage of suffering and death, so He hears and understands the longings that rise from the hearts of His children even when words fail. His ears are tuned to pick up the faintest cry of one of His little ones. Think of how attuned an earthly mother is to the cry of her baby. She rushes to see what is the matter. Yet how can even her loving attentiveness be compared with that of our Father in heaven?

God's Purpose

And what a wonderful scripture follows! Romans 8:28-30 says, "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified."

Here, again, is one of those things we "know" because God's Spirit dwells within. We have the inward sense that we are not merely careening through life, helplessly caught in one whirlpool of random circumstances after another with no meaning. Rather we sense that the God in Whom we have put our trust is orchestrating our lives according to His loving purpose for us. Often, we do not understand things as they happen, yet we still have that sense of purpose that God knows what He is doing.

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In this wonderful scripture we not only see that there **is** a purpose in a vague general sense but we also are made to see a glimpse of what that purpose is. This is a good subject in its own right but for our present purposes it is appropriate to take note of God's great plan: many sons, all made like Jesus in their character, all brought to a place of great glory. And we see not only the divine purpose, but also the certainty of the divine plan. It is so certain that Paul even expressed the end result in the **past tense**. In other words, it is as certain as if it has already happened! Why not? God, Who cannot lie, has declared His plan and purpose. Who can stop Him from carrying it out? And that is exactly what verses 31-39 express.

Chapter Thirteen

The Race Set Before Us

The first part of Hebrews 12 sets forth some wonderful aspects of truth concerning God's purposes for us and how He carries them out. Hebrews 12 comes on the heels of chapter 11 where we meet so many of the heroes of faith. We see that, whether they were called to achieve great things or to suffer great things, the guiding principle of their lives was a persevering faith—trust—in God.

Yet they are not presented to us in Hebrews 12:1 as “dead and gone” but as “a great cloud of witnesses” that surround those of us who remain here. Their testimony to us is not a mere lesson of history but a living word of encouragement sent from heaven itself. It is as though we are in an arena and they are the spectators, cheering us on to victory.

Our Race

Our life in Christ is pictured as a race. However, it is not a “speed” race but rather an endurance race. It could even be described as an obstacle course. We are exhorted to run this race with perseverance, throwing off “everything that hinders” as well as the “sin that so easily entangles.” The writer, knowing full well that such a race cannot be run in human strength, instructs us to “fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith” (verse 2). Thus, while it is the responsibility of Jesus to “perfect,” or complete, our faith, it surely is our responsibility to cooperate.

Salvation does not even begin until we are willing to abandon self-righteousness and self-effort and cast ourselves upon Christ's mercy and ability to save us. And, just as we must look only to Him in

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the beginning, so we must look only to Him all the way home. Salvation is by grace and through faith from beginning to end. Every resource we need is in Christ and available to us as we embrace His promises. And yet, the process itself involves a serious effort, what Paul calls “the good fight of the faith.” 1 Timothy 6:12.

But Christ is also our example. He suffered beyond our power to imagine while on earth, willingly giving up His life. The endurance He demonstrated was directly connected with “the joy set before him.” His eyes were not focused on His earthly troubles but on the heavenly joys beyond. So strong, so fixed was He in His purpose that He actually scorned the shame of the cross. His reward was to be given a throne second only to that of His Father. From that exalted position He reigns today for our benefit.

The concern of the writer was that the trials and troubles of this life might cause his readers to become discouraged. He wanted them to remember and consider, not only their Savior’s suffering, but also His exaltation. He also wanted them, in verse 4, to consider that, however much they might suffer for Christ, He suffered more—and God brought Him through.

God’s Discipline

We are talking about being God’s children and the evidence that we are His children and verses 5-6 introduce some important principles that bear directly on our subject. There we read, “And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons: ‘My son, do not make light of the Lord’s discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son.’”

The writer here quotes from Proverbs 3 and in so doing reminds of us where our help and encouragement comes from in times of difficulty. They do not come from the self-help section of the bookstore nor from the psychiatrist nor from the pop psychologist on TV. They come from the Word of God. Only God’s revealed Word can give us a true perspective on the race to which we have

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been called. It's wonderful that in life's trials our Heavenly Father goes out of His way to strengthen us through His encouraging Word. When the devil introduces trouble into our lives he goes out of his way to pile on every discouragement that he can!

Once again we see the wonderful relationship believers enjoy with God: Father and child. One of the central features of the father-child relationship is the father's responsibility to teach and train his children. This passage uses the word "discipline" several times. The Greek word that is translated "discipline" is directly derived from the word for "child" and could well be translated as "child training." It encompasses all of the father's efforts to teach and prepare his child for adulthood.

As ridiculous as it may seem to those who know better, there have been many influential people who have advocated "permissive" child-rearing. Of course, we know that leads inevitably to what we call a "spoiled child." Such a child enters the adult world with a severe handicap. Our natures are much too self-centered and undisciplined to be allowed unrestrained expression.

And it is no different in the spiritual realm. There the goal is that we are changed into the image of our Savior, the Lord Jesus. That is a pretty drastic change! How little are we like Him even after our sins are forgiven. See how He endured the torture and injustice that led to the cross. Over and over again, no matter what was done to Him, he kept silent. He did not defend Himself. He did not rail against the injustice of it all. He did not threaten His tormentors. In fact, He prayed for their forgiveness! A supernatural work of grace is required to produce any measure of such character in a human being!

And that is exactly the point. Our heavenly Father does not simply forgive our sins, hand us a "ticket" to heaven, and forget about us. He is utterly devoted to "bringing up" His children properly. From the time we are born again until such time as He sees fit to take us home our lives here on earth are designed to prepare us to live in His eternal kingdom. Furthermore it is His purpose to use us to help and influence others to come to faith while we remain here.

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Such purposes require tremendous changes. And the instruments of those changes are the trials of life combined with the divinely supplied grace to bear them. There is no other way. It takes more than simple “classroom” instruction.

The Butterfly

I often think of the process by which a butterfly emerges from a cocoon. Having begun life as a caterpillar it goes through an extended period confined to a cocoon. Finally the day of deliverance comes.

But when it comes it does not simply split the cocoon open and fly away. The process is a torturous one involving a lot of struggle. It is tempting to one who doesn't understand to take pity on the poor struggling creature and free it from its prison. If that happens, however, not only will the butterfly never fly, it will shortly die! It is no kindness to bypass the process or make it easier.

But if you patiently watch you will observe the weak spindly creature begin to fill out and grow strong. In accordance with the wise design of a loving Creator the very struggle itself is what makes the butterfly fit to survive—and to flit around colorfully on the breeze. What a transformation from its beginning! The ability to change comes from the Creator and yet the process requires a real effort on the part of the emerging butterfly.

God's Motive

It is important to take note of the Father's **motive** for disciplining His sons. It is simply **love**. All too often earthly fathers mete out discipline for all the wrong reasons. It has more to do with them than it does the welfare of the child. The father is impatient, angry, bothered, inconvenienced, his pride is offended, his ego and authority challenged. And so he lashes out at the child trying to intimidate him into a kind of submission. It is sometimes more retaliation than it is loving correction.

But our Heavenly Father's discipline is always motivated by the

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unfathomable love He has for His children. He disciplines, not because He is mad at us or disgusted with us, but because He is utterly faithful to our need and His purpose. Psalms 103:13-14 says, “As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him; for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust.”

This discipline necessarily takes many forms. Sometimes it is only necessary for Him to speak, to convict us in our hearts. Do you sometimes find yourself reacting to something in anger, or hastily saying words in a wrong spirit? When that happens do you afterwards feel grieved and convicted on the inside, just between you and God?

That is one way He corrects us, something like a parent when he has only to catch his child’s eye or speak a word to correct him in something. Would that all our child-training were that simple! But when we sense that inward grieving and conviction it is a perfect opportunity to lift our hearts, confess our sin, and be quickly and fully forgiven.

How wonderful is His forgiveness! Suppose a mother firmly instructs her young son not to play in mud puddles. Then, once he is outside, he “forgets” and gets really dirty. As he returns to the house one look from his mother is all it takes for him to remember. Suppose he then quickly and humbly asks for forgiveness and she forgives him. Is that all there is to it? No! He is still dirty and so she lovingly gives him a bath. Now he is both forgiven **and** clean! That is how our Heavenly Father forgives.

The Consequences of Sin

Much of the time, unfortunately, discipline must be a little more drastic, something that will get our attention. The problem is that sin has consequences. Sin is not just the breaking of a lot of rules that God has made up. It is a very real power that ruins and destroys.

It is rooted in our selfish, lust-driven nature. James 1:13-15 says, “When tempted, no one should say, ‘God is tempting me.’ For God

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cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.”

If God never once intervened with His law we would still perish as an inescapable consequence of the sinful nature with which we were born. Our acts of disobedience against what He reveals—our sins—simply flow from the sin principle that dwells within.

I have written in the past about the difference between the natural and the legal consequences of sin. Imagine a wise king who knows that jumping off a building leads to serious injury and even death. And so, desiring the welfare of his citizens, he passes a law: “Thou shalt not jump off of buildings.” Note: this is not just an arbitrary—for no reason—law; it is motivated by a desire that the king’s subjects might avoid injury.

However, one citizen is both foolish and willful. He imagines the exhilaration of flying through the air, not thinking about what happens afterward! As he jumps his sense of exhilaration quickly turns to fear as he begins to realize what happens at the bottom. By the time he reaches the bottom he is truly repentant! The king, being a good king, forgives him and says he doesn’t have to go to jail.

That fixes everything, right? Of course not! Forgiveness does nothing to heal the terrible broken leg that he has gotten from the fall. Jail is a legal consequence of the sin of jumping. The broken leg is a natural consequence. Thank God that Jesus has forever settled the legal consequences of sin for God’s children. Their sins will never be remembered against them—even on the judgment day.

But a willful and disobedient child will reap many sorrows in this life if his willfulness goes unchecked. As Paul says in Galatians 6:7, “A man reaps what he sows.” Romans 6:16 says, “Don’t you know that when you offer yourselves to someone to obey him as slaves, you are slaves to the one whom you obey — whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness?”

How well our Father knows this and how faithfully He disciplines

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His own that we might avoid those sorrows. Often He allows us to experience the consequences of our sins to get our attention before we get in worse trouble down the road. This is like a wise earthly father who firmly disciplines his child so that childish rebellion does not grow into criminal adult behavior that leads to prison or worse. That is no doubt why Hebrews 12:6 tells us that “he punishes everyone he accepts as a son.” “Punishes” is a stronger word, a word that is derived from a whip, the kind of whip that could be used in a serious beating. Clearly God will do what it takes to bring up His sons properly. Yet even when punishment is necessary the Father’s underlying motivation is love for His own

But I want us to notice something in Hebrews 12:7. The writer says, “Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father?” In connection with this I want us to remember that he holds up Jesus as an example for us. But what did Jesus ever do wrong? He was a sinless, perfectly obedient son, and yet look at the hardships He endured. Obviously discipline is more than just “punishment” for something done wrong as we tend to think of it. Where there is willfulness and sin then corrective discipline is very much in order but at its heart discipline is, as we said earlier, child-training. That is, it is designed to teach, to shape character. Sometimes it is just the simple fact of having to cope with hardship that brings about much needed changes in our lives.

Jesus was not corrected by His sufferings but as a Son He was taught in and through them. One thing He learned was obedience, the kind of obedience that comes from having to say no to self in order to submit to God. Hebrews 5:8. And so, trials and troubles are not necessarily because of some sin we have committed. They may be, but whether they are or not the underlying purpose of God is to shape us, both for service here and also for life in His eternal kingdom.

Illegitimate Children

But listen to Hebrews 12:8. “If you are not disciplined (and

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everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons.” This goes to the heart of our subject. Does this passage in Hebrews 12 describe your experience? Do you know what it is for God to discipline you, to deal with you as a Father does a son? Is He writing His laws in your heart, convicting, correcting, instructing, encouraging? Or do you take the lack of discipline as a sign that He is pleased with you and that everything is OK? According to this scripture it is not OK. It’s something to prayerfully consider.

In verse 10 we are told that “God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness.” Verse 11 goes on to say, “No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.” That sounds like a wonderful harvest to me. There is a peace that comes simply from knowing the Lord and having our sins forgiven. But the peace spoken of here results from a deeper and broader experience of trust and fellowship with God that can only be learned in the arena of life as He teaches and trains us.

After all, we are not our own but rather “bought at a price.” 1 Corinthians 6:20. He is the potter and we are the clay. Isaiah 64:8. Ephesians 2:10 says, “For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” Salvation is a lot more than just believing in Jesus, living your life, and then going to heaven. If we truly belong to Him we cannot get away with just “living our lives” as people of this world do. Our citizenship is in heaven and our lives here consist of a divine work in us to prepare us to live there. Thank God for Philippians 1:6 which says, “being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.” That is the glorious hope of every true believer.

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Pass or Fail?

Paul said, “Examine yourselves.” We have sought with God’s help to provide a scriptural basis for doing just that. How did you fare? Did you pass the test? Are you one of the disturbed who have found comfort and assurance in God’s word? Or are you one of the comfortable who has found yourself disturbed by what you have read?

I pray that you will not close your mind, wrap your religious robes tighter, and go on pretending everything is OK. The issues are eternal. Now is all you’ve got any promise of. The final chapters will set forth at least the basics of the gospel Paul preached. It is the gospel that is “the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes.” Romans 1:16.

Remember the parachute illustration. One day you **will** jump, ready or not. Will your spiritual “parachute” open?

Chapter Fourteen

The Gospel: Man's Need

If there was one thing that got the Apostle Paul out of bed in the morning and filled his waking hours with a burning passion it was the gospel of Jesus Christ. When the risen and glorified Savior revealed Himself to Paul—then a young Pharisee known as Saul—on the road to Damascus the whole course of his life changed forever.

In a few short traumatic days young Saul was forced to abandon his deeply held belief that righteousness before God was to be obtained by keeping the law of Moses. He came to realize that, not only did God have a very different plan for making men righteous, but that he—Saul—had been chosen to be His ambassador, carrying God's message to—of all people—the Gentiles! What a revolution!

And so it was, many years later, he was moved to write to believers in Rome, believers he hoped soon to visit in person. He wrote out of a desire to see them established in the truth he had been commissioned to proclaim. In Romans 1:16-17 he wrote, "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith."

To Paul, the expression, "the gospel," which means "good news," uniquely identified the message that burned in his heart. He saw clearly the intimate connection between this message and the salvation that men so desperately needed.

He called it THE gospel because he knew in the depths of his soul that there was no other message that would avail. The world is full of

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religious opinions and messages but there is only one true gospel, only one message that brings salvation. There is no “Baptist gospel,” “Catholic gospel,” “Presbyterian gospel,” “Pentecostal gospel,” “social gospel,” or any other.

Satan’s Attack

It did not take the devil long to mount a full-scale attack on the one message that he knew spelled his defeat. Even as Paul traveled from place to place, risking his life preaching God’s truth, Satan stirred up false ministers to corrupt and confuse the message. Paul was so incensed by this in the first chapter of Galatians that he actually pronounced a curse on such ministers! For him it was not merely an issue of differing opinions and interpretations. He saw a battle between truth and error with eternal consequences. It was bad enough when real believers were misdirected and hindered in their Christian walk. This kind of error caused men to miss salvation completely.

Galatians 1:6-8 says, “I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned!”

Why was Paul so sure? Listen to what he wrote in Galatians 1:11-12, “I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel I preached is not something that man made up. I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ.” (I wonder how many could say that today. I wonder how many preach tradition handed down from other men and call it the gospel.) Many years later Paul was led to go to Jerusalem and share with Peter and the others what he had been doing and preaching and they recognized the call of God upon his life and the truth of the gospel he preached.

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Paul's concern over the issue of a corrupted gospel is plain in 2 Corinthians 11:3-4, "But I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent's cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ. For if someone comes to you and preaches a Jesus other than the Jesus we preached, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it easily enough."

Listen to what Jude felt compelled to write in Jude 3, "Dear friends, although I was very eager to write to you about the salvation we share, I felt I had to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints." He saw, as did Paul, the influx of false brethren and false ministers corrupting the gospel.

What about today? If Jude felt the need to write as he did about contending for the faith once for all entrusted to the saints way back in the first century ought we not to do the same? In our day, virtually any minister who is considered to be "Christian" is said to be a "minister of the gospel." But what does that mean? What gospel is it that is preached? Just what is the gospel anyway? It is obvious that what is preached in the name of Christ varies tremendously.

If you believe—as I do—that Paul did indeed receive a direct commission from Jesus Christ to proclaim the one true gospel that brings salvation, ought we not to inquire as to what that is—and to preach it boldly without compromise? Or should we just blindly follow our traditions? I pray that God will raise up in every land ministers who will be able to preach with great clarity the same gospel Paul preached—the message that alone brings salvation.

And that is the object in view when the one true gospel is preached. It is the salvation of the hearers. The key words Paul used in Romans 1:16-17 have acquired many strange meanings over the years—words like "gospel," "power of God," "salvation," "righteousness," and "faith." But what did these words mean to Paul? That is the question.

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What is Salvation?

Undoubtedly the word nearest to the heart of the gospel message is “salvation.” But what exactly is salvation? Who is it that needs saving and from what?

The word “salvation” implies several things. One implication is that there is a danger from which deliverance is needed. If there is no danger then why would anyone require “saving”?

Another implication of “salvation” is that one in need of saving cannot help himself. It is not salvation if someone merely points out a danger and tells us how to avoid it or how to escape it through self-effort. Salvation is not merely a “helping hand.” Nor is it spiritual “self-help.” Salvation means that the one in need is ensnared in some danger and has absolutely no hope in himself of escape.

There is a point beyond which a drowning man cannot help himself. In fact, if he persists in trying to help himself and does not surrender completely to the efforts of a capable rescuer it is very doubtful that he can be rescued at all. And that illustrates another implication: “salvation” requires a “savior,” one who is not himself ensnared by the danger and who also possesses the ability to rescue the one in danger.

Defining the Danger

And so clearly defining the danger in which men find themselves is necessary if we are to begin to understand salvation and our need of it. That is precisely what Paul does in the passages following Romans 1:16-17.

He chronicles the descent of men from a knowledge of God into a depraved state of slavery to sinful lusts. This descent was marked by a willful rejection of truth and righteousness and a defiant choice to serve those lusts instead. Man is not an innocent victim but a deliberate rebel against his Creator. Even those who have only the light of creation are without excuse. Romans 1:20.

We human beings are very prone to comparing ourselves one with another. We imagine that among men there are both good and

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bad, righteous and wicked. And since we can always find plenty of evil men around us we suppose ourselves to be “good,” or, at least, better than most.

People were no different in Paul's day. The Pharisee who went into the temple to pray had convinced himself in his own mind, “I am not like other men.” Luke 18:11. He even went through the motions of thanking God for that supposed fact yet even his thanksgiving was merely part of the self-deception. He wasn't thankful. He was proud, proud of his own efforts to be righteous. But all he had was simply classic self-righteousness—and God was not impressed.

Paul spent some time in his letter discussing these outward differences among men. He spoke of those Jews who prided themselves on possessing the law and of Gentiles who did not possess the written law yet had a God-given conscience. His conclusion is clear: there is no difference. Not when it comes to the need of salvation.

Rom. 3:9-18 says, “What shall we conclude then? Are we any better? Not at all! We have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin. As it is written: ‘There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one.’ ‘Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit.’ ‘The poison of vipers is on their lips.’ ‘Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness.’ ‘Their feet are swift to shed blood; ruin and misery mark their ways, and the way of peace they do not know.’ ‘There is no fear of God before their eyes.’” In verse 22 he says specifically, “There is no difference.”

So, are you and I like everyone else? Yes, we are. As Romans 3:23 continues, “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” We have all sinned against our Creator and are in need of the same salvation as everyone else. No one is better than another. There are no “good” sinners and “bad” sinners; there are just sinners.

Have you ever told a lie? Then you are a liar. Have you ever taken

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something that didn't belong to you? Then you are a thief. Have you ever so much as entertained lustful thoughts concerning someone? Then, according to Jesus, you are an adulterer. Matthew 5:28. Have you ever hated someone? Then you are a murderer. 1 John 3:15.

Why? Because men only look on the outward appearance but God looks at the heart. 1 Samuel 16:7. We are very good at putting on a front in order to appear well before others but in our hearts we are all the same. Jeremiah 17:9 says, "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?"

Jesus was asked which was the greatest commandment. He gave his answer in Matt. 22:37-40: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments." Who among men has measured up to that standard? Are not the greatest sinners those who break the greatest commandments? What about you?

Judgment

Now if sin had no real consequence then none of this would matter. But God's word says, "...man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment." Hebrews 9:27. Sin matters.

Revelation 20:11-15 pictures this judgment. Books will be opened and men will be judged by what is written in those books. Heaven has a perfect and complete record, not only of every act of sin, but also of every evil thought and motive. The secret things hidden in men's hearts will no longer be secret on that day. What will heaven's record reveal about you? Measured by the standard of God's own holiness how will you fare?

And what can you do about it? Can you travel to heaven, find the books, and erase the record of your sins? Do you hope to convince God to overlook your sins on that day by promising to "do better," or by piling up enough "good deeds" to outweigh the bad? Will you blame someone else for your failures?

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No. The facts are inescapable. We are all sinners. Heaven has an accurate record of every thought, deed, and word. Death and judgment are appointments we will keep. We will not be able to say, "I don't believe I can come, Lord. Death and judgment just don't fit into my plans." All will be there, small and great. And there is not a man alive who has the power to erase the guilt of his own sins. That fact alone makes a savior necessary if we are to escape the hell we deserve.

All Fall Short

But the danger doesn't stop there. Suppose just for a moment that we were somehow able to convince God to overlook our past sins in return for a promise to do better. How would that work? Not at all, I'm afraid.

When Paul wrote, "all have sinned," he was referring to acts of sin from the past. But when he added, "and fall short of the glory of God," he was referring, not to the past, but to an ongoing problem. All of our promises to "do better" are empty ones.

I have often written of the shocking lesson about which Paul wrote in Romans, chapter 7. There he learned—the hard way—that, no matter how sincere he was, no matter how hard he tried, he simply could not keep God's law. And God showed him why. God showed him that there was a law operating in him, the law of sin and death, that made living up to God's standard impossible.

He now saw sin not just as acts of disobedience against a lot of divine "rules" but as a terrible power that enslaved him. The very core of his natural being was hopelessly infected by this thing called "sin," a wicked principle that puts "self" at the center of everything. Paul really wanted to do right. His persistent failure caused him to cry out in anguish, "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?" Romans 7:24. Paul realized his need of rescue.

There is no more destructive power in the universe than sin. It ruins and destroys all caught in its web. Even if you could somehow conform your behavior to righteous principles it wouldn't change

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your heart. We are not sinners because we commit sins; we commit sins because we are sinners. A salvation that only deals with what we do and not what we are is no salvation. God's eternal kingdom will not be populated by people who have learned how "to keep the lid on," to control their sinful inclinations. Citizens of that blessed kingdom will have been delivered—inside and out—from sin, period. Can you accomplish that for yourself?

And so, just as no one can cleanse himself from his past sins, we are all helpless to change our own hearts. If help does not come from outside ourselves then we are all doomed.

The Power of Satan

It would be bad enough if all a man had to contend with was his own sinful heart. That fact alone makes his natural situation hopeless. But it is worse than that. This present world order is ruled over by Satan and literally hordes of demons. They are real. And the sin that dwells in the hearts of men gives Satan all the leverage he needs to rule over mankind without mercy. And so men are not merely slaves to the sin in their own hearts. They are also, because of that sin, slaves to wicked spirits whose only intent is to use, abuse, and destroy them in order to gratify their own evil natures.

I have met people who had the mistaken idea that they didn't have to serve either God or the devil, that they could somehow be "free" and do what **they** wanted to do. Apart from the divine miracle of salvation every member of the human race lives out his days under the dominion of Satan. If Satan cannot rule over a man one way, he will another whether the man is aware of it or not. Men are hopeless addicts of sin and all the power of Satan's kingdom is devoted to keeping them that way. And Satan knows which "buttons" to push.

In Acts 26:18 Paul recounts what happened when God "arrested" him on the Damascus road and called him to preach the gospel. His call concerning the Gentiles was "to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God..." Remember in Romans 1:21 where Paul says that as a result of

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choosing sin over the knowledge of God, “their foolish hearts were darkened.” 2 Corinthians 4:4 says, “The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.”

Listen to Paul's description of men in Ephesians 2:1-3: “As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath.” All of us!

Ephesians 6:12 says, “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.”

Salvation is described in Colossians 1:13 in these words: “For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves.”

God's servant is instructed in 2 Timothy 2:25-26, “Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth, and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will.”

1 John 5:19 tells us that “the whole world is under the control of the evil one.”

And so, not only are men guilty, and powerless to change, but they are also helplessly under Satan's dominion—and blind to that fact.

It Gets Worse

But it gets worse! The world of which we are a part has no future—at least not a long one—and it may be much shorter than people think. Both the flood of Noah's day and the fire and brimstone that destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah are held forth as examples for

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us of what is coming. They remind us that God judges sin and does not allow it to go on indefinitely.

In 2 Peter 3:5-7 we read Peter's warning to scoffers: "But they deliberately forget that long ago by God's word the heavens existed and the earth was formed out of water and by water. By these waters also the world of that time was deluged and destroyed. By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men."

This day will come without warning for Peter goes on to say in verse 10, "But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare." As Paul also said in 1 Thessalonians 5:2-3, "...the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. While people are saying, 'Peace and safety,' destruction will come on them suddenly, as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape." Pay close attention to that last part: "they will not escape."

Many other scriptures could be cited to demonstrate this truth, that this present world will have a sudden fiery end. Suppose it were to happen today? Would you be ready?

Back in the days of the Roman empire the Romans found a way to use condemned prisoners to serve their ends. If a man was condemned to die for crimes he had committed—and was strong and healthy—he might well be sentenced to be a galley slave. Along with others he would be chained to a bench in the lower parts of a ship and forced to row to help power the ship. Often these were war ships and the fate of the galley slaves was completely tied to the ship they rowed. If the ship survived the battle they lived to row another day. If it sank they sank with it. If one died another would take his place.

But this is not a bad picture of this present world. Because of sin men live under the power of Satan, rowing his "ship" until they die—or until the ship goes down, taking them with it. What a sad, meaningless existence. How far removed this is from God's purpose in creating man in the beginning. All of the proud accomplishments

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of men in this present world are destined to go up in smoke. And judgment lies beyond.

Put simply, men are in desperate trouble, blind to their danger, and completely unable to save themselves even if they were aware of their plight. This is what drove Paul to proclaim—at the risk of his own life—the one message able to bring salvation.

If help is to come it must come from God. The world, the devil, and man's own heart are allied together to bring about his destruction. But does he deserve God's help? Surely not! Every fiber of his being hates and resists the light that would expose his sinful condition. He is not an innocent victim but a defiant rebel. Why would not a God who has the power to fling the galaxies across the universe simply blot out mankind and put an end to his wickedness?

Chapter Fifteen

The Gospel: God's Answer to Man's Need

It is against the backdrop of this awful sin and rebellion that the amazing love and grace of God shine like a great beacon of hope. As Romans 5:8 says, "...God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." God has not made a way of salvation for sinful man because he deserves it but because of His own character and purpose. Think of all of the vile, unspeakable, wickedness of this present world! Only divine love could hold back its utter destruction in order to offer hope.

God's answer to man's need is not mere religion. The best that religion can do is to prescribe things for man to believe and do—in the vain hope that the practice of that religion will meet his need. NO religion can do that—including much that is called "Christianity" but has become mere religion.

God's answer instead is a person, His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. The very name, Jesus, given by God to His Son, means "the LORD saves." But who is he and how can he help? What difference could a man who died 2000 years ago on a Roman cross possibly make to anyone today?

Though He lived among us as a man, Jesus Christ was the divine Son of God. He did not begin His life in the womb of His earthly mother, Mary. Back in eternity, before there were angels, or men, or even creation itself, He was there with His Father. In fact, it was through His Son that the Father created all things. John 1:1-3. Hebrews 1:2. Colossians 1:16-17. So it is entirely proper to call Him our Creator.

What anguish of heart it must have caused as He saw His

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creatures turn away from Him in sin and rebellion. We cannot imagine. And yet, in His great love, He was willing in obedience to His Father's plan, to leave all of the glory of heaven behind, to humble Himself to live among His fallen creatures. He tasted our sorrow and pain; He faced our temptations; He endured the opposition of wicked men. Yet through it all He remained untainted by sin. Where Adam failed, He did not.

It is amazing enough that He was willing to come down and live in such a world. But to endure the suffering of the cross—that defies understanding! Why would He do such a thing? Why would the Creator submit Himself into the hands of wicked men to torture and crucify Him?

Imagine, if you will, a courtroom. There you stand. The judge has read the law and has enumerated your crimes against that law. Your mouth has been shut. There is nothing that can be said in your defense. No excuses. No protestations. Nothing to do but to simply stand there in silence awaiting your just sentence. Your head is bowed. You see no way out. Hope is gone.

The Substitute

But just before the judge passes sentence, into the courtroom steps the judge's son and says, "Father, may I approach the bench?" The judge says, "Yes," and motions him to come. The son steps forward and says, "Father, I know that by our law this man is guilty as charged. He is worthy of death. But I offer myself as a substitute. Charge me with his crimes. Let me take his punishment. I love him. Please let him go free."

Yet these simple words cannot begin to convey the enormity of what Jesus has done for us. Listen to the words of the prophet, Isaiah. "He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted.

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“But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.” Isaiah 53:3-6.

As Paul said in 2 Corinthians 5:21, “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”

The death of God’s Son on the cross is His answer to the otherwise unsolvable problem of our guilt. He did not die for any crime He had committed. It was our sins—yours and mine—that nailed Him there, that caused Him to endure such indescribable suffering. And beyond the physical suffering was the awful weight of our sins on His holy soul. The sin of the world was heaped upon Him.

Yet He did it willingly, even joyfully, for He could see beyond the suffering of the cross, beyond the grave, beyond this world. He saw another world, peopled by an innumerable company of the redeemed of all ages, living forever in peace, love, joy, and fulfillment, free from every ill of this present evil world.

Sins Erased

The first danger we listed from which men need saving is the guilt of sin. God’s answer is the cross. The blood that flowed from the broken tortured body of Jesus represented the life that He willingly gave for us. You and I have no power to erase our sins. But the blood that He so willingly shed has the power, not merely to cover up our sins, but to blot them out as if they had never happened! Hallelujah! That is freedom!

Someone may read this who has not merely hated someone. You have actually committed murder—or some other terrible crime. When you allow yourself to think about what you have done there is a terrible weight on your soul. You wonder if there is any hope. For someone else, maybe, but surely not you. But I tell you on the authority of God’s word that the blood of Jesus Christ—and ONLY

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the blood of Jesus Christ—can make you as free and clean before God as if you had never even committed those crimes in the first place!

Let's return for a moment to Romans 3. "There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood." Romans 3:22-25. The gospel does not only show us our need; it also shows us God's perfect remedy.

Ephesians 1:7 says, "In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace."

No More Guilt

In Hebrews, chapter 9, we read of the old testament animal sacrifices, sacrifices that in themselves could not take away sin, but were meant to be temporary "stand-ins" for the one true sacrifice yet to come. At the proper time in God's plan He provided His own Lamb as a sin offering, a sacrifice that forever ended the need for any other.

The writer continues the comparison between Christ's death and the old testament sacrifices in Hebrews 9:14 by saying, "How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!"

You may feel as though God might forgive you yet you will always live under a cloud, weighed down by the guilt of what you have done. No! The blood of Christ not only erases the record of our sins; it frees the conscience so that even our sense of guilt is gone! That is salvation indeed!

But what of the second need, deliverance from the power of sin? What about our inability to live for God? Does God have a remedy for that?

Examine Yourself

Complete Salvation

Speaking of Jesus, Hebrews 7:25 says, "...he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them." What a wonderful scripture! Here we see salvation not just as an "event" like being "saved" or "born again" as so many think of it. Here salvation is more of a process. We also see that the ability is His. At no point in salvation are we asked or expected to rely upon our own strength or ability. It is truly salvation from start to finish.

Philippians 1:6 says, "being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Jesus Christ." Once again, we see salvation described as a "good work" that lasts until Jesus comes. What most people call "salvation" is really only the beginning. To God, salvation describes the entire process of taking lost hell-bound sinners and making them fit to live in another world to come, entirely free from sin. That's a big job! But it's not too big for Jesus. He is able to do a complete job.

1 Corinthians 1:18 says, "For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." Two things are particularly worth noting. One is that Paul refers to "us who **are being saved.**" That is not an event but a continuing process.

God's Power

The second thing is Paul's reference to "the power of God." The gospel is much more than a simple formula by which our sins can be forgiven and we can go to heaven when we die. Salvation requires God's power. In fact the previous verse refers to Paul's calling "to preach the gospel—not with words of human wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power."

Remember that in Romans 1:16 Paul says that the gospel "is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes." **If the power of God is not present and active in the proclamation of what is called the gospel, then it is not the gospel.**

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That is what I see missing in so many places in our day. The words are OK. The facts are in order. The people are correctly told that Jesus died for their sins and that they need to believe in Him and be saved. But how often is the power of God present in the message to actually change people's lives at the heart level—or are they just converted to a doctrine about the new birth and to a religious way of life?

Sinners live their lives under the power of sin and Satan. It takes more than mere words to deliver them. It takes God's power, present by the anointing, convicting, revealing, ministering faith, drawing, and ultimately bringing people to the miracle of the new birth. Satan will not give up his victims willingly. He will only yield to a power greater than himself.

And there must be a source of power available to us greater than that of sin—or else we will remain, in a practical sense, under its power. Romans 5:20-21 tells us that the grace of God is greater than our sin. Grace is divine help that we do not deserve. Verse 17 speaks of “God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness” that enables us to “reign in life through the one man, Christ Jesus.”

The scriptures describe the result of the new birth in a number of ways. All of them are basically conveying the same truth. 2 Corinthians 5:17 says, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!” Ezekiel 36:26 refers to a “new heart” and a “new spirit.” Colossians 1:27 refers to “Christ in you, the hope of glory.” In Galatians 2:20, Paul says, “Christ lives in me.” Romans 8:9 refers to our having “the Spirit of God,” and “the Spirit of Christ.”

All of these expressions are referring to the same thing: a divine miracle that takes place in our hearts in which God's Spirit comes in to live and give us what we need to live for God. Without that all you have is someone “trying” to be a Christian. It doesn't work. And even when God comes in to live, the changes needed in our lives do not

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come automatically or instantly. But a saving work DOES begin, one that Christ not only begins but has promised to finish.

Ephesians 2:10 says, “For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” This scripture reminds us that salvation is God’s work. We assume our proper role as the “clay” and He takes His place as the “Potter,” fashioning us according to His plan. Any truly “good” works are, therefore, the result of His prior workmanship and are never self-effort.

Two Extremes

I have observed two extremes of teaching regarding the Christian life. One extreme actually teaches a place of sinless perfection attainable in this life, often as the result of an experience. If this were the case then Christ’s work in us would be over long before the day of Christ. After all, what can you add to sinless perfection? Surely any honest reading of the first chapter of 1 John should make it obvious that such a teaching is an unscriptural extreme. There are many scriptures that exhort believers to holy God-honoring living but none that place us beyond sin in this life.

The other extreme is often a reaction to the first extreme. You would almost get the impression that the only thing a Christian can realistically expect is to have his sins forgiven. He ought not to expect to gain any real measure of practical victory over sin. Great stress is laid on Paul’s profession in Romans 7 as though that was meant to describe the normal Christian life. Of course, Romans 7 is a pretty good description of what you can expect IF you are trying to produce godliness through self-effort.

I remember a couple of years ago hearing a famous preacher—now gone on to be with the Lord—make the following statement concerning the group of which he was a part: he said, “I wish to God we were as afraid of sin as we are of perfection!” It is easy to see what he was getting at. He had observed such a “knee-jerk” reaction against any suggestion regarding overcoming sin that many

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had gone into the other ditch. People were so warned against "perfection" that sin became almost expected.

Surely there is a middle ground! Christ didn't come to save us IN our sins but FROM them. True, during this life we continue to inhabit bodies of sin but the progressive work of Christ from the inside out gives us the ability to grow up in Him and learn to more and more live for God anyway. What a sad "gospel" it would be if we had to tell a lost hell-bound drunk that, while he would always be a drunk, he could at least be a "forgiven" drunk! No! God has made provision for overcoming sin in a practical way. There is no place for complacency or feeling that we have "arrived" but we have every right by the grace of God to expect Him to help us and to deliver us as we rely upon Him.

The one extreme tends to produce delusion, hypocrisy, or frustration. The other tends to produce empty profession, worldliness, and complacency. The gospel of Jesus Christ, preached by the anointing of the Holy Spirit has the power to bring about a progressive work of salvation that takes a man all the way from the miry pit of sin to the purity of the halls of heaven. And the blood of Jesus Christ is available throughout that journey to cleanse us completely from all our failures and shortcomings along the way. 1 John 1:7-9.

The subject of victorious Christian living in spite of our flesh is quite a large one but for our present purposes let it suffice to say that God has made provision for us in the cross not only to be forgiven but also to live for him in this world. Of course, it is only by His strength; that is why it is called "salvation."

Jesus Versus Satan

But what of Satan's power? What about the fact that we continue to live in the midst of a world system ruled over by the devil and all his demons? What of the god of this world? We are surely no match for Satan's power in ourselves. What has Christ done about this need?

The world into which Jesus was born was ruled by Satan, sin, and

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death. As Isaiah 60:2 says, "...darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples." At best, a small remnant of Israelites remained faithful to God, awaiting the promised Messiah. Luke 2:25-38.

When Jesus was still a young child wise men came from the east seeking the one who had been born to be "king of the Jews." When King Herod heard of this and learned where the child was he issued an order to kill every male infant under the age of two years in Bethlehem. But God warned Joseph and Mary through an angel in a dream and they escaped to Egypt before the slaughter.

We know from John's vision in Revelation 12 that the devil was fully aware of who Jesus was and sought to kill him. No doubt he was the inspiration behind Herod's attempt as well as the many other plots recorded in the gospels.

Immediately following the baptism and anointing of Jesus we see him led by the Spirit into the wilderness specifically to be tempted by the devil. Although just three particular temptations are recorded there is no doubt that in the wilderness—and throughout his ministry—the devil assaulted Jesus with every temptation he could devise—to no avail.

Hebrews 4:15 says, "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are — yet was without sin." And so we see that, first of all, Jesus personally overcame every attempt of the devil to corrupt him through sin.

One of the notable characteristics of the ministry of Jesus was his authority over demons. Wherever he went he healed sick people and cast out devils. When some of the religious leaders accused him of being in league with the devil (Luke 11:15) Jesus said, "Any kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and a house divided against itself will fall. If Satan is divided against himself, how can his kingdom stand?" Luke 11:17-18.

Then in Luke 11:21-22, he said, "When a strong man, fully armed, guards his own house, his possessions are safe. But when someone

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stronger attacks and overpowers him, he takes away the armor in which the man trusted and divides up the spoils.” Jesus came preaching the kingdom of God and clearly demonstrated its superiority in authority and power over Satan’s kingdom. His words on that occasion clearly prefigured God’s plan for the salvation of multitudes yet unborn. The devil is the “strong man,” and this world is “his own house.” For souls to be rescued from Satan’s house it was necessary that he first be overpowered and defeated. As Matthew 12:29 puts it, “he first ties up the strong man.”

Victory

Shortly before it was time for Jesus to go to the cross he said in John 12:31-32, “Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out. But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself.” In Revelation 12:7-9, John’s vision continued, “And there was war in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back. But he was not strong enough, and they lost their place in heaven. The great dragon was hurled down — that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him.”

What a glorious picture of the battle of the ages fought at the cross! Jesus endured everything the devil and all his evil hosts could muster—and they were utterly defeated. And the devil couldn’t even kill him! He laid his own life down—willingly—for us! John 10:17-18.

Hebrews 2:14-15 says, “Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.”

And so the proclamation was made in heaven: “Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Christ. For the accuser of our brothers, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been hurled down.” Revelation 12:10.

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In Ephesians 1:18-23 Paul said, “I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of his mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.”

All the powers of hell could not keep Jesus in the tomb. He rose in triumph with a life forever beyond the power of sin and death. It is this life that He offers to all who put their trust in Him. His victory was “for the church, which is his body.”

In Colossians 1:13-14 Paul says, “For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.”

There is a very definite connection between Christ’s victory and authority over Satan and the proclamation of the gospel. Listen to the words of Jesus shortly before he returned to heaven: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. **Therefore** go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” Matthew 28:18-20.

One of the privileges of salvation is that those who have put their trust in Christ are given power to overcome the devil’s strong holds in their lives. The devil may at times wield a strong influence in the life of a Christian through intimidation or deceit but he has no **right** to do so. He is a liar. One of the things those who are being saved learn is to recognize and resist the devil even as Jesus did. We learn to believe and confess God’s word instead of Satan’s lies. God’s word is a

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sword before which the devil cannot stand. Ephesians 6:17. James 4:7. 1 Peter 5:9. Luke 10:18-20.

An Eternal Kingdom

But the authority given to Christ by His Father is not just for the defeat of Satan: it is for the establishment of God's kingdom. Listen to the wonderful prophecy of Isaiah 9:6-7: "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this."

The foundation for this eternal kingdom was laid at the cross and confirmed by the empty tomb. On the day of Pentecost the church was born and from that day to this the work of calling out, sanctifying, and preparing a people to live in that great kingdom has continued despite all of Satan's efforts. As Jesus had declared in Matthew 16:18, "...I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it."

Before his crucifixion Jesus said many things to prepare his disciples for the traumatic events to come. In John 14:1-3 he said, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am."

What a wonderful, simple declaration. The word "rooms," sometimes translated, "mansions," is literally "dwelling places" or "abodes." He was saying that where my Father lives there are plenty of places to live. Note that these are places to **live**, not merely visit. There is a sense of permanence and of rest conveyed by his words.

He then states four simple stages of God's plan: I am going; (I will)

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prepare a place for you; I will come back; (I will) take you to be with me. The end result is that you will be where I am. Consider, if you will, **when** these words were uttered. This was **before** the cross! Jesus knew that despite the agony he faced, his death was not the end but was, rather, a means to an end—and a glorious end at that! What Jesus declared in this scripture is God’s answer to the “sinking ship” of this world—for those who are saved.

Shortly before the day of Pentecost the disciples witnessed the first stage when Jesus suddenly began ascending upward until a cloud hid him from view. Then two men dressed in white appeared beside them: “Men of Galilee,’ they said, ‘why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.’” Acts 1:11. The evidence that He arrived safely came a few days later with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost!

At Home With The Lord

Of course, many believers have died physically since that day. What of them? Paul shares his hope in these simple words: “We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord.” 2 Corinthians 5:8.

Listen to his declaration in Philippians 1:21-24: “For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body.” There is a place right now where the redeemed who have gone on are “with Christ,” awaiting the glorious day to come.

Today, the promised return is drawing nearer and nearer. Why has it not happened? Why does God allow such evil things to happen in our world? 2 Peter 3:9 tells us, “The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not

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wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance." His work is not done.

Yet the day will soon come when it will be and opportunity will be gone. As it was in Noah's day, "My Spirit will not contend with man forever." Genesis 6:3. All heaven awaits the day when God says, "Enough! Go and bring my children home." What a day that will be!

When He Comes

In 2 Thessalonians 1:6-10 Paul comforted the persecuted Christians of Thessalonica with these words: "God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed. This includes you, because you believed our testimony to you." Judgment for the world; deliverance for the saints.

The wonderful words of Paul in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 are often quoted at the funerals of believers: "Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope. We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage each other with these words." What an awesome hope!

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The words of 1 Corinthians 15:50-57 are also often used: “I declare to you, brothers, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed—in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: “Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Everything Under His Control

Philippians 3:20-21 says, “But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.” How wonderful it will be when we no longer have to put up with these bodies of sin and death, our whole beings transformed by the grace of God into citizens of a holy and eternal kingdom!

A New Earth

What is our final destination? 2 Peter 3:12-13 tells us, “That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness.” In Ephesians 2:7 we are told that the amazingly gracious things God has done for us through Jesus Christ have been done “in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in

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Christ Jesus.” Coming “ages”—plural! “Incomparable riches”! What a great God we serve!

Truly, our Lord Jesus Christ “is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.” Hebrews 7:25. Our utter inability to help ourselves is no hindrance to his ability to save us. God's provision is far greater than our need. No wonder Paul was excited!

Chapter Sixteen

The Gospel: Coming to Faith

Thus far we have sought to establish two critically important truths: man's overwhelming need with respect to sin and judgment; and God's ample provision for that need through Jesus Christ. What obviously follows is the question of how man benefits from that provision. Left to himself he will surely perish. Yet even an ample provision does a man no good unless he comes into personal possession of it.

Remember the words of Paul in Romans 1:16 in which he tells us that the gospel "is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile." Need and provision, then, are brought together in "everyone who believes."

First For The Jew

Lest it be a distraction to the discussion of our subject, I believe it would be in order to comment on the last part of Paul's statement, the part where he said, "first for the Jew." Why did Paul add that? Does this mean that God favors Jews above Gentiles when it comes to salvation?

We have already pointed out that with respect to the need of salvation there is no difference between Jew and Gentile, All are helpless sinners, whether Pharisees who boast in the law of Moses, or Gentile heathen who have never even heard of Moses. In fact, Paul explicitly said, "For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile — the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for, 'Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.'" Romans 10:12-13.

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Why, then, did Paul say, “first for the Jew”? It is obvious from the scriptures that, prior to Christ, God **did** indeed favor the nation of Israel, Abraham’s descendants through Isaac and Jacob, over the other nations of the world. In spite of the terrible record of apostasy and unbelief that characterized Israel as a whole there was always a faithful remnant of believers, preserved by God, within the nation. As the Lord told Elijah in his day, “I reserve seven thousand in Israel – all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and all whose mouths have not kissed him.” 1 Kings 19:18.

It was to and through this remnant that God revealed Himself and foretold of the Savior to come. Generations of them lived and died believing in and waiting for the fulfillment of God’s wonderful promises. Hebrews 11:39-40. 1 Peter 1:10-12. Simeon and Anna were examples of these true Israelites who looked for the Savior. Luke 2:25-38.

In the parable of the great feast, recorded for us in Luke 14:16-23, the first call to the feast was to those who had already been invited. Note the timing. The invitation came first, then the preparation of the feast, then the call to “Come, for everything is now ready.” It was only after this call was refused that the command was given to “Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.” Luke 14:21.

Whom do you think Jesus meant by this parable? The feast itself is a wonderful picture of the gospel, the provision of God made ready through Christ. For centuries the prophets had given out the invitation of God to the coming feast. This invitation had been to Israel and so it was fitting that when the time finally came, the fulfillment of the prophetic message should be announced to the Jews first. After all, some of them were like Simeon and Anna. How strange it would have been for the Lord to have gone straight to the heathen nations without first telling them and others like them!

Even though Paul’s ministry was primarily to the Gentiles, it nonetheless reflected the order indicated in the parable. Everywhere he went where there was a synagogue Paul first went there to

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announce the fulfillment of the words of their prophets. Only when he had done this did he preach to the Gentiles. That is what “first to the Jew” meant. “First” had to do with the order in which the gospel began to be proclaimed. Beyond that, it is for “everyone who believes.”

Done

I have often heard recounted an incident from the life of the famous evangelist, D.L. Moody. He had occasion one day to travel by train. During his journey he was seated next to a zealous practitioner of a particular religion. For some two hours the man talked, pressing his religious views upon Moody, who patiently listened. At the conclusion of the journey, as they stepped onto the station platform, Moody turned to the man and said simply, “There are only two letters difference between your religion and mine: yours is spelled ‘d-o’; mine is spelled ‘d-o-n-e.’”

What a wonderfully simple way to express the difference between “religion” and the gospel. I should hasten to define the way I use the word “religion,” since it differs from the way many in history have used it. To me, “religion” is any system of beliefs and practices by which man tries to save himself. The gospel reveals what God has done—“d-o-n-e”—for man. “Religion” is, then, man’s substitute for God’s true salvation.

Every religion in the earth has its own idea as to what man’s need is. Leaving aside the question as to whether that need is correctly identified or not, virtually all religions give man something he must **DO** in order to meet that need. It may be the offering of sacrifices or the performance of other acts of religious ritual and devotion. It may be the pursuit of special knowledge or the exercise of various kinds of self-discipline or adherence to certain creeds and codes of conduct. But regardless of the details, the hallmark of religion is “d-o.” It is basically up to the followers of the particular religion to save themselves, or to qualify for some sort of salvation through their own efforts.

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But if man could save himself there would be no need of the gospel. Religion in all of its forms violates the very reason that Jesus went to the cross: that man is a helpless sinner. If man is truly helpless in the face of sin and judgment then there is nothing he **can** do—and all of his religious efforts are in vain.

Religion, no matter how sincere, denies both of the truths that we have thus far established. It does not see man's need the same way God sees it. In the view of religion, man may be misguided, but basically good, or a victim of ignorance, anything but a hopeless, helpless sinner against a holy God. As a result religion relies on a man's own ability to "DO" in order to save himself.

To Paul, all of the "doing" necessary for our full and complete salvation has already been done, once for all, by Jesus Christ. John 19:30. Colossians 2:9-10. Hebrews 10:10, 14. There are many things a Christian ought to do. However, not one of these things is done "to be saved." Titus 3:5. Romans 4:5. Ephesians 2:10.

What is Faith?

Salvation, therefore, is not for those who "do," but for those who "believe." That is the key word. The meaning of the word "believe," as Paul understood it, is what I hope, as the Lord enables, to make clear. What is "faith"? What does it mean to "believe"? Before considering what faith **is**, let's first consider some of the things it is **not**.

Not Intellectual Assent

Saving faith, first of all, is much more than mere intellectual assent. No one has ever been saved by simply embracing certain religious doctrines. It is true that God does not bypass our minds and there are truths of which we must be convinced but it is with the **heart** that man must believe if he is to be saved. Romans 10:9-10.

James warned those who thought of faith as simply a belief of the mind that such faith cannot save. He says, "faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead." James 2:17. Faith without resulting deeds is no better than the faith of demons, who believe in God—and

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shudder. James 2:19. And that is all that some people have – “demon faith”! It is a “faith” that makes no real difference in their lives. This kind of “faith” that James evidently encountered and wrote about is not at all what Paul meant by faith. To both James and Paul, works were the evidence of genuine faith.

Imagine yourself trapped in a place where destruction is certain. Then imagine that there is but one escape, a narrow bridge over a deep chasm. Intellectually, you could acknowledge the facts of your case but if that is as far as it went you would surely perish. Merely believing in the destruction to come and professing your belief in the bridge as a reliable way of escape is useless. You must take action, committing yourself to that bridge and leaving the place of destruction behind.

What an empty sham such faith is! It offers fine words and noble ideas yet withholds trust. It is self condescendingly seeking to accommodate God without surrender. It professes faith in God yet that profession makes no difference in the life. It is no better than that of the man who perishes while professing faith in a bridge he will not cross. Religious pride and self deception are the hallmarks of such “faith.” Trust is placed, not in a God Who saves unworthy sinners, but in self and religious profession.

Not a Feeling

Another thing that faith is not is a religious feeling, emotion, or experience. Many people equate faith with a certain kind of feeling. This is why in many places religious services amount to little more than spiritual “pep rallies” designed to get the people excited. However, religious enthusiasm is not faith and has never saved anyone. Yet that is all many people have and their spiritual life consists of striving to seek out, work up, and maintain that special feeling that gives them a temporary sense of confidence towards God, however false that confidence may be.

Even where true faith is present it seldom corresponds to our emotional state. In fact, the greatest expressions of faith happen

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when the emotions are most contrary. It wasn't emotion that carried Abraham through 25 long years between God's promise and the birth of Isaac.

Not a Human Ability

Faith is not a human ability at all—not saving faith. None of us is born with it. So many struggle, looking down inside themselves, trying to find or “work up” faith—whatever that is. You will never find it there. Faith is, in fact, a gift of God. Ephesians 2:8. You will never have faith unless God gives it to you. To imagine otherwise is to violate the truth of man's helpless sinful state before God.

Not Religious Beliefs

When many people speak of faith, what they mean is their religion with its various beliefs and practices. Their “faith” consists of what they believe and do and your faith, what you believe and do. One “faith” is as good as another—they think. How well that fits into a world that has rejected absolute truth!

Of course, some people do set “their” faith above others but that is not what we are talking about. There is a faith that was once entrusted to the saints. Jude 3. That faith is as different from what most people call faith as life is from death. I can just hear some reader thinking, “Oh, so you think you are the only ones, that your church, with its particular teachings and ways of doing things, has exclusive possession of the one true faith and everyone else is wrong.” Not at all. I certainly believe there are many doctrines that are true and that matter but that is not the faith once delivered to the saints.

The Origin of Unbelief

Consider what was lost in the beginning. God created a perfect world with no sin, no suffering, and no death. Our first parents, Adam and Eve, were given complete freedom to fellowship with God and to enjoy His beautiful creation—with one exception. There was

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one tree whose fruit they were forbidden, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Genesis 2:16-17.

Along came Satan, expressing himself through the serpent. He approached Eve when she was alone. That fact by itself reveals a calculated attack on God's order. Why, if his wisdom was true and honorable, did he not first approach Adam?

Satan first raised the issue of God's command not to eat of that particular tree. When Eve stated what God had commanded Satan launched his attack. He first declared God's warning that disobedience would lead to death to be a lie. Then, after attacking God's truthfulness he attacked His character, His very motive for giving the command.

"You will not surely die," the serpent said to the woman. "For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." Genesis 3:4-5. Eve foolishly considered what Satan said, found both his lie and the fruit itself appealing, ate it, and gave some to her husband who also ate.

The disobedience of Eve and then Adam was no small thing. By believing Satan they were at the same time calling God an evil, selfish liar who could not be trusted. God became their enemy, His every command suspect. By their deed they declared that their highest welfare lay down the path of independence and rebellion. In their minds God had known what was best for them and had refused to tell them, lying to them instead.

All disobedience against God is really saying the same thing! We are saying that our wisdom is wiser than His, our motives are purer. Our interests are better served by self-will. Either He is evil and desires to use us for His own selfish purposes or else He really just doesn't understand what is best for us. Think about it!

Thus did the awful power of sin enter into their very hearts, corrupting them as well as the heart of every member of Adam's race. It is this heart-level enmity between man and God that must be overcome in true salvation.

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Real Faith

Consider Abraham, the father of all who believe (Romans 4:11). God gave Abram, as he was known at the time, an amazing promise that not only would he produce an heir from his own body but that his descendants would be like the stars of heaven, more than Abram could count. Genesis 15:6 says simply, “Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness.”

It doesn't say, “Abram believed the promise,” but, “Abram believed the LORD.” There is a huge difference. It is one thing to believe a particular promise or statement someone makes. It is quite another to believe the **person** who makes that promise. Faith in the **person** results in believing **whatever** that person says because the person is judged to be truthful and reliable.

Much that is called faith is really just an issue by issue thing. The person involved is never really trusted. Rather, as each issue arises we consider it, evaluate it and decide if we are going to believe or disbelieve. We retain control. Our faith and trust is really in self and every issue is judged by its effect on self, its reasonableness to our natural minds, and so on. The Israelites in the wilderness were like that. They followed Moses out there but fell, one by one, because they never really believed or trusted the God Who had sent him. Hebrews 3:7-19.

Real faith is of a different sort. **It transfers confidence from self to God.** He is judged to be 100% truthful and trustworthy. We no longer judge what He says issue by issue. If He says it then it is true and reliable and we fully trust in it regardless of anything else that may seem to be contrary.

Faith enabled Abraham to wait those long 25 years for the son of promise, even when the answer became a biological impossibility. Did he waver? Certainly, and Ishmael was the result, but in the end faith prevailed and Isaac, the miracle child of the promise was born. As Hebrews 11:11 says, “By faith Abraham, even though he was past age — and Sarah herself was barren — was enabled to become a father because he considered him faithful who had made the

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promise.” That’s it! Not just faith in the promise but in the faithfulness of the One making the promise. Notice that Abraham was “enabled.” The power involved was God’s alone.

Think about it: Adam and Eve walked and talked with God and lived in paradise. They had every reason to trust Him, but turned away. Abraham faced mountains of obstacles for years yet persevered in faith until the promise came.

The greatest test of faith came later when God told Him to offer his son Isaac as a sacrifice. Anything short of full unquestioning confidence in God would have resulted in failure. But Abraham passed the test, fully confident that whatever God told him to do was right and that all would be right in the end. After all, even if he killed his son, God could easily raise him from the dead! Hebrews 11:19. The test lasted until Abraham was standing over his bound son with the knife raised to kill him when God stopped him and provided a substitute sacrifice.

It’s hard to imagine a greater test. This was the very son of promise—his son, flesh of his flesh! Kill him? It didn’t make sense. Every natural consideration screamed out, “No way!” But God had spoken—a God he knew and loved and trusted. That was enough.

As a result God said, “I swear by myself, declares the LORD, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me.” Genesis 22:16-18. This promise is directly connected with the hope of the gospel. Galatians 3:6-9.

It was such faith that enabled Noah to withstand the ridicule of wicked men for 120 years as he preached, warned, and built an ocean-liner sized boat on dry land in anticipation of the coming flood of destruction. This, despite the fact that it had never rained before!

I recently illustrated for our people at the Bible Tabernacle the magnitude of Noah’s task. The Bible Tabernacle is 60 feet by 100 feet.

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The ark that Noah built was approximately 450 feet long, 75 feet wide, and 45 feet high with 3 levels. That means that the ark was higher and wider than the church and four and a half times as long! No wonder God gave him 120 years to build it!

It was faith that enabled Joshua to lead a nation against the city of Jericho following one of the most unusual battle plans of all times. As they marched and shouted in faith God brought the walls down. Faith enabled Gideon to send all but 300 out of 32,000 volunteers home when he faced the Midianite army. Faith enabled Hezekiah to send the choir out ahead of the soldiers to face an army of overwhelming size. In each case the God Whose word they unquestioningly believed gave great victories.

Faith enabled a young man named David armed with only a sling and 5 stones to **run** towards a fully-armed giant whose taunts had terrified a whole army.

Faith is Childlike

In Luke 18:15-17, people were bringing their little children to Jesus to touch them. The disciples rebuked them but Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.”

What we have been describing is childlike faith. A child simply believes because Daddy says so. If Daddy says, “Let’s get in the car and drive to such-and-such a place the child does not have to understand how a car works. He doesn’t worry about the price of gas, whether Daddy knows how to get there, whether he has checked the oil lately, and so forth. That’s Daddy’s responsibility. As far as the child is concerned, arriving at the destination is a certainty the moment Daddy says they are going.

Now the child will probably ask, “Are we there yet?” every five minutes! But notice that he doesn’t ask, “Are you sure that’s where we are going?” or, “Are you sure we will get there?” If the destination is

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Grandma's house the child doesn't worry about whether they will make it or not but rather spends his time in joyful anticipation of seeing Grandma. Why? He knows and implicitly trusts Daddy.

The difference can easily be illustrated by the incident where Jesus said, "Let us go over to the other side." Mark 4:35. Jesus was so certain of the destination that He went to sleep in the stern of the boat. When the storm came up the disciples forgot all about Jesus' words concerning "the other side" and woke Jesus up in a panic.

When He awoke He didn't say, "Oh, my God! I thought we were going to the other side but it looks like we are going to drown!" He first spoke to the winds and waves and said, "Quiet! Be still," and then simply said to the disciples, "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?" Mark 4:39-40. The "faith" of the disciples was more in the storm than it was in the implied promise in Jesus' words before they set out. Jesus had a perfect confidence in His Father and the certainty of His plan.

To natural men God is an enemy Who cannot be trusted. To a man with saving faith God becomes a Father Who cannot lie. Therefore the gospel, its facts, its promises are fully embraced and relied upon. Why? He is faithful that promised!

The Road to Saving Faith

For a man to be moved from stubborn unbelief to such childlike trust is nothing short of a divine miracle. It is a complete reversal of everything his life is about. It is not a little fine-tuning, or even an overhaul: it is a new engine.

No mere words, clever human persuasion, emotional appeal, or anything else that relies upon human ability can accomplish this. Only God, dealing directly with the heart of a man, can bring such a change about. Of course He employs the anointed proclamation of the gospel in the process but the real work is an inward one wrought by God.

Many people "try" to believe God, to embrace the hope of the gospel apart from that work of God but it doesn't work. They are told

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that all they must do is to pray a little prayer and “receive” Jesus. Then they are told that they are saved so they begin to “try” to be Christians. They may struggle and doubt and wonder about the power the gospel is supposed to have. Then they look around, see others just like them and shrug their shoulders, figuring, “That’s just how it is.” Or they give up.

Unplowed Ground

Jeremiah 4:3 says, “Break up your unplowed ground and do not sow among thorns.” This is a natural picture of what must happen in the heart. The gospel, with its hope of eternal life, is like seed. The heart is like soil. Sin has left the heart hard and rocky and choked with thorns and briars. For the gospel seed to spring up and flourish God must do a lot of weeding and plowing.

In Matthew 13:1-23 Jesus gave us both a parable about the preaching of the kingdom and its explanation. The seed is the message. It falls on several different types of soil. Some falls where the soil is trampled down and hard. The birds (Satan and his demons) steal the word before it has a chance to germinate. Another type of soil is rocky with very little earth. The seed springs up quickly but doesn’t last because there is no real root. Another type is choked with thorns and briars, representing the cares of this life and the deceitfulness of riches. They choke out the word and no crop is produced. Only in the good ground is a crop produced.

The parallel between Jesus’ parable and Jeremiah 4:3 is obvious. There is no greater Gardener than the Lord and He knows what it takes to produce the fruit He is looking for. And He is patient because He knows that there is both a preparation and a process involved. Before the gospel seed can prosper the soil must be prepared. Let’s take a look at a number of aspects of the divine work of preparing a human heart and see what a prepared heart is like.

Conviction

Fundamental to that preparation work is a thorough conviction

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of sin. Every natural instinct will cry out against and oppose the light that exposes the awful darkness of a human heart. Self will desperately seek to protect itself from the truth with every form of anger and denial.

And it is not enough merely to convince the mind of the fact of human depravity. The very heart itself must be confronted and brought to a thorough conviction of its corruption and of the justice of God's wrath against sin—not only against sin as a general principle, but also against the individual sinner. Every mouth must be stopped—nothing else to be said in defense of the heart.

A man who has been brought this far has come a long way, but not nearly far enough. Remember that it is God's kindness that leads us to repentance. Romans 2:4. Repentance is the goal as it must precede and accompany saving faith. Repentance is faith in action in response to conviction. It would make no sense for God to grant faith to a man who has no intention of giving up his sins.

The work of God in conviction must, as we have said, confront a man's very heart. Yet that conviction must result in more than mere acknowledgment or grudging admission. Many will **admit** that they are sinners—and deeply resent your bringing it up. They have no desire or intention of giving up their way and turning from sin. God will never grant saving faith to such a man. He is still an unrepentant rebel despite the conviction he may temporarily feel. And even when he feels it he runs **from** the light and not to it.

Another way men fall short at this point occurs when their motivation is simply fear of judgment and hell. Fear of judgment may well be a part of bringing a man to true repentance but the kind of man I'm describing acts purely out of self-interest. In his heart of hearts he would really prefer to continue in sin but the prospect of judgment motivates him to make some kind of religious effort. This is not salvation—not even close.

Godly Sorrow

The conviction of God's Spirit in the heart is designed to bring

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about far more than a grudging admission or a fear-driven religious effort. It is designed to produce a godly sorrow. 2 Corinthians 7:10 says, “Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death.”

Godly sorrow is not being sorry you were caught. It is not being sorry the divine spotlight is exposing your sin and making you feel bad. It is not self-pity or sorrow that you can't have your sins and heaven too. It is not focused on self at all. Rather it is a heart sorrow concerning sin itself. That sorrow produces a deep shame, a sense of guilt, a self-loathing, a humble contrition. It is focused upon God and how wicked and contemptible we are in the face of His unsurpassed holiness and goodness. It is a total change of viewpoint. Instead of measuring ourselves against other men we see ourselves in a measure as God sees us—and we are heartbroken.

Consider Job's response to God's revelation of Himself: “My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes.” Job 42:5-6. And we have Isaiah's exclamation at the vision of God's holiness: “‘Woe to me!’ I cried. ‘I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty.’” Isaiah 6:5. Each of these men was among the most godly men of their respective generations. But when God reveals Himself, it is a different story.

Self-Righteous Pride Destroyed

One effect of such revelation is that it destroys all self-righteousness. The sinner is made to know with shocking clarity that if He is to find favor with God it will be because God chooses to act in mercy and grace towards him, and not because there is anything in him that deserves such favor. Pride, the wicked and deceptive product of sin, must be utterly destroyed. There will be no boasting on the day of judgment. The redeemed will fall on their faces amazed at God's goodness and mercy.

Part of the effect of God's work of conviction is the knowledge

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that only God can fix what is wrong. Salvation cannot even begin as long as we are striving to “save ourselves.” That is why the scripture says, “for anyone who enters God’s rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his.” Hebrews 4:10. Human pride must utterly fall before the grace of God through which we become “God’s workmanship.” Ephesians 2:10. He is the divine Potter and we but the clay. Isaiah 64:8. We are no longer our own but rather bought with a price. 1 Corinthians 6:19-20.

A Heartcry

Of course, the purpose of conviction is not to leave us wallowing in the mire of hopeless self-pity. It is designed to produce in the heart a genuine willingness to turn from sin, a deep heartcry for deliverance from both sin and self. It is one thing to see what we are; it is another to cry out to be changed. That is what God is looking for and He alone has the power to bring that change about.

There is a kind of desperate boldness that pleases God, that catches His ear and grabs His attention. I think of blind Bartimaeus in Mark 10:46-52 who sought healing from Jesus. When he heard that Jesus was passing by he cried out. When others tried to shut him up he only cried out louder. He was totally focused on one thing and would allow nothing to stand in his way. He didn’t care what anyone else did or what they thought of him. He did the one thing he could do: cry out to the One Who could help him until Jesus stopped and said, “Call Him.” Jesus asked, “What do you want me to do for you?” He replied simply, “Rabbi, I want to see.” Jesus told him to go, that his faith had healed him.

And so we see that faith is both belief and specific action. The man knew his need. He fully believed that Jesus could help him. That belief caused him to cry out from the depths of his soul—undeterred by the criticisms and discouragements he received from others—until he obtained what he sought. And a record of his faith has been preserved for us in holy scripture as an encouragement to us in our great need.

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A man who only casually seeks God cannot expect to be heard. Do you want to be saved or not? Just how important is your soul? A sinner ought to cry out to God as if God must answer or he will die—because that is exactly the case: if God does not answer you will die. That is what is at stake.

A Radical Choice

The gospel presents a radical choice between two worlds. It is the kingdom of God OR the world, God OR the devil, heaven OR hell. There is absolutely no middle ground, no way to have one without turning your back on the other. To have Christ is to reject the world and to fall down before Him, not just as Savior, but also as Lord.

Conviction destroys trust in self in order that trust may be returned to our Creator where it rightfully belongs. All of our strength and ability can only produce corruption and so we learn that henceforth our hope lies in His limitless strength and utter faithfulness. The ground of our hearts is plowed up and weeded and God reveals concerning His Son that, “he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.” Hebrews 7:25. We are divinely enabled to believe in Him. It is God’s loving gift to those who humble themselves when He deals with their hearts.

Our Heavenly Father paid a price to save us that we will never fully comprehend. No one was more dear, more precious to God than His Son. And yet, to open heaven’s door to us, wicked, vile, rebels that we are, He poured out all the wrath, the anger, the hatred, the fury of His holy nature against that very beloved Son. Why? Not because there was any sin in Him but because He stood in our place and bore our sins. God held nothing back that was needful and that is why Romans 8:32 says, “He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all — how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?”

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Costs Everything

This great salvation is, in one sense, given to us. We cannot earn it nor do we deserve it. Yet in another sense it costs us everything, our sins, our very life. In Matthew 13:44-45, Jesus gave us the parable of a merchant seeking fine pearls. He discovered one of great value, **sold everything he had**, and bought it. That is the value of this heavenly kingdom. It is worth everything. When we are enabled by God's grace to catch even a glimpse of that kingdom this world loses its beauty, its allure. Nothing is more important than serving God and being part of the world to come. As missionary martyr Jim Elliott said, "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose."

Salvation is by faith: "for...everyone who believes." Romans 1:16. Faith is a gift of God. Ephesians 2:8-10. So how does God give that precious gift to those whose hearts have been prepared? Romans 10:17 tells us that "faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ." Faith comes, not by looking inside and "trying," but rather by looking to God, hearing the glorious words of hope and promise that He Who cannot lie sows like a seed in a plowed heart. He makes Himself known to us by His Word, impregnated by His very life, ministered through those He has called and sent as messengers. In that life is the very power of God for the salvation of all who believe.

There is so very much more that could be said of the gospel—and yet it is in its essence so simple that even a child can grasp it. What about you? Have you entered into salvation? Have you discovered the "pearl of great value" and "sold everything" to possess it? Which world are you living for?

If what I have written has disturbed you or left you in doubt what should you do? If there is in you any inclination, any desire towards God I would counsel you to seek Him with all your heart. Cry out to Him to reveal Himself to you, to help you. Don't give up. Will He hear you? Jeremiah 29:13 says, "You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart." Hebrews 11:6 says, "And without faith it

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is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.” Remember, this is God’s word and is given to encourage any who would seek Him. And if there is such a desire in your heart, God put it there. You would never desire Him on your own. He put it there seeking a response from you.

It is not my job to tell you that you are saved. That is God’s job. It is between you and Him. Romans 8:16. He will meet with you through His Word if your heart is willing. When He has revealed to you the reality of what it means that you are a lost sinner, and also that Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners, there will come a time when you must act upon the Word He has revealed to you. You must step out in faith and confess Jesus as Savior and Lord, committing your soul into His keeping for time and eternity. Remember the words of Paul: “I am not ashamed, because I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him for that day.” 2 Timothy 1:12.

Now

When that time comes do not hesitate or draw back. Hebrews 10:38 says, “But my righteous one will live by faith. And if he shrinks back, I will not be pleased with him.” 2 Corinthians 6:2 says, “I tell you, now is the time of God’s favor, now is the day of salvation.” Now is when God says, “Now.” It is when He deals with the heart, pressing the claims of the gospel upon it. To say “No” at such a time is to risk everything.

To say, “Not now” is just as risky. To say “Not now” is to say, “I’d rather live in my sins awhile longer. I’m not through enjoying them yet. I would really rather go on in sin but my conscience is bothering me and I need to say something to make it stop.” To say, “Not now” is to say, “Let me first go and scourge your Son some more, pound in a few more nails, spit on Him, mock Him some more.” How do you know that “later” will come? How do you know He will ever deal with you again? If He does not then you are lost.

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You say, “He wouldn’t do that. “ Oh yes, He would. John 6:44 says, “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him....” John 12:35-36 says, “...Walk while you have the light, before darkness overtakes you. The man who walks in the dark does not know where he is going. Put your trust in the light while you have it, so that you may become sons of light.”

If you have experienced what I have been talking about then there is something on the inside that rejoices in the truth. If not, then I pray that you will be one of those who walks “while you have the light.” A great darkness is falling over planet earth. God’s last call is sounding forth and time is running out.

The Hope of the Gospel

The following scriptures are great promises of God for those who believe. Many of them have become merely trite religious sayings having no real power. But remember that the gospel, “is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes.” If these scriptures have not become that for you then I pray that you will seek God until they are. Their truth and power cannot be conveyed through mere human communication. God must reveal them—and Himself—to the heart.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son.” John 3:16-18.

“But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the

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redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood.” Romans 3:21-25.

“What does the Scripture say? ‘Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.’

Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation. However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness.” Romans 4:3-5.

“You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God’s wrath through him!” Romans 5:6-9.

“At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another. But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.” Titus 3:3-7.

“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith — and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” Ephesians 2:8-10.

“Brothers, my heart’s desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved. For I can testify about them that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge. Since they did not know the righteousness that comes from God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God’s righteousness.

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Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes.” Romans 10:1-4.

“But the righteousness that is by faith says: ‘Do not say in your heart, “Who will ascend into heaven?” (that is, to bring Christ down) or “Who will descend into the deep?”’ (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? ‘The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart,’ that is, the word of faith we are proclaiming: That if you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved. As the Scripture says, ‘Anyone who trusts in him will never be put to shame.’ For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile — the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for, ‘Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’” Romans 10:6-13.

“We accept man’s testimony, but God’s testimony is greater because it is the testimony of God, which he has given about his Son. Anyone who believes in the Son of God has this testimony in his heart. Anyone who does not believe God has made him out to be a liar, because he has not believed the testimony God has given about his Son. And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life. I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life.” 1 John 5:9-13.

I would like to conclude with the words of a great old hymn by William R. Newell, “At Calvary.” I’m afraid that it is often sung without people paying too much attention to the real meaning of the words. I pray that you will consider the words now in the light of what I have shared about the gospel. Have you experienced what the hymn writer was writing about?

*Years I spent in vanity and pride,
Caring not my Lord was crucified,
Knowing not it was for me He died on Calvary.*

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Chorus

*Mercy there was great, and grace was free;
Pardon there was multiplied to me;
There my burdened soul found liberty at Calvary.*

*By God's Word at last my sin I learned;
Then I trembled at the law I'd spurned,
Till my guilty soul imploring turned to Calvary.*

*Now I've given to Jesus everything,
Now I gladly own Him as my King,
Now my raptured soul can only sing of Calvary!*

*Oh, the love that drew salvation's plan!
Oh, the grace that brought it down to man!
Oh, the mighty gulf that God did span at Calvary!*

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Recently, while looking through some of our oldest issues of the MCM, we uncovered this timely gem, published in about 1960! Originally published in two parts, it is reprinted here in its entirety. There is a simple directness and clarity in this teaching that will help anyone who desires to walk with the Lord and overcome in this hour. I believe that many of you will be amazed at how something written that long ago could be so perfectly relevant to the present need of God's people! Suggested Price - \$1.00.

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Many audio and video tapes are available, tapes that have enabled many over the years to share the opportunity we have here to hear the living word as the Lord anoints. Many have discovered that these tapes provide a spiritual lifeline.

World Wide Web

What an opportunity for communication the internet has become! It is available to those connected to the internet 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. All of our books and many of our articles are published on the website in their entirety. We also have information available online regarding upcoming events, the tapelist, and local churches. Video clips taken from recent services are included as well.



The author dares to challenge the scriptural validity of much that goes by the name "Christian" in America today—including evangelical churches. In the scriptures we read about the "faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints" (Jude 3) yet it is an open question just how much of that there is in our day.

In their eagerness to fill churches an alarming number of modern preachers have "watered down" the gospel to make it palatable and "seeker-friendly." But is it even the gospel? Or are multitudes being given a false hope of heaven, their eternal souls sacrificed on the altar of religious "success"?

Even in the Apostle Paul's day he found it necessary to question the salvation of many who professed Christ. It was his admonition to the Corinthian believers in 2 Corinthians 13:5 to, "Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you — unless, of course, you fail the test?" God's Word gives us all the help we need to do just that.

Real biblical salvation was a life-changing thing. However, today, what was once considered normal Christianity is now considered to be a sort of special "deluxe edition," optional, reserved for a dedicated few. A whole new class, the "carnal Christian," has been invented to justify the countless numbers who have professed Christ yet who have no real fundamental change in their lives. They are told to pray a little prayer "inviting Jesus into their hearts" and are told that they are saved and that heaven is sure. But is this biblical Christianity or a modern corruption? Eternity hinges on the answer.

And then there are the remnant of genuine believers who have struggled with doubts and questions and need some solid scriptural ground to stand upon. The hope is that this book will address both needs. Will you accept the challenge?