

The Beginning of Wisdom



Biblical Christianity

by

Miranda A. Darling

Editing by Todd R. Darling

Other Books by this Author:

True Love – The Joy of Biblical Marriage

Sojourn in the Land of My King – Memoirs of a Christian
in Israel

Only One Anchor – Peace for the Anxious Soul

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*This book is dedicated to Todd -
my husband, soul mate, and faithful brother in Christ.
Without his strength of character, bold witness, and Spirit-
led encouragement, the following words may never have
been written or published.*

PROLOGUE

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding. (Proverbs 9:10)

To those who are perishing of thirst, the first tiny stream of cool, living water is a salve to the burn, a quenching relief to the parched soul, and a hint of respite from the torment of unsatisfied and desperate longing. Drops seen gently seeping into a small pool at the base of a desert mountain alert us to a higher source; a rushing and abundant waterfall which can be found far above, birthed from a deep, vibrant spring; richly bubbling up and pouring forth to prosper all it passes over. In the same way, the beginning of wisdom is the initial trickle, an indicator of a greater flow from God which lies ahead for those who willingly seek Him and endeavor to climb upward toward a more bountiful, life-giving supply of His truth. *As the deer pants for the water brooks, so pants my soul for You, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. (Psalm 42:1,2)*

The present spiritual need of this world is one born of desperation. We are like those who wander in the desert, seeking water, sustenance, and protection – but we look in all the wrong places. Let us find what we seek, and discover the true beginning of wisdom, pursuing its abundant source by climbing ever upward.

Part One: Fundamentals of Biblical Christianity

CHAPTER ONE

Purpose and Eternity

Who am I? Why do I exist? What is my purpose? What happens to me when I die? Is God real? What is He like? What does He expect from me? I vividly remember myself beginning to wrestle with questions such as these as I neared the end of the 5th grade. I had begun to experience a new level of self-awareness as I approached adolescence, and this led to me wondering what the point of my existence was. I was often left feeling frightened and uncomfortable with my burgeoning thoughts and momentous, self-probing inquiries. At some point, such unsettling ponderings were willfully pushed aside because they made me feel panicky – not something I wanted to dwell upon any further. Like most preteens, I chose instead to move forward and busy myself with the daily activities and more superficial thinking any average preadolescent would be occupied with at the time. You see, there were no answers to my queries – at least none I could think of, and since the internet was not yet invented, I certainly was not able to ask Google my questions to explore a list of possible responses. So, I abandoned the whole matter and eventually forgot about my deeply existential concerns.

It seems to me there are various phases in life where people find themselves facing the age old, “meaning of life” questions, but I often wonder how many ever make a real effort to seek viable, truthful answers. I personally did not find myself entertaining those monumental, far-reaching thoughts again until I was almost 30 years old. At that time, a series of negative life experiences had brought me to my knees and finally, I once again found myself questioning my existence, my purpose, and even God’s existence, to determine how I could make the changes needed to improve the trajectory of where my life was headed. It was only then I began to truly consider who God really was and explore what the Bible teaches about Him as well as about me and my place in this life. This book has been written to joyfully share the news that I have found the answers I was

looking for and more. I am so incredibly happy to be able to say my life has never been the same. It is my heart's desire to encourage and inform others who may be struggling as they, too, question their identity, purpose, and the perceived uncertainty of what happens after death.

The Bible encourages us to get wisdom and understanding. *Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore, get wisdom. And in all your getting, get understanding. (Proverbs 4:7)* As we ponder this passage, we realize it indicates we are not inherently born with either wisdom or understanding. These are attributes which we must pursue and obtain – and then utilize once found. If we acquire wisdom and understanding about who we are, why we exist, and especially about God Himself, we can be fully equipped for all facets of life. *His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue. (2nd Peter 1:3)* First and foremost, we are told the beginning of human wisdom starts with a proper fear or reverence of our divine Creator, God. *The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding. (Proverbs 9:10)*

Let us begin our pursuit of wisdom and understanding by defining who and what we are as human beings. The Bible tells us God created mankind in His image. *So, God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. (Genesis 1:27)* What does this mean? Firstly, the passage proclaims there is a supreme being called 'God' Who is the Creator of mankind. And from the text found in Genesis 1:1 we can also understand the God Who created us is eternal because He existed before time began. God created a beginning by creating time, space, and matter. *In the beginning (time) God created the heavens(space) and the earth (matter).* Throughout Scripture God is also declared as all-powerful (omnipotent), all-knowing (omniscient) and all-present (omnipresent) i.e., everywhere at once. Another facet somewhat difficult to grasp at first is the fact that God is a three-part or triune Being. He consists of a soul (God, the Father), a physical

body of flesh (Jesus Christ, the Son) and spirit (the Holy Spirit). Since we are created beings, we are not able to be omniscient, omnipotent, or omnipresent – only God can hold such divine attributes. However, the way in which God makes us in His image is by giving each of us a soul, a body, and a spirit. This three-part or triune nature of ours is addressed throughout the Bible in varying ways, such as in the following passage: *Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely; and may your whole spirit, soul, and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Thessalonians 5:23)*

The body is who we are on the outside – our flesh and blood physical characteristics which can be seen and touched. The human soul is who we are on the inside – our thoughts (mind), feelings (heart), personalities, judgments, behavior, and all that intrinsically defines us as unique individuals. Our spirits are best defined as a mystery; a God-given element or facet of our nature which enables us to be spiritually alive creatures with an ability to have a spiritual relationship with our Creator, God – if we so choose. Beloved Christian author A.W. Tozer described the human spirit in this way:

“Deep inside every man there is a private sanctum where dwells the mysterious essence of his being... From man’s standpoint the most tragic loss suffered by mankind is the vacating of this inner sanctum by the Spirit of God. At the far-in hidden center of man’s being is a bush fitted to be the dwelling place of God. There God planned to rest and glow with moral and spiritual fire. Man, by his sin, forfeited this indescribably wonderful privilege and must now dwell there alone...No one can enter but Christ; and He will enter only by the invitation of faith.” (Man: The Dwelling Place of God, by A.W. Tozer) It is important to note animals do not have the spiritual component which human beings have been given. Animals have a two-dimensional nature which consists of their personality or soul, and their physical body.

When God created Adam, the very first human being, the Bible tells us He breathed a spirit of “life” into Adam, causing him to

become a spiritually alive person. The Hebrew words used to describe the breath of life which God gave to Adam are ‘neshamah chay’; literally meaning ‘living spirit’ or even ‘living wind’ in the original language. *And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath (spirit) of life; and man became a living being. (Genesis 2:7)* So, we are created in the image of God in the sense that we are made up of three specific attributes: body, soul, and spirit. Most logical, serious-thinking people can make the deduction that though the human body is physical, the human soul and spirit are not. And because the human soul and spirit are not physical, we can also deduce those aspects of our nature are not bound by time, space, or matter, and therefore, must be eternal – able to exist outside of time and space when not constrained within a physical body. There is a reason no one can truly imagine what death is like. The idea of not existing is impalpable to us because we are indeed eternal beings; our souls and spirits will always exist.

The Bible also tells us God has put a sense of eternity into our hearts: *I have seen the God-given task with which the sons of men are to be occupied. He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, He has put eternity in their hearts, except that no one can find out the work that God does from beginning to end. I know that nothing is better for them than to rejoice, and to do good in their lives, and also that every man should eat and drink and enjoy the good of all his labor—it is the gift of God. I know that whatever God does, it shall be forever. Nothing can be added to it, and nothing taken from it. God does it, that men should fear before Him. That which is has already been, and what is to be has already been; and God requires an account of what is past. (Ecclesiastes 3:10-15)* The human mind naturally finds the idea of death or the notion of nonexistence utterly appalling because the human soul and spirit will always exist. Our hearts intrinsically know this, though our minds might not understand it. We are also told in the above passage God will require an accounting from each one of us regarding what we have done with the gift of life He has given us. Since it is logical and reasonable to acknowledge we have eternal souls and spirits, the

core issue for us to contemplate is not about *whether* we will exist forever, but rather, *where* and *in what capacity*?

Like my younger self, most people erroneously assume we cannot truly know the answers to questions which are of an eternal nature. We have been molded by our culture to not dwell on human mortality and as a result we presume whatever happens after death will work itself out if we are basically good people. It seems strange we do not consider the uneasy questions which should be asked of such an apathetic belief system. Who is in charge of defining what is ‘good enough’ to be in favor with the God Who created us? What are the parameters? Where is the scale? Are we ‘graded on a curve’? Is it logical to face our current life as well as all of eternity carelessly assuming ‘good’ and ‘evil’ will be defined relative to the situation or are simply nebulous values which can be open to personal interpretation? There is a spiritual blindness undermining modern society’s worldview on this subject and it is conceivably one of the most devious tools ever wielded against the human race.

The ‘good enough’ viewpoint is a manmade rationalization and as such, faulty to the core. Such a perspective essentially assumes if there is an “Almighty Being” in charge of the universe, that Being will eternally reward some people and eternally condemn others without providing any information as to how He determines our fate. Wouldn’t this leave the entirety of humankind engaged in a cruel and perverse guessing game the duration of their lives with regard to how they should conduct themselves on earth, and more importantly, how they will measure up in the hereafter? Yes, it would! And tragically, this is how many people view the issue. The ambiguity and helplessness of such a worldview is simply embraced without anyone questioning its validity. Please, let me assure you, our loving Creator did not grace mankind with the precious gift of life simply to torture us with such uncertainty. We do have a God who created us specifically for the purpose of worshipping and loving Him, and being loved in return by Him, as the Bible teaches. Therefore, we can presume He is an immeasurably loving, powerful, good, just, and merciful God. A good, just,

and loving God certainly would have provided mankind with precise guidelines showing us exactly why we exist, how we should live, and ultimately, what is required to be able to enter eternity with Him when our physical bodies die.

The content of this book is intended to bring all who read it into a very real confidence and understanding we do have a Creator, and He gave us not only His parameters and guidelines for life – both now and in eternity – but He also left us with a completely accurate and detailed account of our human history and the origins of the universe. It is a divinely inspired, collective volume of information and writings which we know today as the Bible. But as a society, we now function so far beyond our spiritual roots and God-given purposes we can barely acknowledge God exists anymore, let alone accept the idea He can be personally known and learned about by studying the words He left for us to live by. The Bible explains our origins, our purpose, our God, and His plan of eternal salvation available to us through His Son. Through the teachings of Scripture, we can *know for certain* why we exist and what is expected of us during our lifetime on earth. Again, God has already given us everything we need to know and His Word assures us of it: *His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue. (2 Peter 1:3)*

As is true of so many others, I used to make the ‘good enough’ assumption. I had considered myself a relatively decent person and since I held to a general belief in God, I identified myself as a Christian. However, I had a serious problem. I was a “cultural Christian” and not a true believer in God’s eyes. This basically means I was raised in a nation whose government and social standards were originally founded upon Judeo-Christian values and therefore I automatically assumed I was a Christian. My parents took me to church and Vacation Bible School a few times when I was a child, and they even taught me to recite a prayer before going to sleep at night. In my mind, this qualified as believing in God and the faith of Christianity.

Yet I grew up living my life according to whatever personal goals and moral dictates seemed attractive to me and fit my lifestyle, and I never gave the idea of God much thought in my daily existence. I did not realize it at the time, but I lived to serve myself, which meant I had my own, self-created god – Me. I did not know my lifestyle was idolatrous from God’s perspective. I was also not aware the Bible teaches of a far different God than the one I had periodically envisioned in my mind. Ultimately, I had no understanding of the heart-changing, life-altering kind of faith relationship which God desired from me – a faith which the Bible portrays as differing greatly from what is called Christian and practiced by many in today’s world.

In hindsight, I realize I had viewed myself as being “Christian” in about the same manner I identified myself as being a mix of German, Norwegian, Scottish, and Irish decent. The quasi-Christian viewpoints I had held and what many others are currently living under today are some of the greatest spiritual stumbling blocks of all humanity. It is so important for us to heed the gentle prodding of our consciences and actively seek to correct this spiritually desensitized way of thinking. The Bible makes it noticeably clear the common world view I held regarding Christianity the first 30 years of my life was godless, truth-less, secularized, superficial, and uninformed. I did not really know God or anything about Him. The promise of an eternal life spent with Him in a wonderful dimension called ‘heaven’ was not mine at that time. Additionally, I did not have any comprehension of why I existed, nor did I have an understanding what my true purpose in life was supposed to be. It is this lack of knowledge and spiritually empty understanding of ourselves and our purpose which can leave so many of us feeling lost, hollow, unfulfilled, unsatisfied, or inwardly disappointed in life no matter what our outward blessings, activities, or accomplishments might be. Millions of people throughout the ages have found themselves suffering from a discontented, nagging feeling; a sense they are missing out on something important, something relevant, something epic and meaningful – but they do not know quite what it is.

The explanation is this: When we live our lives without truly knowing who God is, there will remain within us a void; an abiding sense of something ‘bigger’ which seems to have not yet been attained, understood, or experienced. This inner void tends to lead many people to assume lasting inner ‘peace’ or happiness cannot be achieved in this life. At its foundation, the problem is entirely a spiritual one. Because God has set eternity in our hearts, we naturally have a deep-seated, inner yearning to be filled with His eternal presence and commune with His eternal Spirit. Until we seek to know God as He really is and experience this desired personal, spiritual relationship with Him, we will never satisfy our underlying, inner longing. *Oh, that men would give thanks to the LORD for His goodness, and for His wonderful works to the children of men! For He satisfies the longing soul and fills the hungry soul with goodness. (Psalm 107:8, 9)*

The psalmist declares God satisfies the longing, hungry soul with His goodness. Nothing else can. This is the heart of the matter for every one of us. *As the deer pants for the water brooks, so pants my soul for You, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God? (Psalm 42:1, 2)* The human race was created to worship its Creator. God formed us so we could enjoy and pursue a close, personal, loving, worshipful, spiritual relationship with Him – during our time here on earth, as well as in eternity. We were created specifically to love and worship God of our own free will, and to receive from Him the joy of His love, mercy, kindness, and guidance throughout our earthly lives. We were designed to exist in His very Presence! Therefore, when we travel through life refusing to acknowledge or pursue this relationship, and when we instead try to fill the resultant inner void with anything other than God, (family, money, toys, hobbies, travel, clothes, academics, careers, social status, power, unbiblical spirituality, or various avenues of manmade religion) we will find we are never quite as content as we expected to be, nor can we feel satisfied or at peace for any great length of time. The pleasures and satisfactions of all we do or accomplish without God quickly diminish and fade away, leaving us

continually desiring something new, something more, or something different.

Looking back, I had indeed carried within me a sense of being incomplete and unsatisfied from childhood all the way through age 30. I did not know why I had these feelings and for the most part I tried not to think about it. In my mid-twenties, I had a next-door neighbor who was a Christian and I remember trying to express these feelings to her. My marriage did not fulfill me, my job certainly did not satisfy me; not even my children, my friends, my experiences, my possessions, or accomplishments produced true, lasting contentedness or inner peace. I constantly experienced an indescribable, nagging sensation of ‘missing out’ and as a result, I found myself striving to figure out what else I could possibly do in life or what further goals I could achieve.

Like an unwitting sponge, I had soaked up the modernized perceptions of ‘spirituality’ and ‘faith’ so abundant in our culture and carelessly assumed they were of biblical origin. Though I had supposed I was a Christian I was the farthest thing from it. Had I perished at that time I would have stood before a God and Savior Who did not personally know me as one of His own. To put the situation in a more understandable format, it was as if I assumed because I was aware of who the President of the United States was and even knew his name, he must certainly know me and would let me into his home to live with him and his loved ones. You can imagine how impossible it would be to knock on the door of the White House and say, “Please let me in, I know who the President is”. The President would only be able to say, “I do not know you and I have never met you. I’m sorry but you cannot come in.” Approaching eternity without having ever truly known and personally accepted God as my Creator and my Savior, I imagine His words would have echoed over and over in my mind throughout a dark, empty, painful, and meaningless eternity, *I never knew you; depart from Me. (Matthew 7:23).*

Thankfully, God was not willing I should eternally perish – just as He desires none of us to perish! *The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is*

longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance. (2 Peter 3:9) I am so profoundly grateful He faithfully and tirelessly pursued my heart and my conscience. He began by inspiring that Christian neighbor to spend time sharing her faith in Jesus Christ with me. I learned a lot from her, and I am very thankful she began to point me in the right direction at that time. To this day I am amazed at God's patience as He waited until the Holy Spirit finally and successfully opened my eyes and my heart to His presence and His will for my life. God pursues all of us in the same manner because we are His beloved creation. He created us, He loves us, and He deeply desires to enjoy a personal relationship with every one of us, now and forever.

Our true purpose is fully exposed in learning how we were created, why we were created, and what we were originally intended to be and do! We were created out of God's love in order to give and receive love – from Him and from others. We were created by God's choosing for the dignity of our own free choice. We were created by God to worship Him and follow His commands – but He has allowed us the freedom to choose not to do so, as well. We were created to be saved by Him from sin and the judgment of hell, should we desire salvation. We were created to share all the wisdom, knowledge, love, mercy, and understanding of God to those who are seeking – in essence, we were created to know Him and to make Him known. We were created to be part of God's 'forever family' and to play a part in God's salvation plan if we so desire. We were created as unique and wonderful images of God, each of us having utmost value, importance, and meaning to God. We are no accidents. We are not mere animals. Our lives do have a higher purpose and incredible significance. We are body, soul, and spirit, and we have the amazing ability to be in direct, personal fellowship with the One who created us. God has given us a way to seek this relationship through faith in His Son and the power of His Holy Spirit – but He has left the choice to us. What a wonderful thing to begin comprehending as we make our way through life on this earth!

CHAPTER TWO

The Bible

I never used to give the Bible much thought. I was not against it; I was not for it. I literally had no opinion of it one way or another. When I was a child, I am sure we had at least one dusty tome of Scripture shoved on the bottom shelf of a bookcase. But I never saw anyone in our family reading the Bible, and the infrequent instances in which our family attended church, we did not bring Bibles along. There really did not seem to be much attention given to the Bible during the era in which I grew up – at least not in rural northern Wisconsin.

In hindsight, I have learned there was an extensive, born-again-focused, hippie-centered ‘Jesus-Movement’ which began in the 1960’s and continued strongly throughout the 1970’s. This movement was all about people hearing the gospel message of Jesus Christ and His sacrificial death on the cross for human sin, and as a result, thousands were giving their lives to Jesus, becoming saved, and moving forward with miraculously changed lifestyles. They were walking away from the prolific drugs, promiscuous sex, and alcohol abuse of that time period, and turning toward a new, God-inspired passion for reading and learning about the Bible, worshipping Jesus Christ with grass-roots Christian rock music, and emphasizing the need for a personal relationship with God through His Son, Jesus Christ. This Spirit-led “Bible revival” began out west along the coastal states and quickly surged across the United States and eventually to many other nations. However, I simply was not aware of this movement of God, probably because I grew up in a rather secluded manner; a country girl living 30 miles from the Lake Superior shores of northern Wisconsin. All that to say, I had never even once considered looking into the pages of the Bible to find answers to life’s questions. Yet, I have since discovered it is the one place everyone should be looking! If we could all start life with a right knowledge of what is taught in God’s Book, we would not be so apt to spend the first half of our lives

unwittingly destroying ourselves and the second half so desperately trying to figure out where we went wrong! It is just as God exclaims in the Book of Hosea; *My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge. (Hosea 4:6)*

Throughout recorded history and the multitudes of preserved artifacts from archaeology we can be very confident God called out and used numerous men of faith to tell the world about Himself, His ways, and His judgments – from Adam to Moses and the prophets, to the followers of Jesus Christ. In all this, God chose and inspired faithful men to write down, disseminate, and preserve what He taught them. As a result, we have been left with a complete, detailed love letter from God; a spiritual manual known worldwide as “the Bible”, “Scripture”, or “God’s Word” interchangeably. Amazingly, most of mankind today – even those who think of themselves as Christians – do not accept it as being wholly valid in the present era, and therefore, make no attempt live by it, believe in it, or even open the pages to simply read it.

Proving the legitimacy and validity of the Bible is a vast subject, and, having been handled very well by many other books and scholarly research, I will not address it deeply here. For more on the subject I can recommend the works of authors such as Josh McDowell, Lee Strobel, Ken Ham, Kent Hovind, Brian Young, Henry Morris, Dave Hunt, Chuck Smith, Arnold Fruchtenbahr, Randall Price, Roger Oakland, and Jacob Prasch. If you are willing to delve into this arena of study and honestly examine the evidence, you will find the Bible is a supernaturally created and divinely preserved book. Only our Almighty God could have used the hearts, minds, words, and pens of so many faithful men over such a vast span of years to create one miraculous, amazingly cohesive book of truth, history, instruction, and wisdom for the entire human race; manuscripts *which flow perfectly*, from beginning to end, using over 40 authors of various lifestyles, education levels, languages, and eras, to write what His Spirit urged them to write. It is inexplicable unless we accept the reality that it is indeed supernatural.

I write with a foundational premise the Bible is God-breathed, God-directed, and God-preserved, despite centuries of attack, misuse, misinterpretation, and a multitude of attempts to malign or even annihilate its writings and teachings. I can only ask my readers to please take some time and seriously investigate this subject on your own if you harbor any doubts. There are multitudes of scholarly, academically sound books with enormous amounts of information and research attesting to the validity of Scripture whether one is seeking scientific proof of creation and the proven record of a global flood; historical and archaeological verification of the named events, places and people in the Bible; or whether there has been an uncorrupted preservation and translation of the original biblical manuscripts, both Old and New Testament. The bottom line is, we do not have to check our brains at the door when it comes to the Bible. We can trust the writings of all Scripture as being God's tangible, yet supernatural source of truth given to mankind. *Forever, O LORD, Your Word is settled in heaven. Your faithfulness endures to all generations; You established the earth, and it abides. (Psalm 119:89,90)*

Furthermore, the Bible is the only genuine, printed, verifiably ancient source we have which teaches about the faith of Christianity. There are no other valid, authentic, unanimously vetted books or scrolls written on this subject from the appropriate and corresponding time periods in which biblical history and precepts were recorded. The Bible teaches Christianity is a way of life built upon the foundation that eternal, spiritual salvation is only achieved through one's personal faith in and purposeful submission to the Son of God - the promised Messiah, Jesus Christ - and what He has accomplished for mankind on the cross with His own blood. There is literally no other book from which we can obtain this information about our Creator, our sin, our Savior, the way to eternal salvation, and how to live our lives as disciples of Jesus Christ. The Bible has been proven to be factually correct within the confines of all human history. Museums and archeologists all over the world use it as their most reliable resource for timelines, verification of events, and the buried locations of cities, peoples, and artifacts.

Additionally, the Bible is supernaturally correct in every one of its prophecies to date. We are told all Scripture was written by God through the power and inspiration given to men by His Holy Spirit:

All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work. (2 Timothy 3:16)

For prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit. (2 Peter 1:21)

The Bible declares God has set His Word above His own Name. God's Name is deemed holy, mighty, righteous, exalted, and eternal. It is for His Name's sake God performs His glorious works in the lives of men. Yet God states His Word is to be valued even above His own Name: *For You have magnified Your word above all Your name. (Psalm 138:2)* God is made manifest (i.e., made evident, visible, or apparent) to mankind by His written Word – again, interchangeably known as Scripture or the Bible. We can know *Who* God is by knowing *what* His Word says. God proclaims His Word is eternal (just as He is), so we can trust the power of His Word will never cease nor will those things which He has spoken ever fail to come to pass. *Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will by no means pass away. (Matthew 24:35)*

If you view yourself as a Christian yet you know little or nothing about the Bible; or doubt its validity and deny its infallibility, the question must be asked: From what basis are you forming your ideas of who God is? What sources are you using for truth about Jesus Christ and the faith of Christianity? Are you simply counting on your own opinion? Perhaps you have gotten your beliefs from a favorite television personality's stance, or maybe you rely upon traditional church doctrines or denominational theology. But are any of those resources viable? We must realize opinions are not necessarily truth, whether they are our

own or those postulated by famous personalities. Additionally, multitudes of church institutions are scripturally weakened because they are desperate to gain or retain members, money, or be deemed socially acceptable in today's culture. Many traditional churches uphold the personal interpretations and writings of fallible men such as Martin Luther, John Calvin, or the Catholic Catechism as their preeminent source for doctrine, instead of depending upon the Bible itself. Modernized, nondenominational churches have also sprung up over the past 50 years, and while some are decent, Bible-teaching churches, a majority are moneymaking, motivational-speaker-driven, mega-church business enterprises which focus on self-help theology and hip, popular music instead of on Jesus Christ and the Bible. All such approaches to Christianity are inherently skewed and compromised.

There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death. (Proverbs 14:12)

Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ. (Colossians 2:8)

Division and differences among professing Christians and their beliefs have always existed and will continue to exist, primarily because people so often choose not to accept the texts of Scripture exactly as they were written, or because manmade rules, philosophies, and traditions creep in. God's Word simply gets reinterpreted to mean what people want it to mean, or at the very minimum, what people 'feel' it *should* mean. We must learn this is exactly how the darkness of evil and all that stands against God fell like a cloud over mankind in the first place. The Bible indicates the devil ushered in our spiritual fall from grace by causing the first woman on earth to covet a life of self-rule rather than a life lived in submission to the God Who created her. How did the devil do it? He merely questioned and doubted the Word of God in her presence, which resulted in her questioning and doubting God's love and His intentions toward her:

Now the serpent was more cunning than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made. And he said to the woman, "Has God indeed said, 'You shall not eat of every tree of the garden?'" And the woman said to the serpent, "We may eat the fruit of the trees of the garden; "but of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God has said, 'You shall not eat it, nor shall you touch it, lest you die.'" Then the serpent said to the woman, "You will not surely die. For God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil. (Genesis 3:1-5)

Notice how the serpent questions, twists, and rephrases God's Words. He questioned what God had commanded, rejected it as a lie, and then cast out a lure of temptation in proclaiming what the consequence would "really" be from *his* point of view. The devil excels at mixing the truth with lies, so if one is not careful, it is difficult to perceive where the truth ends and where the lie begins. Satan told Eve she would not die, which was somewhat true on a certain level. He also told her she would be like God, knowing good and evil, which was also partially true. Physically, Eve did not immediately die. However, she became mortal, with the promise of physical death on the horizon where it had not previously been, and her *spirit immediately died*, which caused her spiritual relationship with God to be severed and broken. Righteousness and holiness no longer covered her. Eve could not unashamedly enter God's presence any longer because she had become spiritually naked and felt mortified. Therefore, she and Adam suddenly felt exposed and sought to hide themselves from God, covering themselves with leaves when the Lord walked into the garden to be with them. *Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves coverings. And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. (Genesis 3:7,8)*

Eve did become like God in the sense that she would begin to live according to her own desires and her own self-will instead

of according to the will of her Creator; but she did not become a god herself, nor did she gain God's power, holiness, goodness, or any other part of His deity. And, while she had previously been taught the *difference* between good and evil, she had not personally *experienced or practiced* evil and was therefore naïve or innocent to behaving or thinking in evil or rebellious manners. But once she initially rebelled against God's simple command, her fallen spiritual nature and corrupted heart then enabled her to personally experience and willfully practice evil if she so desired. All of this, stemming from merely doubting God's Word, rejecting His commands, and listening to a twisted truth mixed with lies.

Questioning and doubting God's Word will always result in deception and misdirection. Satan does not have many tricks – he does not have to. He is quite successful at using the same ploys to deceive men and women throughout the ages. The packages may change, and the style might be updated, but the basic premises the devil uses to stumble mankind remain the same now as they were in the beginning. It is to Satan's great satisfaction much of the world today has been seduced into questioning God's Word – ridiculing the Bible as being hateful, or outdated and silly, consisting of fables and historical fairy tales. Our innate self-love and human pride have caused many of us to ignore God's truths so freely given. We reject our Creator and all He wants to show us when we reject His Word without really knowing anything about it.

The following is a specifically strong warning God gives us on the issue of adding to, adjusting or omitting the teachings of His Word: *For I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds to these things, God will add to him the plagues that are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the Book of Life, from the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book. (Revelation 22:18, 19)* We are not to add or change meanings, manipulate context, or apply personal opinions and philosophies to the things God says in His Word. God wrote the words within

it through the power of His Holy Spirit, and since God is infallible, all of Scripture is infallible, not just certain sections or specific teachings.

All Scripture is written by the power and leading of God and has just as much value and meaning to us today as it did to those who were alive during the times it was being written. Now all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages have come. (1 Corinthians 10:11) God wrote the entire Book for the entirety of mankind. Everything in the Bible was written for all people to search out, learn from, and live by, regardless of the era. God tells us He does not change. For I am the LORD, I do not change. (Malachi 3:6) Therefore, the whole Bible is God's unchanging truth, not merely bits and pieces of it; and as such, it applies to all of mankind, not just the ancient civilizations of its origins. All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work. (2 Timothy 3:16, 17)

Rejecting the validity of the Bible as having come from God will lead one down a slippery slope to a self-created god, a self-created faith, and self-created doctrines. This results in idolatry rather than a biblically sound, soul-saving Christian faith. Not trusting the Scriptures as being written by God will lead a person off the narrow path of faith in Jesus Christ and onto a broad road of destruction and deception. Faith becomes grounded in the ever-changing bastions of personal preference and self-rationalization instead of in God's unchanging truths. We must reach an understanding any rejection of the divine infallibility of the Bible is rooted in a personal refusal to repent, submit, and walk in accordance with those biblical teachings which are contradictory to one's current preferred lifestyle. Additionally, if a person determines they cannot trust the Bible as being the inerrant, supernaturally inspired words of God, they must also embrace this conclusion: If God did not create the Bible, the passages within it can only be a bunch of random stories, histories, genealogies, poems, fables, and opinions compiled and

written by mere men. There certainly is no power, eternal, or otherwise, in the Bible or the Christian faith if what is taught within Scripture is derived solely by the thoughts and hearts of imperfect, mortal human beings. I do not know about you, but the opinions and stories of ordinary men do not hold a lot of water with me when it comes to matters of eternal and spiritual gravity. If God did not write the Bible, the words within it neither have the power to lead us into eternal salvation nor can they supernaturally change lives, and our hope of an everlasting life through faith in Jesus Christ is in vain. If such were the case, we should all just stop playing church right now. Certainly, if God isn't the personal Author behind the words of Scripture, the Christian faith and its promised gift of eternal life in a place called heaven is a silly pipe dream and we are wasting our very short, very precious time on earth following such absurdity.

The Bible is either from God or it is not. What is taught within Scripture either consists of all the godly power and wisdom needed for mankind to understand life, death, and eternity, or it holds no valid supernatural power, wisdom, and knowledge whatsoever. Christianity is either altogether true, or it is altogether false, because there is no such thing as an authentic Christian faith which acknowledges the truths found in some parts of the Bible while ignoring the rest. Therefore, we must conclude there are no half-truths or errors to be found in the Bible. Thankfully, we *can know for certain* the Bible was given to us by our Creator. We can see the amazing patterns and proofs of fulfilled prophecy across every era of civilization when we study through the pages of Scripture. We have found what can only be described as supernaturally created mathematical codes [gematria] within the texts of Scripture manuscripts which continue to be impossible for mankind to duplicate even with today's most powerful computers. We have archaeology, history, and science all attesting to the validity of what is spoken of in the Bible. Most importantly, we can attest to millions of miraculously changed lives and civilizations throughout the world, all pointing to Scripture and the truths given to us by God taught within its pages.

If we think of ourselves as Christians, we must know and understand what makes one a Christian. We must learn who God really is, how He created the universe, what He expects from His creation, and why He sees humanity as sinful. We need to study about the Son of God, the promised Messiah, Jesus Christ; and learn why He had to become physically born into our finite world in order to sacrificially die for our self-ruled, spiritually dead, naturally apathetic souls. Finally, we must learn about and embrace what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ, i.e., a ‘Christian’, and then learn to live out what we profess to believe. The only way to learn these things is by studying the Bible. Yes, we can listen to pastors, preachers, prophets, and popes, but if what they are teaching does not agree with Scripture, they are guilty of false teaching and those of us who listen to them will be deceived. How can we know if such people are disseminating biblical truth unless we study Scripture for ourselves?

We are each held personally accountable by God for our spiritual standing with Him. Therefore, we should act responsibly in seeking a biblically accurate understanding of God on our own and stop carelessly embracing various philosophies, religions, or belief systems as valid without comparing them to what God’s Word tells us. We must learn who God is and realize we were created to revere Him and seek His guidance. The beginning of wisdom about this life as well as the next is only found in loving, venerating and worshipping God and His precepts. *The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. (Proverbs 9:10)*

For those who want ‘Bible ala carte’, accepting the tenets of God’s Word which are agreeable to one’s personal opinions and lifestyles while ignoring those which are not; the Christian faith *which eternally saves the soul* does not work like that. Faith in God and the finished work of Jesus Christ on the cross is a faith irrevocably joined and intertwined with God’s Word. *If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him. (John 14:23)* To love Jesus Christ is to keep His Word. Where do we find His Word? Every letter in the Bible is His Word, from Genesis through Revelation – divinely recorded by men of

strong faith who were inspired by His Spirit. The Bible is entirely about Jesus Christ. Jesus makes the following comment to the scribes and pharisees of His day, with regard to their many scrolls of Old Testament writings: *You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me. (John 5:39)* The entirety of Scripture testifies to the sin of mankind, the coming of a promised Messiah – Jesus Christ – and the eternal life He offers to mankind by way of His sacrifice. Scripture proclaims Jesus Christ *is* God made manifest in the flesh, and He is also the *Word* of God, holy and perfect:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made. In Him was life, and the life was the light of men... He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him. But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name: who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1:1-14) This passage shows us Jesus Christ is the Word of God, the second Person of our triune Creator, Who became physically manifested in the flesh here on earth in order to dwell among mankind. Clearly, believing in Jesus Christ goes hand in hand with believing in the Word of God. Jesus Christ judges the unbeliever on the last day, as does God's Word. Jesus Christ and His Word are two sides of the same coin. *He who rejects Me, and does not receive My words, has that which judges him--the word that I have spoken will judge him in the last day. (John 12:48)* Jesus Christ is made manifest (made visible, made known, made evident) through the testimony of God's Word. The New Testament book of Colossians explains even further the union between Jesus Christ and the Word of God:

For by Him [Jesus] all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him. (Colossians 1:16)

How did God create our world? He spoke.

Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light.” (Genesis 1:3)

Then God said, “Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it divide the waters from the waters.” (Genesis 1:6)

Then God said, “Let the waters under the heavens be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear”; and it was so. (Genesis 1:9)

Then God said, “Let the earth bring forth grass, the herb that yields seed, and the fruit tree that yields fruit according to its kind, whose seed is in itself, on the earth”; and it was so. (Genesis 1:11)

Then God said, “Let there be lights in the firmament of the heavens to divide the day from the night; and let them be for signs and seasons, and for days and years; and let them be for lights in the firmament of the heavens to give light on the earth”; and it was so. (Genesis 1:14,15)

Then God said, “Let the waters abound with an abundance of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the face of the firmament of the heavens.” (Genesis 1:20)

Then God said, “Let the earth bring forth the living creature according to its kind: cattle and creeping thing and beast of the earth, each according to its kind”; and it was so. (Genesis 1:24)

Then God said, “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea,

over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.” (Genesis 1:26)

“God said.” God spoke and created all things. All things were created through God’s *spoken Word*. i.e., Jesus Christ, the ‘Word of God.’ Jesus is the very instrument of Creation. Just to take this a step further, look at the word we use to describe our world: “Universe”. Break it down to the roots and we can see it means “one [uni] spoken word [verse]”. Now, isn’t it interesting we use such a word to describe our physical world? Perhaps this is because God created all human language, and thereby disseminated this creation knowledge throughout the ages; so, no matter how much time has passed from our perspective, even within his own voice, language, and vocabulary, mankind has always held within his grasp the God-given understanding of how our world came into existence. Scripture teaches us belief in Jesus Christ is in essence a full acceptance of God’s Word and all it tells us about Him. Reason dictates we either believe all of God’s written Word, or we can believe none of it. It makes no sense to embrace a little bit of both, because such a position would be a subjective, spiritually dangerous compromise resulting in willful idolatry.

There are publishing companies today who have altered parts of the Bible and repackaged it in new and modern ways designed to appeal to the general public or to the undiscerning Christian. For the sake of accuracy and strength of correct doctrine based on the original manuscripts the discerning believer should stick with word-for-word translations as opposed to thought-for-thought. A few common favorites include the English Standard Version (ESV), the King James Version (KJV), the New King James Version (NKJV), or the New American Standard Version (NASB). The study of English Bible translations as compared to the original Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek manuscripts is an interesting one. It certainly is important to be aware of what is out there and why, and how it all came to be.

However, with the more accurate, word-for-word translations, God's precepts, laws, principles, and doctrines are less open to question, misunderstandings, incorrect assumptions, and deceptions. It is also extremely important to understand a *paraphrase* is not a *translation*. A paraphrase displays an unwarranted literary freedom taken by the author(s) and therefore, subjects God's Word to the personal opinions, subjective interpretations, and re-wordings of said author(s). God's truths will always become compromised with the input and elucidations of fallible men. I would encourage the avoidance of any paraphrased "bible" to learn about God, Jesus Christ, His commands, and His plan of salvation.

Jesus Christ said, "*He who is not with Me is against Me*" (*Matthew 12:30*) Spiritual stances in Scripture are always portrayed in a black and white scenario like this. We are either with Christ, or we are against Him. We are either walking in the light of biblical truth or unknowingly stumbling in spiritual darkness. We are either doing that which is good in God's eyes, or we are doing that which is evil and far apart from Him. We are either loving others or loving ourselves. We are either spiritually born again, or we are yet spiritually dead to our Creator. There are no gray areas on these issues, at least not from God's point of view. We are either following Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior or we are living by our own dictates. Logically, we can know if we refuse to accept *all* God's written Word as true, holy, and infallible, we have in effect rejected the whole of Christian faith and called God a liar. The result of doing such a thing will be a powerless, pseudo-Christian belief system stemming from human philosophies, religious traditions, or personal preferences. Such a faith cannot even change our lives let alone save our souls.

Are we hampered in some ways by our limited human understanding when it comes to reading the Bible? Certainly, we can be. But at the end of the day, we know our Creator is not a God of confusion; *For God is not the author of confusion but of peace. (1 Corinthians 14:33)* and He does not deceptively hide core truths within highly convoluted passages of Scripture

resulting in only ‘genius level Bible scholars’ being able to understand His words. God means what He says and says what He means. Simple, uneducated, hard-working men (fishermen, shepherds, farmers, tent makers, tax collectors) were all meant to understand the teachings of God and thus it is these types of men God often used to write His Word. If we read our Bibles within the context which the passages were written, and if we let Scripture define Scripture without adding meanings and without taking away from that which is clearly stated, we can be assured of a correct understanding of God’s Word. If there are difficult areas which we cannot seem to comprehend, we can bring those passages to the Lord in prayer and trust Him to reveal an understanding to us in His own time through the leading of the Holy Spirit. In many cases a little research into the culture, politics, history, and language of the day in which a passage is written can shed immense light upon its meaning. We must keep in mind the Bible is essentially a Hebrew book written by primarily Jewish people saturated in an ancient, God-given culture and language. Therefore, it should be read and understood from a Hebrew perspective in order to comprehend the incredible patterns, prophecies, pictures, poetry, and typologies so amazingly embedded throughout. We can trust all Scripture as being God’s complete ‘truth’ and has value and meaning or it would not have been written.

All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work. (2 Timothy 3:16, 17)

Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path. (Psalm 119:105)

CHAPTER THREE

The God of The Bible

Who is God and what is He like? What does He want from us? Why does He see the human race as sinful? How can He love us if He sees us in such a light? Why did He create us to be so imperfect if He expects righteousness and perfection from us?

Many people think of God as a very distant and unreachable entity or force. This idea is not taught in Scripture. Others view God as a kind, loving, forgiving, merciful, and comforting ‘Supreme Being’. While those positive characteristics are certainly expressed throughout the Bible, such a list is missing numerous additional descriptions, resulting in a rather lopsided idea of our Creator. There are well over 300 attributes found in the Bible which describe God. For the purpose of this discussion, it is important to examine at least a few more of God’s attributes to gain a clearer and more balanced picture of Him as He is depicted throughout Scripture.

First, let us reexamine for the sake of clarity something we covered previously; God is eternal. This means He has always existed and always will exist – He abides outside the measurable dimensions of time, space, and matter. Some people erroneously think eternity is an unending amount of time. This is incorrect. Eternal existence is a *timeless* existence; there is no time at all. Timelessness is an exceedingly difficult concept for us to fully comprehend because as finite, physical beings, we are currently bound by time. Since God is eternal, He inhabits a timeless or eternal dimension, a place called ‘heaven’. In numerous passages Scripture informs us heaven is one of two eternal realms existing outside of or beyond the dimensions of our physical universe and it is the realm in which God dwells.

If My people who are called by My name will humble themselves, and pray and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways,

then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land. (2 Chronicles 7:14)

God was not born, and He will never die. While our physical creation does have a beginning and will eventually have an end, God does not have either one. God has always been and always will be. He is the great "I AM". *Then Moses said to God, "Indeed, when I come to the children of Israel and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they say to me, 'What is His name?' what shall I say to them?" And God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." And He said, "Thus you shall say to the children of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you.'" (Exodus 3:13,14)* God's existence, His very presence, is from everlasting to everlasting.

The eternal God is your refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms. (Deuteronomy 33:27)

Known to God from eternity are all His works. (Acts 15:18)

For thus says the High and Lofty One Who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: "I dwell in the high and holy place..." (Isaiah 57:15)

Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever You had formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting (eternity) to everlasting (eternity), You are God. (Psalm 90:2)

For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse. (Romans 1:20)

To put the eternal nature of God in more manageable terms, we can attempt to think of God as a designer or an artist. The person who designs a computer does not exist inside the computer and is not limited by what the computer is or does – the designer exists outside of his product. The artist does not exist within a painting or sculpture, he is outside of his artistic creation. God

exists beyond and outside of His beautiful creation. He is not bound by any part of it.

Some especially important, additional attributes of God according to Scripture are the fact that God is ‘Holy’, and His ways are ‘Perfect’. *Exalt the LORD our God, and worship at His footstool, He is holy. (Psalm 99:5)* To be holy is to be set apart and of course, to be perfect means to be pure or without fault. *As for God, His way is perfect; the word of the LORD is proven; He is a shield to all who trust in Him. (Psalm 18:30)* A holy and perfect God is something we cannot fully comprehend as human beings this side of eternity because we have never witnessed pure holiness or perfection in our own present condition. However, we can understand by reading the Bible those who are *not* holy and *not* perfect absolutely cannot approach the presence of our Almighty God and survive. God is a living and holy Spirit, and His holiness is sometimes described as akin to a purifying or consuming fire: *For our God is a consuming fire. (Hebrews 12:29)*

Scripture furthermore proclaims God is ‘Just’ and ‘Righteous’ and therefore whatever statutes, precepts, and laws He has set up within His creation, they are perfect, logical, orderly, righteous, and fair. This understanding is covered numerous times throughout the Bible and the following passage is a great example: *The law of the LORD is perfect, converting the soul; The testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple; The statutes of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; The commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes; The fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever; The judgments of the LORD are true and righteous altogether. (Psalm 19:7-9)* A righteous, holy, and just God would require His perfect laws to be adhered to and if they were not, He would have in place resulting consequences. Justice applies an appropriate consequence to a corresponding action. The Lord’s righteousness and fairness will naturally enact a negative consequence in response to disobedience and provide blessings in response to obedience.

Now we come back to the part where people think they are fairly good and generally deserving of positive eternal consequences rather than condemnation or judgment, regardless of their beliefs or lack thereof. Most people do not consider themselves as “all that sinful”. But this is because they are rating their thoughts, attitudes, intentions, and behaviors on a continuously updated and modified manmade scale which compares them to whatever is reasonable relative to the rest of society at that time. This is called ‘moral relativism’. When fallible human beings weigh themselves against other fallible human beings, they are by default using a defective scale. God does not change, therefore His laws and expectations do not change or become “updated”. *For I am the LORD, I do not change. (Malachi 3:6)* So, if we are honestly seeking the truth according to our Creator we must explore where we stand when compared to His commands, His holiness, His justness, His glory, His standards of perfection, and His laws. We need only examine one command in the Bible to conclude all mankind inherently practices continual rebellion against God (a.k.a., “sin”) daily.

Let us look at the First Commandment. The First Commandment tells us we are to have no other gods [idols] before the one true God. *You shall have no other gods before Me. (Exodus 20:3)* What this command amounts to is simply the idea that nothing should be more important to us in life than the pursuit of a right relationship with God. Remember, the Bible says the reason God created us is so we could choose to love and worship Him and follow His purposes and His guidance for us. God is love, and because He is love, He greatly desires our love to be offered to Him of our own free will. *And we have known and believed the love that God has for us. God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God in him. (1 John 4:16)* We are to be seeking a personal, loving, reverent, spiritual relationship with God over the course of our entire lives simply because He created us – without Him we would not exist. This thought alone should cause us to love, worship, and honor God, praising Him for all He has done. *You are worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honor and power; for You created all things, and by Your will they exist and were created. (Revelation 4:11)* Another way

to phrase the First Commandment is given to us in Deuteronomy 6:5: *You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.* This command is repeated throughout the Bible and strongly reiterated by Jesus Christ in the New Testament: *And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength. This is the first commandment. (Mark 12:30).* As we ponder this all-encompassing command the obvious question becomes, “Can any person on earth honestly live up to it?” The answer, of course, is “No”! Because of our inherently disrupted spiritual state, we are not able to comply with this command.

When we hold ourselves and our lives up against the Bible and the level of relationship God seeks from us, we can begin to see how desperate our spiritual situation is. We exist in a world where everyone primarily lives to pursue their own desires, dreams, and goals. Our thoughts and time are spent focusing on feeling good, looking good, making money, paying bills, raising children, having enough material things, gaining the attention, approval and affection of others, achieving status or power, and maybe even establishing a name or a legacy for ourselves. Ideas of actively loving God or living for God’s purposes just do not normally rank anywhere on the average person’s list of ‘top priorities’ in today’s world. From heaven’s perspective we are natural-born idol-worshippers. Our first and foremost idol is the god of ‘Self’. We also tend to love our children, our spouses, our friends, and our parents, far more than we love the God Who created us – yet Jesus states, *“He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me.” (Matthew 10:37).* Human sin at its foundation is entirely about our spiritual priorities and the self-oriented attitude of our hearts toward the precious life we have been given.

Why do we suffer from the condition of sin? Did God create us this way? No, He did not. He created man and woman in His image and therefore, in the beginning, things were vastly different than they are now. *So, God created man in His own*

image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. (Genesis 1:27) As stated previously, just as God is a triune God made up of soul (God, the Father), physical body/flesh (Jesus Christ, the Son) and spirit (The Holy Spirit), we are also triune beings consisting of soul, body and spirit. Mankind was created specifically to enjoy the fellowship, guidance, and love of God, and to love and worship God with all of his being. We know from the Book of Genesis, God and the first man and woman [Adam and Eve] were able to enjoy a close relationship with one another in the Garden of Eden. *And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day. (Genesis 3:8)* However, God had given an incredibly special command to Adam and Eve. The command was provided in order to establish within all of mankind the dignity of free will, and for Adam and Eve, obeying this command preserved the wonderful, active spiritual relationship they had with their Creator. The command was simply to never eat the fruit of a certain powerful tree – a tree of the knowledge of good and evil. God informed them the consequence of their disobedience (sin) would be their death. *But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die. (Genesis 2:17)*

Unfortunately, as mentioned in a previous chapter, Eve became tempted and deceived by the devil to disobey God and cause her husband to disobey as well. Thus, in a single moment, using their free will, Adam and Eve rebelled against God's one simple dictate. The very act of doing so caused them to turn away from God's rule in order to live under self-rule. Such a decision resulted in their imminent mortality and initiated a form of spiritual death which disrupted their divinely given spiritual relationship with God. These consequences then became the inherent affliction of every human being born.

Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned. (Romans 5:12) Sin (rebellion against God's will and God's rule) introduced death to the entire world. God teaches this concept throughout Scripture.

Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death. (James 1:14)

For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 6:23)

Therefore, since Adam and Eve's fall from grace we are all born spiritually dead – the secret, inner dwelling place inside each person is now naturally empty of God's Spirit. We have living, physical bodies and living souls but we are born spiritually severed to a relationship with our Creator. We have no capacity to become spiritually alive on our own, yet God requires a spiritual relationship with us if we are to abide with Him, both on earth and in eternity. *God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth. (John 4:24)* This is why there is absolutely nothing we can do to earn salvation, righteousness, or good standing in God's eyes. The matter is only solvable by God Himself. We have no ability to enjoy fellowship with God on earth or in heaven until our spirits are reconciled to Him and brought into a personal relationship with Him the way He originally intended. This reconciliation can only be accomplished through personal repentance and an abiding faith in one thing: the redeeming sacrifice of God's Son, Jesus Christ. The Bible describes this inner, heartfelt repentance and faith as being 'born again' and it is the only cure for the disease of human sin. *Jesus answered and said to him, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. (John 3:3)*

Many people find such concepts incomprehensible because they see themselves as born inherently 'good' and therefore assume they are destined for a good eternal outcome or a place in heaven. But the Bible portrays *everyone* as being born spiritually dead and destitute; in desperate need of a sacrificial Savior in order to be reconciled back into God's spiritual presence. *For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23)* How many sin? All. How many fall short of the glory of God? All. *There is none righteous, no, not one; There is none who understands; There is none who seeks after God. They have all*

turned aside; They have together become unprofitable; There is none who does good, no, not one. (Romans 3:10-12)

We must understand the Bible does indeed teach mankind is inherently sinful. We are spiritually fallen creatures who are born with hearts already wired to live life without God; unwittingly rebelling against our Creator and living under our own dictates. Wickedness according to God is simply the innate rebellion of our sin nature which sets itself against Him as we pursue our personal desires and ideals rather than submitting to His guidance, His love, His truth, and His purposes. In speaking of Jesus Christ and the purpose for which God sent Him to our earthly realm, the Bible ultimately explains our rejection of Him in the following terms:

In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it. (John 1:4-5).

And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. (John 3:19).

Our deeds are evil because our motivation to do anything in this life is innately grounded in what pleases ‘self’ rather than what pleases God and we do not have the natural inclination or urge to change this fact. The referenced passages from the book of John tell us the world’s reaction to Jesus Christ and His sacrificial death on the cross is primarily incomprehension and rejection. Sexual immorality, covetousness, selfishness, adultery, lying, murdering, or stealing are all symptoms of a much deeper, more singular problem. We are born spiritually barren and unable to obey our Father’s primary command: *Love the Lord your God with all your hearts, all your souls, and all your minds. (Matthew 22:37)*. All other commandments given by God are tied into and founded upon this one directive, for if we were to love God in such a manner, we would not practice the specific behaviors the rest of the commandments condemn. *Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law? Jesus*

replied: "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." (Matthew 22:36-40)

Loving God above all else is what God has required of mankind since He created us, and it is the one thing the human race is not capable of doing on its own since Adam and Eve made the wrong choice. Our natural tendency is to live in general apathy toward the God who created every one of us. Some people even grow to exhibit rage or hatred toward any mention of God, Jesus Christ, or the Bible. Again, we see the Bible proclaiming: *There is none righteous, no not one, there is none who understands, There is none who seeks after God, They have all turned aside; They have together become unprofitable; There is none who does good, no not one...There is no fear of God before their eyes. (Romans 3:10-18).*

There is no fear of God before their eyes...and if the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom, what does that say about the above passage? There are none who are wise. It is a disturbing and hefty indictment.

CHAPTER FOUR

Rebellion

In its rebellion against God, the secular world has chosen to bring forth a faith masquerading in the name of ‘*science*’ known worldwide as the ‘big bang theory’ which is partnered with ‘evolutionary theory’ in which we are led to believe that over billions of years everything was created out of nothing, and it evolved into the intelligence, design, order, and variety we see in existence today. This premise gets rid of the idea we have a God to Whom we are accountable. These theories are inherently foolish considering nothingness, randomness, and chaos do not breed life, order, beauty, design, information, and intelligence, no matter how many zillions of years are added to the equation. The odds of blowing up a printing press and creating a set of World Book Encyclopedias from the destruction are far higher than the odds that the design, order, and supreme levels of intelligence and information lying within every cell, atom, or quark in this universe came from a random ‘big bang’ in which a tiny pinpoint of nonliving ‘nothingness’ exploded and mystically evolved into everything we see today.

We have incredible amounts of scientific evidence testifying to the validity of biblical creation and a great flood. We have zero evidence of the ‘big bang theory’ or ‘evolutionary theory’. Yet these facts are willfully and purposefully ignored by the secular scientific community. Consider the following Bible passage: *For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse, because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Professing to be wise, they*

became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man--and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things. (Romans 1:18-23)

As the passage above proclaims, we have no excuse for not knowing God, not glorifying Him, and not living in an attitude of submission and thankfulness before His eternal throne. We are literally surrounded by His amazingly complex, orderly, and beautifully created masterpieces – all life, all matter, all facets of our universe by their very existence loudly declare only God could possibly have created them. It is utter folly for us to challenge this fact with our inadequate human speculation and rationalization. When we do so, God declares us to be fools who are spending our time suppressing the truth in unrighteousness. God is not merely saying we are naïve or ignorant on this matter. In the passage above He is declaring we *willfully suppress the truth* in order to live in our self-ruled unrighteousness. On some level, every person knows God exists and created this world. But many do not like this knowledge because of its far-reaching implications, and therefore, it is willfully suppressed in favor of popular notions posing as science and founded upon Darwinism-leaning thinking. We may think we are highly educated, wise, enlightened, and knowledgeable, yet God tells us our thoughts are futile and our hearts are darkened when we deny Him as the Creator of all.

Secular scientists and philosophers have been pounding the drum of evolutionary theory and proclaiming it as ‘science’ and ‘factual’ for decades. We are spoon-fed this godless worldview from the moment our parents read to us children’s books about dinosaurs living billions of years ago, all the way through high school and college textbooks. We grow up believing the big bang theory and Darwin’s theory of evolution are true and tested science because both are purported as factual in our classrooms, and we have been given no reason to think critically about the viability of such theories. Let us think critically now. First, in order to qualify as science, a proposed theory must become a demonstrated fact. In order to do this, a study must be conducted and contain that which is observable, testable, and provable;

having an inarguable accumulation of factual data which is consistent and repeatable every time it is tried. Anything less than this is not science but can only be classified as an unproven theory or hypothesis. Obviously, there is no way to test, observe, demonstrate, or prove how the universe came into existence, so the ‘big bang’ concept logically and scientifically must remain a theory.

Additionally, the only factual, observable, testable, and provable evidence we are given for evolution is the proven ability for a species to adapt to its environment over time if such an adaptation becomes necessary for survival. However, please understand, this process is not true evidence of Darwinian evolution. It is simply an *adaptation within the species*; a wonderful but very minor progression which does not *ever* change the DNA of said species into the DNA of another species. A moth species which adjusts its predominant wing color over time to adapt to its environment is not accomplishing an evolutionary feat. It is still a moth. It still carries the DNA of a full-fledged moth – DNA which has simply lost information, not accumulated or changed information. This is not evolution. Evolution theory purports life developed from nonlife and then a single celled creature developed into every form of life in the world today, be it a fish, dinosaur, bird, ape, or human being. We have no evidence of this ever happening and logic tells us it is impossible – the bodies of every life form have interrelated and interdependent systems which cannot develop apart from one another and if anything were to mutate on a serious level in any given creature, the animal would merely die. If one were to believe human beings evolved from apes, why are there still apes today? Wouldn’t they all have become human by now? Why are there no species found in mid-transition? Why are there no fossils found in mid-transition? Why is nothing evolving now? Why does everything in our world deteriorate and degenerate *instead of improving*, as evolutionary thought would suggest? The second law of thermodynamics directly contradicts evolution – all things naturally age and fall to disorder or entropy. Living things die, rot, and turn back into the earth they came from. *All go to one place: all are from the dust, and all*

return to dust. (Ecclesiastes 3:20) Metal oxidizes, rusts, and crumbles away. Rocks and earth erode. Nothing improves or magically reinvents itself upon being left to the devices of chance and time.

The information we now have on DNA utterly destroys the argument that any random, accidental, or evolutionary development could have happened over ‘billions of years’, or that intelligent, organic life could have become self-created out of nonliving matter. There is indisputable, infinite design, supreme intelligence and messages of information programmed into DNA which cannot be explained other than to admit God created this universe and everything in it. Yet society still flocks to these humanistic, secular theories of the big bang and evolution because it frees us from accountability to any ‘Higher Being’ while dispelling the need for adherence to even the most basic moral laws God instituted within Scripture. If there is no God, then we do not have to obey Him or be judged by Him. Indeed, if we can say we simply evolved from animals, we then give ourselves permission to act like animals. Surely if the human race randomly evolved from animals, we do not have any reason to follow a moral code – we are animals! In this, as a society we have recently begun to effectively erase all lines for defining good and evil.

We are being told there are no longer any absolutes, i.e., moral right and moral wrong are now relative to the individual or the situation. One person is allowed his or her “truth” and another has their own completely differing “truth” and yet somehow it is all truth. This is an illogical and dumbed down way of viewing life which results in words having no meaning while one’s reality becomes a mixture of dysfunctional philosophy and blinded, subjective perception. This has happened before in other eras and in other societies, and sadly, it leads to destruction. Our moral structure steadily rots from within, which eventually causes lawlessness and chaos to abound.

I grew up in a simpler time. Most people still held to a general belief in God even if they did not read Scripture or understand

Christianity fully. We were not yet living lifestyles inundated with brazen and biased media, ever-pervasive platforms of social internet outlets, and a constant stream of information at our fingertips 24 hours a day. Both my childhood farmhouses had one mustard colored phone attached to the wall near the kitchen, and the receiver was attached by a 6-foot curly cord. For most of my young life we owned a black and white screen television which beamed a pixelated, grainy reception dependent upon a wire antenna. There was one button to turn the power on, another button to adjust the volume, and a knob which twisted to primarily four working channels: NBC, CBS, ABC, and PBS. We did eventually obtain a colored television as I grew older, and another channel or two, but being country dwellers, we did not watch anywhere near the amount of television people watch today. There was far too much to do outside and around the house in those days to have such a constant fixation.

In the 1970's and early 1980's there was no such thing for our family as 'cable tv' - not beyond the above mainstream stations. News anchors simply spoke the news and did not display rampant political bias or push personal agendas the way they do today. The broadcast day ended at 10:00 or 12:00 at night, depending on the station, and did not begin again until 5:00 or 6:00 in the morning. The content of television programming was more innocent then – there was no foul language spoken, families were depicted as wholesome and God-fearing, dramas did not show graphic violence or sexual acts. I have memories of daily news programs, cartoons on Saturday mornings, religious shows on Sundays, weekly nature shows, and variety shows or corny-humored sitcoms on weeknights. As children, we only watched the television on certain evenings while the rest of our time was devoted to drawing and coloring, or playing with blocks, Legos, dolls, and Tinker Toys when confined inside. Otherwise, my siblings and I could usually be found outside running around and playing in the yard. We did a lot of digging in the sandpile, climbing trees, playing on a swing or swing set, and riding bicycles. When we were not playing, we helped with chores around the house or farm, depending on which home we were living in at the time. We seemed to have a vast amount of

time for creativity, and I am certain we perfected the art of ‘make believe’. We did more reading and deep thinking in those days. We had a lot of quiet time. Our minds were not cluttered with ceaseless input from computers or smartphones because neither one had been invented yet. We did not talk back to our elders. There were rules to be obeyed and we tried awfully hard to obey them. We had a correct fear and respect for the authority of our parents, our teachers, and adults in general. Church was a normal activity for many people, whether they truly knew who God was or not. Divorce was rare and suicide was virtually nonexistent compared to today’s numbers. There was no such thing as ‘gender confusion’ or ‘alternative lifestyles’. The very idea of anyone being involved with sex outside of marriage was appropriately deemed wrong and harmful by the general masses.

It was a simpler, kinder, and more wholesome existence to say the least. It was easier for people to hear God’s voice and heed His continual tug on their conscience. The gospel was more acceptable. Decency and morality were more commonly practiced. Right and wrong meant something to most folks. Freedom of speech and the right to protest did not equate to professionally instigated, violent riots where people mindlessly screeched hatred and spit their opinions at the world while destroying property, hurting others, and defying authority. The quality of life as I grew up was healthier, more hands-on, and more even paced. We did not live our lives on the internet or tv, we lived life interacting with each other in our homes, in our backyards, and in our neighborhoods. We carried on regular face to face conversations and had real physical interaction, socializing with one another in person instead of on screens. We ate home cooked family meals together at the same times every day and we spent our days actively doing life together. It saddens me to consider how far we have fallen from those times. Our culture is so much further from God than it used to be, and we have lost our way, as a nation. We have utterly forgotten our true resting place is with God. *My people have been lost sheep. Their shepherds have led them astray; They have turned them away on the mountains. They have gone from mountain to hill; They have forgotten their resting place. (Jeremiah 50:6)*

We are now a people ceaselessly stressed, muddled, and overloaded with a constant flow of information and stimulation. Our minds and eyes are glued to the screens on our desks, in our hands, and on our living room walls. We are an anxious and driven generation utterly dependent upon instant data and communication. We are unable to sit still or purposefully relax. We are unable to be quiet or sincerely listen to others. We are unable to spend any great length of time simply ‘being’ or doing any type of deep or critical thinking. Many people are unable to focus on any one thing for any reasonable amount of time – exhibiting newly created diagnoses called “Attention Deficit Disorder” or “Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder”. A significant portion of our population consumes a variety of prescription anti-anxiety, anti-depressive, and mood altering or calming drugs because of these conditions.

We waste thousands of precious, God-given hours watching mindless, sexually immoral, and violent programs on our televisions, phones, computers, or at the theater. We listen to music and play video games of the same caliber on our electronic entertainment devices. Television programs like ‘Fear Factor’ and ‘Survivor’ are popular. No one seems to understand they are watching modern day take-offs of the ancient Roman Colosseum days where slaves, prisoners, and Christians were pitted against one another or against animals to struggle, suffer, and fight to the grisly end, *all for the enjoyment of spectators*. Such things entertain us when we should instead find them repulsive. Our prime time tv menus appear to be a mixture of soft-core porn, or insipid comedies and sitcoms which mock morality, elevate indecency, promote disrespect, and reverse the biblically correct roles of men and women in marriage; fundamentally destroying God-given family values and moral structure. We no longer have the biblical wisdom and spiritual discernment to understand this type of media ceaselessly bombards our senses and works to desensitize us to the shocking or immoral experiences being portrayed on the screen. We embrace violent, criminal, or sexually immoral programs as exciting, viewable entertainment and a normal part of life.

At the end of the Bible passage written below there is a statement which declares people who approve of others doing wrong things are just as guilty as the ones who do them. Essentially, I believe God is saying when we entertain our senses with television shows, movies, games, and music depicting sin in action we are just as guilty as if we were involved in doing such things ourselves: *And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a debased mind, to do those things which are not fitting; being filled with all unrighteousness, sexual immorality, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, evil-mindedness; they are whisperers, backbiters, haters of God, violent, proud, boasters, inventors of evil things, disobedient to parents, undiscerning, untrustworthy, unloving, unforgiving, unmerciful; who, knowing the righteous judgment of God, that those who practice such things are deserving of death, not only do the same but also approve of those who practice them. (Romans 1:28-32)*

Another facet of our modern-day rebellion problem lies within the subject of abortion. The Bible tells us God knew us (conceived of us, created us) before we even entered the womb: *Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you; before you were born I sanctified you. (Jeremiah 1:5)* God also commands we are not to commit murder. There is a difference between killing and murdering. Biblically speaking, killing is justifiable under certain circumstances such as during a war, serving a death sentence upon a deserving criminal, or simply when defending oneself if attacked. But murder [the malicious and unjustified taking of innocent life] is evil. In today's world we murder millions of unborn babies without blinking an eye. We can grimace in self-righteous horror at the idea of ancient or uncivilized cultures sacrificing their infants on the burning altars of pagan gods – yet we are no different today. In fact, we are worse because we are such hypocrites about it. We are merely sacrificing our infants to gods with other names. They had gods with names like Molech, Baal, Ashtoreth, and Rah. We have the gods of Self and Convenience to which our unborn children are sacrificed. Older pagan societies burned their screaming babies

alive on the heated, graven arms of their carved stone deities. Today we stab, chop, vacuum, and scrape our helpless babies straight out of the womb. I cannot say which method sounds more horrific, yet today's young women are having the latter one done to their babies by the thousands every single day and being counseled it is the right thing to do.

It is so important for us to reach a biblical understanding of human rebellion, i.e., 'sin'. Sin is not merely an outwardly describable *act* which we might perform, but rather, it is the inherent *nature* of humanity. We are all born with the condition. Sin, at its basest, is about godlessness. It is living without God in our lives. It is our daily refusal to believe in Him, depend on Him, and abide by His commands and guidance. The Bible teaches us sin is found in the natural condition of our hearts. It consists of any thought or action which goes against the plans and purposes of God and separates us from Him and His love and guidance. It is the elevation of self-will above God's will, and since the will of God is for us to love Him first and then love others more than we love ourselves, we are all obviously guilty. It is the acceptance of this knowledge which leads to an understanding of our desperate need for a divine intervention; a Savior sent from God to reconcile us to our original purpose.

CHAPTER FIVE

Morø Rebellion

God’s heart does break. He grieves when His imagers, His created beings, live life without any heed to His guidance – guidance He intended for our benefit, not for our dismay or suffering. *For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the LORD, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope. (Jeremiah 29:11)* When we ponder the idea that the knowledge of God, the fear of God, and our obedience to His precepts and purposes are all meant to prosper us, bring us joy, give us peace, and keep us from evil, we must ask the question, “Why do we rebel against God and His commands?”

Truly, if we know He is omniscient, omnipresent, and omnipotent, whereas we are not; why do we insist on our own way? Scripture shows us this all-too-common pattern of behavior is the same from era to era and generation to generation. People love to do what is right in their own eyes, instead of what is right according to their Creator. *In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes. (Judges 17:6)* We are incredibly adept at rationalizing as we make our choices in life and seek to justify them both outwardly and within our hearts. Our minds and flesh know how to construct the right reasoning for anything we choose to do and say, making our behavior seem logical, reasonable, and even righteous to our own understanding.

Our culture has successfully phased out any former ways of thinking which would involve pausing to consider what God may think of our actions, thoughts, or words – something we can easily determine by simply reading His Word. Instead, we choose to believe we know best, justifying our decisions and intentions as being good or right without knowing anything about how God would judge them. The Bible tells us: *Every man’s way is right in his own eyes, but the LORD weighs the hearts. (Proverbs 21:2)* The prophet Isaiah gives us the

following lamentation of God: *I have stretched out My hands all day long to a rebellious people, who walk in a way that is not good, according to their own thoughts. (Isaiah 65:2)* The tendency of human nature is to walk according to our own thoughts – and according to God this is not a good way to walk through life. And yet, how patient God is! He continually stretches out His hands to us, as a loving parent stretches their hands toward their beloved child. Tragically, the world ignores His presence and goes their own way, unwittingly lost, and misguided by their own perceptions, treading on crooked paths, and stumbling in the dark. Scripture tells us: *The way of peace they have not known, and there is no justice in their ways; They have made themselves crooked paths; Whoever takes that way shall not know peace. (Isaiah 59:8)* Without God, we have no peace.

There is not a soul on this earth who is truly at peace without God. A godless society will always be blinded to the ways of God and as a result, cannot see its own sin. I would assert this is the current state of all secular society today throughout the world. The lifestyles many people live are unknowingly self-destructive. They walk crooked paths which are treacherously darkened by a lack of knowledge of God. Paths lacking proper fear and knowledge of the Lord are paths lacking wisdom. Those who tread life in such a manner cause themselves a lifetime of spiritual damage and pain more often than naught. It greatly grieves God Himself. Prior to His decision to catastrophically flood the earth and begin anew with only one man and his family, we are told God grieved over the desperate state which mankind had reached. *Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the LORD was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart. (Genesis 6:5,6)* Sadly, the secular world today now lives so far beyond how God created us to live, I imagine we deeply grieve God as well. The vast majority of people no longer feel shocked or shamed about the wickedness in our society which is continually practiced as ‘normal and right’. It is profoundly troubling when even professing Christians do not recognize what

sin is anymore. The ways of our culture cause us all to become desensitized and oblivious to our condition as seen through the eyes of God. As a result, our nations have become modern day epitomes of biblical Sodom and Gomorrah. Sodom and Gomorrah were two Old Testament era cities operating so far away from God's commands there was an actual spiritual outcry against them reaching up to God. Whether the outcry was from the lamentations of the abused, the prayers of the righteous, or the shocked reports from God's own angels and divine counsel, we do not know. We are simply told the outcry had reached God, and their sin was so grave, He was driven to destroy them.

But the men of Sodom were exceedingly wicked and sinful against the LORD. (Genesis 13:8-13)

And the LORD said, "Because the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great, and because their sin is very grave, I will go down now and see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry against it that has come to Me; and if not, I will know." (Genesis 18:20,21)

What in the world was going on in those cities? Why did God see them as so wicked and sinful they were worthy of grave judgment? Let us continue reading. *Now the two angels came to Sodom in the evening, and Lot was sitting in the gate of Sodom. When Lot saw them, he rose to meet them, and he bowed himself with his face toward the ground. And he said, "Here now, my lords, please turn in to your servant's house and spend the night and wash your feet; then you may rise early and go on your way." And they said, "No, but we will spend the night in the open square." But he insisted strongly; so they turned in to him and entered his house. Then he made them a feast, and baked unleavened bread, and they ate. Now before they lay down, the men of the city, the men of Sodom, both old and young, all the people from every quarter, surrounded the house. And they called to Lot and said to him, "Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us that we may know them carnally." So Lot went out to them through the doorway, shut*

the door behind him, and said, "Please, my brethren, do not do so wickedly!" (Genesis 19:1-7)

We can see from this account, the culture of Sodom had reached a point where it was normal for all men in the city to not only pursue sexual intercourse with other men, but to rape whomsoever they chose. The city was destined for destruction: *But the [angels]men reached out their hands and pulled Lot into the house with them and shut the door. And they struck the men [of the city] who were at the doorway of the house with blindness, both small and great, so that they became weary trying to find the door. Then the [angels] men said to Lot, "Have you anyone else here? Son-in-law, your sons, your daughters, and whomever you have in the city—take them out of this place! For we will destroy this place, because the outcry against them has grown great before the face of the LORD, and the LORD has sent us to destroy it." (Genesis 19:11-13) "Then the LORD rained brimstone and fire on Sodom and Gomorrah, from the LORD out of the heavens. So, He overthrew those cities, all the plain, all the inhabitants of the cities, and what grew on the ground. (Genesis 19:24,25)*

The sin and resulting judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah is fully encompassed in the following passage: *Look, this was the iniquity of your sister Sodom: She and her daughter had pride, fullness of food, and abundance of idleness; neither did she strengthen the hand of the poor and needy. And they were haughty and committed abomination before Me; therefore, I took them away as I saw fit. (Ezekiel 16:49,50)* Sodom had become a place of wealth – as detailed by the description of much food and abundant idleness. Wealth is not a sin, in and of itself. However, if wealth leads to idleness, and the idleness then breeds an arrogance toward God which results in wickedness – that is indeed a problem. Wealth in Sodom had apparently led to fostering a community of people consumed by pride – they had become self-focused, self-oriented, self-promoting, self-ruled, and self-indulgent. When we walk in pride, there is no room for God in our thoughts, for we are consumed with self. *The wicked in his proud countenance does not seek God; God is in none of*

his thoughts. (Psalm 10:4) Everyone proud in heart is an abomination to the LORD; though they join forces, none will go unpunished. In mercy and truth atonement is provided for iniquity; And by the fear of the LORD one departs from evil. When a man's ways please the LORD, He makes even his enemies to be at peace with him. (Proverbs 16:5-7)

When we are self-focused, we lose the ability to care about others. The Ezekiel passage indicates the people of Sodom and Gomorrah did not take care of the unfortunate and the downtrodden in their midst. God informs us that in their arrogance and idleness, they were led to commit 'abomination'. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines the word 'abomination' as something which causes extreme disgust, loathing, hatred, abhorrence, or detestation. The word used in the Bible in its original language additionally means 'exceptionally loathsome, wicked, sinful, or vile'. Clearly it is not a good thing to be doing something which God calls an abomination. There are several actions which God calls an abomination throughout Scripture. The following passage shows us 7 of them: *These six things the LORD hates, Yes, seven are an abomination to Him: A proud look, A lying tongue, Hands that shed innocent blood, A heart that devises wicked plans, Feet that are swift in running to evil, A false witness who speaks lies, And one who sows discord among brethren. (Proverbs 6:16-19)* Additionally, for the Israelites in the Old Testament period, incorrect performance of or disobedience in the practice of various temple ritual laws was an abomination to God, as was the worship of idols, and the eating of certain unclean foods. Further items on the list of abominations according to Scripture include dishonest scales, all sex outside of marriage – be it incest, adultery, homosexuality, bestiality, or simple promiscuity, and interestingly, the wearing of clothing meant for the opposite gender. Refer to the following passages as examples:

*Dishonest scales are an abomination to the LORD,
But a just weight is His delight. (Proverbs 11:1)*

One commits abomination with his neighbor's wife; another lewdly defiles his daughter-in-law; and another in you violates his sister, his father's daughter. (Ezekiel 22:11)

A woman shall not wear anything that pertains to a man, nor shall a man put on a woman's garment, for all who do so are an abomination to the LORD your God. (Deuteronomy 22:5)

You shall not lie with a male as with a woman. It is an abomination. Nor shall you mate with any animal, to defile yourself with it. Nor shall any woman stand before an animal to mate with it. It is perversion. Do not defile yourselves with any of these things; for by all these the nations are defiled, which I am casting out before you. (Leviticus 18:22-24)

The word used in the original language for 'perversion' spoken in the above Leviticus passage is also translated as 'confusion', which seems to be a more accurate definition. People who are caught up in such desires and lifestyles are living in bondage to a form of confusion. They have confused what is natural and good with something unnatural and harmful. This happens because those who reject God and His precepts become so desensitized to sin over time, they begin believing wrong is right and right is wrong. The Bible warns us of this condition. *Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil; Who put darkness for light, and light for darkness; Who put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter! (Isaiah 5:20)*

God does not change – He is eternal. His nature is eternal as are His commands and precepts. God's Word will often show us fulfillments or increasing revelation regarding His prophecies and purposes throughout the passage of time, but God Himself does not change and He will not ever proclaim 'good' what was originally deemed 'evil', or vice versa. For example, God denounces all sex outside of biblical marriage several times in the Old Testament and at least four times in the New Testament. Therefore, we can know it is still wrong today. *For I am the LORD, I do not change. (Malachi 3:6)*

God stretches out His loving arms toward us all day long, and He will meet us where we are at. His is a “Come as you are” calling. But God also tells us, when we become born again, we will not only be washed of our sin by the blood of His Son, but we will no longer be driven to practice sin in our lives on a regular basis. We will be divinely given the power, the desire, and the spiritual conscience to turn away from such things in order to walk in the power and light of His glory. We are reminded in the New Testament those who continually practice any sin as a lifestyle must repent and turn away from it in faith and belief in Jesus Christ. *Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God. (1 Corinthians 6:9-11)*

In dealing with the difficult and touchy subject of sexual immorality, we would do well to refer to the first chapter in the Book of Romans. Adultery, promiscuity, homosexuality, bisexuality, transgender and gender confusion, even bestiality; these are not natural or healthy alternative lifestyles but rather God-given consequences indicative of how far away from God society has become. *Professing to be wise, they became fools...Therefore God also gave them up to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts, to dishonor their bodies among themselves, who exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen. For this reason, God gave them up to vile passions. For even their women exchanged the natural use for what is against nature; Likewise, also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust for one another, men with men committing what is shameful, and receiving in themselves the penalty of their error which was due. (Romans 1:22-27)*

When people ceaselessly rebel against God's commands and guidelines He will eventually 'give us over' to our sin. He gives us exactly what we demand. He respects the free will He blessed us with and has declared He will not struggle with man forever. *And the LORD said, "My Spirit shall not strive with man forever. (Genesis 6:3)* When challenged long enough, God removes His corrections and His hedges of protection. He allows the sin and its consequences to penetrate, permeate, and fully take over a society as peoples' hearts increasingly become hardened against Him and His commands. He does this as a judgment but also in an effort to turn hearts back toward Him in humble repentance when the fallout and suffering resulting from living in chosen sinful manners can be endured no longer.

When God says, 'Don't...' He is really saying, '*Don't hurt yourself*'. His commands are for our protection and for our wellbeing. The Lord knows what will hurt us, mislead us, and destroy us. He has a bird's eye view of humanity, and He is equipped to make judgment calls which we cannot even begin to foresee or fully understand. His intentions are always to bring us into a right relationship with Him, which will then open the way for Him to protect us, bless us, strengthen us, and guide us into a peaceful and fruitful existence on earth, culminating in the blessing of eternal life in His presence.

CHAPTER SIX

How Can a Loving God Send People to Hell?

Even with a biblical understanding of sin, many of us still think the average person does not deserve an eternity in hell. A large portion of the population continues to pursue the comforting thought we must all end up in heaven eventually, regardless of whether we are following Jesus Christ in a life of faith or not. Truly, what sin is so great we should be made to suffer everlasting fires of damnation? If anything, shouldn't we just experience a 'temporary' hell, in accordance with the level of godlessness or rebellious behavior we may have exhibited during our incredibly short lifetime? People often decide the biblical descriptions of hell sound so terrible it just cannot possibly exist. But if we say we are Christians, we must believe the Bible is the infallible Word of God, or else our faith is disqualified and not viable. If we believe the Bible is the infallible Word of God, then we must believe in hell. God describes this place of eternal judgment and condemnation called 'hell' numerous times and in detail. We are told an eternity away from God's presence will be a dark, empty, painful, and burning experience; a place of unending torment where people gnash teeth in despair:

The Son of Man will send out His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all things that offend, and those who practice lawlessness and will cast them into the furnace of fire. There will be wailing and gnashing of teeth. (Matthew 13:41, 42)

He will say, 'I tell you I do not know you, where you are from. Depart from Me, all you workers of iniquity.' There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, and yourselves thrust out. (Luke 13:27,28)

And cast the unprofitable servant into the outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (Matthew 25:30)

God is the source of all goodness, love, and light. Any place where He chooses not to shine His presence or loving countenance is in effect a place of darkness, loneliness, torment, and evil. Jesus Christ spoke of hell and the coming final judgment more than any other person in the Bible. Hell is described as the eternal location for the condemned, and it contains a lake of fire into which the devil, his fallen angels, and all who are against God will be cast on Judgment Day. The Bible further explains hell was created specifically for the purpose of punishing the devil and his rebellious host of demons. So, the question is, “Why do any human beings have to end up there?”

Human beings end up there for two reasons. First, through sheer, personal choice. We choose hell for ourselves when we reject God and His ‘Only Way’. *Jesus said to him, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me". (John 14:6)* Who comes to the Father without submitting to Jesus Christ? No one. Secondly, our souls are eternal, and Scripture mentions only two locations in the eternal realm; heaven, where God dwells; or away from God, in a place called hell. Therefore, hell must be the only other *eternal, spiritual dimension* in existence besides heaven. For those who want to believe the suffering in hell is not eternal, I can only share a basic, logical presumption which the Scriptures steadfastly support; if *heaven* is eternal, then hell must also be eternal, i.e., “forever” or “everlasting”:

*The sinners in Zion are afraid; Fearfulness has seized the hypocrites: "Who among us shall dwell with the devouring fire? Who among us shall dwell with **everlasting** burnings? (Isaiah 33:14, emphasis added)*

*Then He will also say to those on the left hand, 'Depart from Me, you cursed, into the **everlasting** fire prepared for the devil and his angels. (Matthew 25:41, emphasis added)*

*These shall be punished with **everlasting** destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power."*
(2 Thessalonians 1:9, emphasis added)

*These are wells without water, clouds carried by a tempest, for whom is reserved the blackness of darkness **forever**.
(2 Peter 2:17, emphasis added)*

*And the smoke of their torment ascends **forever and ever**; and they have no rest day or night, who worship the beast and his image, and whoever receives the mark of his name. (Revelation 14:11, emphasis added)*

If we accept the validity of an eternal heaven, but deny an eternal hell, we again have an ‘a la carte’ belief system – picking and choosing to believe those parts of the Bible which make us comfortable while discarding the rest. Reason tells us (as does the Bible) if we are given the gift of an *eternity* in heaven with God by faith in the atoning work of His Son, Jesus Christ, then the condemnation for *not* believing in Jesus Christ can only be an *eternity* spent in the one place from which God withholds Himself. Essentially, if we reject Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior during our life on earth, then upon our physical death we will not be spiritually born again, and therefore sinfulness will still be a part of us. We will remain spiritually dead to a relationship with God for all of eternity, unable to approach Him or fellowship with Him; destined to be marred by our sin nature forever. It is impossible to exist in heaven with a sinful nature because God is holy, and His glory is a purifying fire which consumes all sin. Therefore, if a person dies as an unbeliever, they will by default be denied a place in God’s presence and descend into the only other eternal place of existence which the Bible describes; hell. God does not want us there at all.

The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance. (2 Peter 3:9)

For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. (John 3:16)

Hell is an eternal place necessarily created for all who reject God because His Holy Presence will not tolerate sin or evil. Sadly, due to human sin and the influence of Satan in this world, much of mankind recklessly rebels against God and rejects the authority of Jesus Christ and His one plan of salvation. We are free to choose hell as our eternal destination during the earthly life God gives us to make such a decision, and the fact is, many of us willfully do so. Our Creator as described in the Scriptures is good, loving, and merciful beyond anything we could ever imagine. But He is also righteous, holy, perfect, and just. A righteous God must judge sin and evil. A holy God cannot abide with sin. All sin and rebellion practiced on earth must be avenged, if not now, then in eternity; otherwise, God is not a Just and Fair Judge. We cannot embrace those attributes of God which seem the most agreeable to us and then completely disregard the rest of His nature. Our faith must be founded upon belief in the God of the Bible as He has chosen to make Himself known.

Ultimately, the direct consequence of choosing a self-designed, self-focused life away from the will and purposes of the One who created us, is going to be an eternal life spent away from Him as well. God would not force Himself or heaven upon anyone. If we want no part of Him in this life, He will be sure to respect our choices and give us no part of Him in the next.

CHAPTER SEVEN

God's Sacrifice

Why would God put into place such a bizarre arrangement as a 'sinless death atonement' for our redemption? Many people do not understand the reasoning behind God's plan of salvation through the death of His only Son, Jesus Christ. It seems illogical and silly to the unbelieving world. *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. (1 Corinthians 1:18)* God's plan of salvation is so unlike any manmade religion it essentially becomes another proof the foundations of Christian faith must have come from our Creator and not from men. Remember, God gave us the freedom to *choose* to love Him and follow His ways, or to turn away from Him and follow other things. The fact that there is a choice causes our love and worship to be authentic and of great value to God. But as previously stated, when the first humans became tempted by the novel idea of becoming self-directed instead of God-directed and then acted upon that temptation, they brought forth a judgment of death and sin into existence for all of mankind.

The Bible explains this act of rebellion caused the fall not only of humanity but of all God's creation. Our physical world became tainted and accursed; prone to natural disasters, aging, disease, pain, pestilence, suffering, and death, just as imperfect and broken as mankind. *For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it in hope, because the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now. (Romans 8:20-22)*

So, we understand every member of the human race is born condemned already; we enter this world spiritually dead and therefore we must be spiritually born again through belief and faith, by the power of God and His Word.

He [Jesus] was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him. But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name: who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God. (John 1:10-13)

Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. (John 3:3)

Since you have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit in sincere love of the brethren, love one another fervently with a pure heart, having been born again, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, through the word of God which lives and abides forever. (1st Peter 1:22,23)

Being born again is the process of our spirits coming to life through hearing the gospel of Jesus Christ preached and personally reaching the belief that it is true. Such a faith happens when, through the power of God's Word and His Spirit, we reach a right understanding of our fallen state and feel wholly moved to repent of our current way of life, believing the Son of God came into our physical world to give us reconciliation with our Creator through His perfect life and sacrificial death. Being born again is dying to our old, self-focused nature and way of living in order to be miraculously born anew by the Holy Spirit, Who, upon our initial belief and submission to the lordship of Jesus Christ, begins residing within us.

And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you 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. (Ephesians 1:13,14)

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, guaranteeing what is to come. (2 Corinthians 1:21,22)

As the above passages assert, when the Holy Spirit begins to dwell in our hearts, we are literally sealed by God. Our spiritual relationship with Him is fully reconciled and the presence of His Spirit in us causes God to see us as His own. That inner dwelling place of God which we were all initially given when conceived is finally filled with His Spirit as God originally intended. When we become born again God immediately sees us as purified and holy, because Jesus Christ's righteousness is 'credited' to our 'account'. The resulting changed life will display evidences of our new spiritual condition, such as a new heightened level of love and concern for others, just as this passage so succinctly encourages us. *Since you have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit in sincere love of the brethren, love one another fervently with a pure heart, having been born again, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, through the word of God which lives and abides forever. (1 Peter 2:2-3)*

Let us summarize: God sent a part of Himself (the Second Person of the Trinity; His only Son, Jesus Christ) to enter our humbled and broken earthly reality in order to become a true physical human being with flesh, blood, hunger and thirst; so He could live a sinless life in our place, in complete and perfect spiritual fellowship with the Father. When an entirely innocent and sinless Jesus Christ was unjustly sacrificed to atone for the sin and rebellion of humanity, all human sin was placed upon Him and He willingly bore His Father's wrath and judgment for the whole world – past, present, and future. The life, death, and condemnation of a perfectly innocent Man was substituted for every naturally guilty man, woman and child God has created. God did this so each of us could have the opportunity to become saved from the eternal judgment and self-oriented life of godlessness we are born into. We can then become spiritually reborn by faith, into an abiding, loving, spiritual fellowship with Him the way He originally intended. This is the Gospel ("good news") of Jesus Christ. All that is needed from us is our belief in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, which results in our faithful

submission to Him the rest of our lives. Why is this the only way? Why did the Son of God have to die in order to achieve salvation for humanity? Why did the Second Person of the Trinity have to enter earthly time and space, take on the form of human flesh and live a spiritually uncorrupted life, only to be unjustly tormented and sacrificed? Why was He resurrected? How was He resurrected?

God's creation is one of order. Science shows us this and so does Scripture. Just as God established laws concerning things like mathematics, gravity, or thermodynamics, so also there is a law which pertains to original sin, death, and blood atonement. God's Word explains since man's sin caused death, the atonement for sin is man's death.

Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned. (Romans 5:12)

Therefore, as through one man's offense judgment came to all men, resulting in condemnation, even so through one Man's righteous act the free gift came to all men, resulting in justification of life. (Romans 5:18)

And according to the law almost all things are purified with blood, and without shedding of blood there is no remission [of sin]. (Hebrews 9:22)

Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many. To those who eagerly wait for Him He will appear a second time, apart from sin, for salvation. (Hebrews 9:28)

Jesus Christ could accomplish complete atonement for mankind because He was both God and man at the same time – our perfect substitute – flesh and blood, yet divine and eternal. Had He been a mere human He could not have lived a perfect life and His death would have been an ordinary death – one of the thousands of Roman crucifixions which were performed on a regular basis in that era. Had He been solely God, He wouldn't have been

able to be a true, substitutionary flesh and blood sacrifice. Being both fully human and fully God He was therefore capable of living a sinless yet human life by the power of the Holy Spirit and His eternal nature enabled Him to be the one flesh and blood sacrifice which was needed to atone for *all* sin, for *all* people, from the beginning of time to the end of time.

The miracle of His resurrection from death is not only a function of His deity and indicative of the Father's acceptance of His atoning sacrifice, but it is also a clear picture of our own promised resurrection into eternal life when we die. It is well documented Jesus Christ was seen alive by more than 500 people after His burial. Who knows how many others had sightings of Him which were not documented? The fulfilled prophecy of the Son of God's death and resurrection is our ultimate proof God has recognized Jesus Christ's sacrifice on the cross as the complete atonement for all mankind's sin. Christ's resurrection is also the evidence which declares both death and the devil were defeated at the cross. The empty tomb of Jesus Christ is the tangible assurance and prophesized picture of our own promised resurrection from death if we die as believers.

These are all reasons why it is so crucial to understand Jesus Christ was indeed fully God and fully human at the same time. He is described in the Bible as God 'in the flesh'. Any doctrine which teaches otherwise is false. *Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God. (1 John 4:2, 3)* We must recognize Jesus Christ was somehow 100% God and 100% human, which enabled Him to be a perfect flesh and blood substitute for all men throughout all ages. Additionally, this selfless act of God was planned from before the foundations of the world, and carried forward to fulfillment through His Son, Jesus Christ:

You were not redeemed with corruptible things, like silver or gold, from your aimless conduct received by tradition from your fathers but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot. He indeed was foreordained

before the foundation of the world, but was manifest in these last times for you who through Him believe in God, who raised Him from the dead and gave Him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God. Since you have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit in sincere love of the brethren, love one another fervently with a pure heart, having been born again, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, through the word of God which lives and abides forever because “All flesh is as grass, And all the glory of man as the flower of the grass. The grass withers, and its flower falls away, but the word of the LORD endures forever.” Now this is the word which by the gospel was preached to you. (1 Peter 1:18-25)

God was not surprised or taken off guard by our rebellion. He has foreknowledge of all things. He knew it would be only a matter of time before Adam and Eve would make a wrong choice and become accursed. Free will and the challenge of evil through the presence of Satan dictated this would be the path men would have to take and therefore, our Creator had already devised a beautiful way in which He would redeem us to Himself; healing the broken spiritual relationship between men and God while still giving us the freedom and the opportunity to choose to become His. This is something we may never truly comprehend to its fullest extent – at least not in this lifetime. I can assure you however, it is an act of unconditional love performed by an abundantly merciful God.

The sacrifice of Jesus Christ’s life as complete atonement for the innate rebellion of mankind is God’s gift which He offers to all people. *For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 6:23)* Our belief in and acceptance of such a gift is God’s only solution to reconcile our lifeless spirits back into His glorious and holy Presence. Our Father in heaven did not create several solutions, perhaps based on our personalities or our heritage. There is only one race – the human race – and God devised only one plan of redemption. He calls each and every one of us to personally trust in that plan alone, receiving it as His ultimate gift of grace and mercy.

A gift cannot be earned, or it would be considered a wage or a form of compensation for work performed. The Bible assures us we cannot ever do enough good deeds to earn or deserve the gift God offers. It comes to us only by God's love, mercy and grace. *For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. (Ephesians 2:8-9)* No amount of helping people, giving money, going to church, working hard, or performing any other worthy deeds can earn us a good position in eternity. Righteous acts and good works can be a result or a spiritual fruit of our faith, but these things do not ever achieve our salvation on their own merit. Salvation is a gift from God alone, through Jesus Christ alone.

We are empowered by the Holy Spirit for the rest of our earthly lives to become more and more like Jesus Christ, as we strengthen and deepen our faith through obedience and submission to God's commands and promises. We are given direct access to God in prayer through the mediation of the risen Christ who now sits in glory at the right hand of the Father until His return to judge the earth. As Christians we cease to live for our own purposes and begin submitting to the will of God. This is an extremely freeing thing! When we die, we are assured of our immediate spiritual presence at the Lord's side in heaven. *We are confident, yes, well pleased rather to be absent from the body and to be present with the Lord. (2 Corinthians 5:8)* The entirety of Scripture is intended to teach us this history and show us how to enter a reconciled, spiritual fellowship with God. Yet so many people, including professing Christians really do not know anything about it. They simply refuse to pick up a Bible and read the words God has directed us all to live by. The primary reason Jesus Christ has not yet returned to judge this world and bring it to an end is twofold. First, it is because God has a plan for Israel and the Jews which must be fulfilled per scriptural prophecy [which is an entirely different subject, so I won't go into it here]. Secondly, our Lord is so incredibly patient with the human race, giving us time and numerous opportunities to become aware of our spiritual rebellion toward Him and repent of it. *The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as*

some count slackness, but is longsuffering [patient] toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance. (2 Peter 3:9).

How do we come by such a faith? *Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God. (Romans 10:17) For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. (Hebrews 4:12)* Those who hear or read God's Word with an open and seeking heart will be touched by the Holy Spirit and have their eyes opened to God's truths. Those who positively respond to God's call on their hearts will become convicted in their own consciences by His Spirit, Who then provides the faith for them to believe Jesus Christ is the promised Savior, and to receive for themselves the gift of salvation which He has accomplished for us all. *For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God. (Ephesians 2:8)*

The crux of the matter is whether one chooses to heed the conviction of the Holy Spirit, or, whether one rejects the convictions and denies the headship of Christ in favor of pursuing life at the level with which they are most familiar and comfortable – directed by self.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Biblical Repentance – You Must Be Born Again

What is repentance? As was clearly stated in the last chapter, *Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. (John 3:3)* True believers are those who have repented of the way they were formerly living, and turned to God and His Son for salvation, which results in becoming born again. These people are immediately spiritually reconciled into a living, intimate relationship with God and as such they will find joy, inner peace, and spiritual fulfillment in giving themselves over to God's rule and a life following His purposes. Those who are born again will experience true contentment and a deep trust in God regardless of the trials and troubles they may face in life. They are no longer ill at ease or wondering if they are missing out on something 'bigger' and that is simply because they have found what they were missing!

If a person has never decisively turned their life over to God and His purposes, begun seeking His will instead of their own, and started the process of abiding in Jesus Christ through His Word and prayer, he or she has not experienced repentance. Therefore, he or she is likely not born again. Jesus Christ's words are clear; those who are not born again cannot see heaven. Some of us could have heard the Gospel at various times, maybe even were taught some Bible verses or concepts, and generally agree with what we heard or read, but if we have not been guided with regard to a personal repentance and the heart-changing faith which leads to salvation, we cannot consider ourselves 'saved' or 'born again'. Repentance happens when we are so convicted by the truths of God and the teachings of His Word we feel urged to turn away from secular ways of living and submit to Jesus Christ from that point forward as Lord and Savior. In our newfound faith, we pray and ask Jesus to enter our hearts and our lives, be our God, and save us from eternal condemnation. In doing so, we immediately become a child of God, sealed with His Spirit. But true repentance expresses itself in actual

change...a turning off of one path in life onto another. Biblical repentance is more than merely recognizing one is a 'sinner' in God's eyes. It is also more than being sorry for every time we have sinned. The word 'repent' means "to *make a change* as a result of remorse or contrition." So, repentance is coming to a place where we see our self-directed, spiritually apathetic life the way God sees it: a rebellion against Him. This realization will cause us to no longer want to live in the manner we have been living, causing us to depart from it. *Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom, and to depart from evil is understanding.* (Job 28:28) The action of willfully departing or turning away from a godless, secular lifestyle toward a life spent following Jesus Christ is what biblical repentance is all about. Until this change happens in our own soul and in our own life, the Bible states we are not born again, and remain unsaved in the eyes of God. There is no true spiritual conversion without authentic conviction, and there is no true faith without repentance.

What does this life change look like? How does it play out, practically speaking? The born-again person moves forward seeking to practice God's will in their daily life and begins trusting in the teachings of the Bible with regard to all aspects of living, be it faith, finances, marriage, career, personal time, child-rearing, possessions, the future, attitudes, or relationships. God has the guidance for every facet of life written in His Word for believers to learn and follow. The Bible is also an incredible tool for encouragement and strength. God has provided prayer, worship, and fellowship with other believers as additional instruments for us to know Him and love Him. This new existence is a *result* of salvation. It is not the means *to* our eternal redemption, but rather, an outward evidence *of* it.

If a believer ignores the spiritual prompting to feed their newly born faith with diligent study of God's Word, prayer, fellowship of other believers, and worship; they will have no excitement, no fire, no sanctifying 'Christian walk' and no passionate involvement in the things of God. The initial faith will dwindle and could possibly even die unless it is newly strengthened by an obedient returning of the heart towards God, through prayer,

worship, and Bible study. Jesus said, *"Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned."* (John 15:4-6)

Are you someone who repented and believed in Jesus Christ and His atoning death on the cross once, but now are becoming close to being cast out and burned as the above passage describes? Are you a withering and backslidden believer? Have you ever given the headship of your life to Jesus Christ and become born again? If you were put on trial for being a Christian this very moment, would there be enough evidence to convict you? The more you submit to God, seeking Him and studying His Word, the more He will open your mind to the fruits of His Holy Spirit, changing you and bringing you closer to Him. A comforting and edifying fact about the Bible is this: within its pages is the living power of God because through the Word of God the Holy Spirit accomplishes much work –if we are faithful in regularly studying and learning what it says. *For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.* (Hebrews 4:12)

It is by hearing [or reading] God's Word a person is led to a saving faith in Jesus Christ. God's Word is also the vehicle through which the Holy Spirit can teach and change believers, sanctifying them [the process of spiritually growing and maturing]. Obedience results in blessings and inner peace, while disobedience can lead to a drifting away from God. We are warned of this in the following verses:

Therefore, we must give the more earnest heed to the things we have heard, lest we drift away. (Hebrews 2:1)

Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God. (Hebrews 3:12)

Disobedience to the words and commands in Scripture is ultimately rooted in unbelief and doubt. It can be an evidence we do not believe God means what He says and will carry out His promises, warnings, and prophecies in His due times. Unbelief is rooted in not fully trusting God is real and is sitting on His throne. It is founded upon a lack of true fear of the Lord. Yet Scripture teaches us in multiple places, *The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom. (Psalm 111:10, Proverbs 9:10)*. We all experience various forms of doubt at different points in our walk of faith with Jesus Christ because we must trust in what we cannot see. But listen, that is why it is called faith.

For we walk by faith, not by sight. (2 Corinthians 5:7)

Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. (Hebrews 11:1)

For we were saved in this hope, but hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one still hope for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we eagerly wait for it with perseverance. (Romans 8:24,25)

The more we abide in God's Word and pursue a personal relationship with Him through prayer and quiet times, the stronger our faith can grow as we become better equipped with a deeper knowledge and greater understanding of our Lord and Savior. Bible study is crucial not only to feed our new spirit but also to avoid being lulled into false theologies and philosophies which are only going to become more prominent in these end times. Each false teaching will be more acceptable, more seductive, more tolerant, more widespread, more powerful, and more 'enlightening' than the last. But, as this popular saying among Christians goes, "the Bible is a dry, dull, boring book for those who have no intentions of obeying what they read". Those who approach Scripture with a hardened heart, a closed mind, and a predisposed rejection of God's authority will find the Bible

to be foolish and irrelevant to their lives. *The god of this age [Satan] 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. (2 Corinthians 4:4)* However, a person who is seeking God with true humility will be able to comprehend enough of His Word to be brought to a personal faith and authentic repentance. *And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart. (Jeremiah 29:13)*

When we repent and begin walking a path of faith with Jesus Christ, we will have our hearts and minds continually opened to receive more of God's wisdom, knowledge and understanding. We will be taught by God's Spirit and by God's Word as we continue to mature spiritually the rest of our lives. *For eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man, the things which God has prepared for those who love Him. But God has revealed them to us through His Spirit. For the Spirit searches all things, yes, the deep things of God. Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God. For what man knows the things of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so no one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God. These things we also speak, not in words which man's wisdom teaches but which the Holy Spirit teaches, comparing spiritual things with spiritual. But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned. (1 Corinthians 2: 9-14)* What an exciting journey is promised to those who experience true repentance and become born again!

CHAPTER NINE

Do Not Be Conformed to The World

The Bible urges Christians to regularly examine themselves in order to be certain they remain grounded in correct biblical foundations while standing steadfast and unaffected by current culture and its ever-changing norms, opinions, and philosophies. *Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Do you not know yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you? –unless indeed you are disqualified. (2 Corinthians 13:5)* Jesus Christ proclaims adamantly: *Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it. (Matthew 7:13-14)* The Bible teaches us pursuing the same general life direction and paths of the secular majority in this world does not equate to living the Christian life. The idea consistently portrayed throughout Scripture is true believers will be comparatively few and far between and they will find themselves swimming *against* the tides of current culture and norms of society. They travel a lesser-used path in life; a path which glorifies God instead of self.

This is not to suggest believers must leave all things beloved behind in order to live a secluded, ‘holy’ life in a convent or monastery. On the contrary, the Bible gives a clear description of how one lives a life of authentic submission to Jesus Christ, and we do not find any passage in which God commands Christians to engage in the self-imposed religious isolation and deprivation found in the lives of nuns and monks or any other secluded sect of similar religious ilk. But back to the point; we have countless professing Christians today who pursue lifestyles totally conformed to the worldly philosophies, priorities, and attitudes of the unbelieving, secular society that surrounds them. These Christians act, talk, think, and live in exactly the same

manners as those who do not claim to have Christian beliefs. Yet how does the Bible tell us to live?

And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God. (Romans 12:2)

Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. (James 4:4)

Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—is not of the Father but is of the world. And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever. (1 John 2:15-17)

How do we reconcile the Christian life and mindset taught in the Bible with the many opposing examples of modernized Christian faith we commonly see being lived out in our society today? Well, the honest answer is, we can't. We must realize God's Word shows us a steady, unchanging line of truth regarding a life of faith in Him, and it looks nothing like what many in our world today practice. *Strive to enter through the narrow gate, for many, I say to you, will seek to enter and will not be able. (Luke 13:24)*

As I have stated repeatedly, Christian faith is far more than a mere nod of the head, or a vague, general agreement with standard Judeo-Christian values. Repentance and belief in God's gift of eternal life entails a momentous, personal decision which affects every aspect of our life from that point forward. We will live differently than we used to. We will speak differently, think differently, see differently and act differently. True faith entails a purposeful submission to God and results in a transformed life. It is not something we are born into merely because our parents or grandparents had us baptized and/or raised us in a Christian household. Nor does living under certain religious ideals or high moral standards make one a Christian. Christianity is not an

inherited trait, a cultural standing, or an automatic result of church attendance or church rituals. Additionally, biblical Christian faith does *not* consist of the idea that in professing our faith we will somehow begin to automatically experience the blessings of health, wealth, and happiness in our lives. This particular teaching is a twisted theology rampant in several of today's well-known mega-churches and is also an idea widely proliferated by many television personalities masquerading as Christians but who are in reality well-compensated, money-driven, hyper-charismatic or motivational speakers. These people are disseminating unbiblical, false spirituality and false doctrines; wildly successfully too, I might add, because the things they teach are what the world wants to hear. *For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers and they will turn their ears away from the truth. (2 Timothy 4:3, 4)* Any so-called 'Christian' speaker who focuses their teachings on you, your best life now, or your prosperity while here on this earth...that speaker is biblically heretical. In contemplating such people's teachings, we must ask ourselves, what special knowledge do these gurus supposedly have today that the apostles apparently did not know in their time? Every one of the apostles were regularly beaten, persecuted, and eventually martyred for their faith, with the exclusion of the apostle John, who, after being placed in oil by those who wanted him dead, miraculously did not die and therefore was confined to the island of Patmos the duration of his life.

We must realize biblical Christianity is entirely about a Person, Jesus Christ. It is about His plan for our lives and what He has already accomplished in giving mankind the opportunity to be reconciled with the Creator of this world. Christian faith encompasses our acceptance of God's will for His creation and our part to be played in it. It is about who we were before Jesus Christ was sacrificed, and who we can now be through faith in His atoning blood and the God-given power of His Spirit. It is obeying the conviction of the Holy Spirit by investing in a personal relationship with our Savior and Lord while here on

earth and looking forward to an eternal life spent in His presence – something so wonderful we cannot rightly envision it but we know inherently it will be the best thing to ever happen to us. Despite these truths, American society claims to be primarily a Christian one, yet it is often difficult in our country to tell the Christians apart from the non-Christians. Why are some believers so obviously living out their faith while others seem to blend in far too easily with the rest of secular society? According to the Bible, as Christians we all should be thinking and living the exact same way:

Fulfill my joy by being like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind. (Philippians 2:2)

Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ. (1 Corinthians 11:1)

Brethren, join in following my example, and note those who so walk, as you have us for a pattern. (Philippians 3:17)

May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus. (Romans 15:5)

That you may walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing Him, being fruitful in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God. (Colossians 1:10)

Some people rationalize faith is personal and should be kept private. But at no time or place whatsoever are we told in the Scriptures to keep our faith in Jesus Christ to ourselves. We are repeatedly commanded to glorify God and to spread the good news of Jesus Christ and what He has done for mankind. We have been given the honor *and responsibility* of sharing in God's work throughout the world by casting His light and love into the darkness of a godless society; playing our small part as God changes the souls of the lost through the sharing and biblically sound teaching of His Word. The only way we can truly participate in this is by talking the talk and walking the walk – not by keeping silent and living exactly like the rest of the

unsaved world! The Bible indicates believers will be held accountable for their obedience (or lack thereof) in sharing the gospel with others. The Apostle Paul proclaims this message with joy and relief at the end of his life. *Therefore, I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God.* (Acts 20:26, 27) This is no small issue. The perception that Christian faith is a private matter and should be kept on the ‘down low’, is a clear misunderstanding of God’s plan of salvation. The primary way for the lost to become saved is by hearing God’s Word spoken, preached, or taught by other Christians, or at the very least, by having a Bible given to them or shared with them by another Christian.

How can the unsaved be led to faith if Christians do not speak out and live what they believe in front of others? *How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard?* (Romans 10:14) We should be striving to share the love of Jesus Christ at any open opportunity, serving others in His Name and lovingly sharing the teachings of the Bible with anyone we come across who has questions or appears to be seeking truth. Our very lives are also to be a witness and testimony to the Lord Jesus Christ and the salvation He offers to mankind. We should be flowing over with love and compassion for those who are lost to God! These things the Bible does portray and teach.

God made it a point to specifically set apart His people from the rest of the world –first the Israelites and then His church. God’s followers are shown throughout the Bible as people who are purposefully ‘set apart’ and visibly separated from pagan and unbelieving societies with regard to daily living, priorities, moral laws, culture, customs, and in the case of the Israelites, ceremonial rules and food. We see this differing lifestyle operating from the beginning of Old Testament history all the way through the coming of Jesus Christ in the New Testament era. We can also take note from Scripture that whenever God’s people rebelled and failed to live as separated, holy children of God, they were judged – sometimes by the sheer natural

consequences of sin but other times as a judgment handed down directly from God Himself when He periodically intervened in order to redirect their focus back to Him. However, when God's people were obedient, obeying His precepts and not living in the manners of the unbelieving world around them, they had His presence, His peace, and the blessings of His guidance. It's the age-old adage, "Choose to Sin, Choose to Suffer." The point being, God repeatedly commands His flock to be *different* from unbelievers. We have a higher standard because *we have been equipped* to attain that standard through the power of Christ within us, and through the knowledge and understanding acquired by abiding in the Word of God. We have been given the tools to live in the manner which Jesus Christ directs.

We are provided with many pictures throughout biblical history as our examples today. When Abraham was called by God to pick up and leave the land of his father, his heritage, his extended relations, and everything familiar behind in order to travel to an unknown land, he had to do so on sheer faith in God's word and His promises. *Now the LORD had said to Abram: "Get out of your country, from your family and from your father's house, to a land that I will show you. (Genesis 12:1)* We, too, are called by God to leave our old ways and even some of our old friends and relations behind, if necessary, in order to begin walking a new path of Christian faith toward what will eventually be our own 'Promise Land'; eternal life in heaven with our God. Jesus Christ taught people the way to salvation was to leave their old, worldly ways behind [repent] and follow Him [faithfully believing and abiding]. This means, as followers of Christ we will no longer look, think, act, or feel like the unbelieving world. The Holy Spirit gives us new insight and an entirely different view of life when we become believers. As Christians, our spiritual 'tour of duty' takes us *into* the unsaved world to be witnesses to the lost, but at the same time, we are not ever to be *part of* that world.

Faith in Christ is a lifetime commitment, not a mere statement of belief. A true believer's actions and public profession will be part and parcel of their Christian faith. Every epistle [letter] in

the New Testament exhorts believers to live worthy of the salvation to which they were called, leading their lives in a manner separate and apart from the pagan [secular] world. *And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God. (Romans 12:2)* Christians are to reflect the light of God's truths in a sin-darkened world, showing the way of reconciliation to God as being only through Jesus Christ, as well as displaying the loving and moral character of Christ in their daily lives. They are commanded to live their faith boldly and distinctly, existing as a 'city on a hill' rather than as a lamp hidden under a basket: *You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do they light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven. (Matthew 5:14-16)*

Christians are also called to be the salt of the earth; *preserving* goodness and godliness in a morally decaying society, and *flavoring* what is otherwise a dull, senseless, purposeless existence by teaching and sharing the knowledge of God and His true purposes for our lives. We are even to convict or cause 'irritation' (salt irritates) in the spirits of those who are living a self-focused and self-driven life by showing them such a lifestyle is really a rebellion towards God. We do these things by faithfully sharing thorough explanations of God's Word and His commands. *You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt loses its flavor, how shall it be seasoned? It is then good for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by men. (Matthew 5:13)* So, considering these things, a question must be asked. When did it become okay to call oneself a Christian and yet virtually ignore God on a daily basis? How did it become so acceptable for professing Christians to routinely disregard God's commands to 'walk in His ways' and 'abide in His Word?' Where in the Bible does God teach us Christian faith should consist of one hour spent in worship and recited prayer on Sundays, or once a month, or only on Christmas and Easter? In what Scripture passages do we find God approving of an impersonal, disassociated,

malnourished faith which consists primarily of a panicked or wishful prayer shot up towards Him when we find ourselves in difficult circumstances? Where does the Bible say it is ‘okay’ with God if we do not even worship Him at all – professing faith in Him yet not singing His praises, not meeting with other believers, not studying His Word, not talking to Him daily, and truly just not seeking Him in any way, shape or form?

If we really believe Jesus Christ is the one and only God-given answer to our deep-seated, eternal, spiritual problem we would be living a life which reflects such a belief. The evidence which implies we do not believe is a life lived without the faithful and constant acknowledgement of God’s presence and influence; a life which portrays a noticeable absence of true, spiritual commitment to His Son. We are encouraged throughout Scripture to act on our faith and not disregard God’s voice as He urges: *Today, if you will hear His voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion. (Hebrews 3:15)*

God tells us it is our *faith* alone in the promised Messiah, Jesus Christ, Who died on the cross over 2000 years ago for the sin of mankind that saves us. But how does our current day definition of ‘belief’ or ‘faith’ compare to God’s definition of faith? It might be enlightening for us to realize in the original manuscript language, the word used for “faith” is synonymous with the word “faithfulness”. It is one and the same word. Therefore, when we read a passage such as Hebrews 11:6: *But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him*, we can also read it as *Without faithfulness it is impossible to please Him*. God means for our faith to be active, ongoing, evident and fruitful, both inwardly and outwardly. Faith is not a vague concept we hold in the far recesses of our mind – it is a way of living.

Please do not misunderstand, never by our own merit can we earn salvation; however, our faith and our faithfulness mean the same thing to God – the bottom line being, faith results in action. *Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as*

*righteousness. (Galatians 3:6) Abraham's faith moved him to obedience and action. Faithfulness is the outworking fruit of the gift of faith which God gives us. The Bible declares, "...if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved". (Romans 10:9) The action of believing in our heart will change how we live and affect every decision we make. The Bible uses the imagery of circumcision to describe living by faith; it is called a 'circumcision of the heart' which then progresses to our outward behaviors and mindsets. And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live [eternally]. (Deuteronomy 10:6) Believing in our heart is different than merely acknowledging the existence of God a few Sundays each month and then going about life as usual the rest of the week. As noted previously, authentic repentance and faith will result in a paradigm shift in attitude, priorities, and way of life. Those who are truly born again will no longer see the world the same way. True Christians will be inclined to view every aspect of their lives through the lens of the Holy Spirit and in light of the teachings of the Bible. A changed life and changed heart are the unavoidable, biblical results of embracing a saving faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ, which, contrary to what our modern day world likes to believe, is our *only* assurance of spending eternity in joyous fellowship with our loving, all-powerful Creator.*

The proverbial 'wrench in the works' which stumbles many people is the realization they cannot have Jesus Christ for their Savior without having Him as their Lord too. There can be no such thing as a Christian faith which acknowledges Jesus with the one title while at the same time ignores the other. Jesus Christ is Lord. The Bible tells us He is God incarnate, i.e., God 'in the flesh'. When we come to faith in Him, it is His full intention to be Lord over every facet of our lives. Not only does He love us enough to save our souls from eternal condemnation, He loves us enough not to leave us the way He found us. Accepting God's gift of salvation should naturally result in the embracing of a new focus – a life lived following Jesus Christ.

Our relationship with God will steadily grow stronger and more intimate through prayer, bible study, and regular worship. We will find ourselves drawn into the company and fellowship of other believers, enjoying their love and like-mindedness through a God-given spiritual bond. This bond is a unity we cannot experience with secular friends or unsaved family members. The Bible depicts and describes this new way of life throughout the New Testament. When we become born again, we will feel urged to pick up our crosses and truly *follow* Jesus Christ.

And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple. For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not sit down first and count the cost, whether he has enough to finish it. (Luke 14:27,28) There is a cost to following Jesus Christ. It is a changed life. Our old life must die. Because Jesus died on the cross for our sins, He essentially tells all of us to get up there and die with Him. This is the only way we can enter into a new life – both in the present as well as in eternity. The Bible gives us an excellent picture of what must happen to a seed in order for it to bring forth a new, living, and fruitful plant. *But someone will say, “How are the dead raised up? And with what body do they come? Foolish one, what you sow is not made alive unless it dies. And what you sow, you do not sow that body that shall be, but mere grain—perhaps wheat or some other grain. But God gives it a body as He pleases, and to each seed its own body. (1 Corinthians 15:35-38)* Therefore, we must put off our old sin nature and put on the nature of Christ. The old man must die – all things are created anew in Jesus. *This I say, therefore, and testify in the Lord, that you should no longer walk as the rest of the Gentiles walk, in the futility of their mind, having their understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart; who, being past feeling, have given themselves over to lewdness, to work all uncleanness with greediness. But you have not so learned Christ, if indeed you have heard Him and have been taught by Him, as the truth is in Jesus: that you put off, concerning your former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and that you put on the new man which*

was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness. (Ephesians 4:17-24)

‘Fire insurance faith’ simply does not hold up to what is taught in the Bible. We cannot store a superficial confession of Christian faith in a mental file folder and hurriedly retrieve it as a ‘get out of hell free’ card on the day we bow down before Jesus Christ to await His eternal judgment. Life is not a Monopoly game. What is often peddled as ‘Christian faith’ in our world today cannot be found anywhere in Scripture and falls far short of what Jesus Christ calls His followers to heed. Many sincere, well-meaning people are deceived regarding their standing before God and are unprepared to meet their Maker because they haven’t read the Bible from which they profess to have gotten their belief system. I humbly beg all seekers to please seek the truth – God’s truth. The Bible is a written portrayal of God’s truth.

Historically and biblically speaking, we know there were false and misleading concepts regarding Christian faith already rampant among believers two thousand years ago, just as there are today. This problem is not a new. It is ages old because there is a perpetual, spiritual warfare for souls waged by the devil against God and those who are His. This is why God spends a great deal of time warning us to beware of the false teachings and the worldly, incorrect mindsets which stealthily creep into the doctrines of Christian faith.

Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ. (Colossians 2:8)

For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth and be turned aside to fables. (2 Timothy 4:3-4)

There were also false prophets among the people, even as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them, and bring on themselves swift destruction. (2 Peter 2:1)

For certain men have crept in unnoticed, who long ago were marked out for this condemnation, ungodly men, who turn the grace of our God into lewdness and deny the only Lord God and our Lord Jesus Christ. (Jude 1:4)

Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. (Matthew 7:15)

For false christs and false prophets will rise and show great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect. (Matthew 24:24)

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world. (1 John 4:1)

But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come; For men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good, traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God having a form of godliness but denying its power. And from such people turn away! (2 Timothy 3:1-5)

Since God strongly and repetitively warns us throughout Scripture of false teachers and unbiblical faith *within the church* (i.e. false beliefs among those who consider themselves believers), we can be assured it is a constant, ever-present threat in this world and has been since the fall of the human race. *Seek the LORD while He may be found, call upon Him while He is near. (Isaiah 55:6)* Every one of us is commanded to seek God and His truths before it is too late. Our lives will look different from the secular world because we will be regularly abiding in

the Word of God in order to become rooted in and deeply acquainted with the teachings of God. The word ‘abide’ means ‘to dwell in’ or ‘to make a home in’. Jesus tells us we must *dwell* or *live* in the words of Scripture. We are to view all of life through God’s Words, God’s eyes.

Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed Him, "If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. (John 8:31)

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

Therefore, let that abide in you which you heard from the beginning. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, you also will abide in the Son and in the Father. (1 John 2:24)

And now, little children, abide in Him, that when He appears, we may have confidence and not be ashamed before Him at His coming. (1 John 2:28)

Whoever transgresses and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God. He who abides in the doctrine of Christ has both the Father and the Son. (2 John 1:9)

A life of abiding in God’s Word is simply the action of regularly reading, studying, praying, and pondering the teachings of the Bible. To the regenerated spirit of a believer this is as needful as daily food. It is also why God’s Word is often portrayed as ‘daily bread’ or “the bread of life” in Scripture. It is the spiritual sustenance which nourishes us and makes our faith and our understanding of God very strong. God shows us Who He is and Who His Son is throughout the words of Scripture. His plan of salvation for mankind is amazingly revealed from the book of Genesis all the way to the book of Revelation. If we seek to learn about Him from the pages of the Bible, we will then truly *know* Him and grow to love Him in the manner which He commands us to know and love Him. We are commanded to diligently study, teach, and discuss the Scriptures and foundations of the

Christian faith with one another in order to stay strongly grounded in the Word of God.

And let us not neglect our meeting together, as some people do, but encourage and warn each other, especially now that the day of his coming back again is drawing near. (Hebrews 10:25)

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another. (Colossians 3:16)

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

These, then, are the things you should teach. Encourage and rebuke with all authority. Do not let anyone despise you. (Titus 2:15)

Therefore, brethren, be even more diligent to make your call and election sure, for if you do these things, you will never stumble. (2 Peter 1:10)

Therefore, my beloved... work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. (Philippians 2:12)

Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching. (2 Timothy 4:2)

I found it necessary to write to you exhorting you to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints. (Jude 1:3)

Finally, then, brethren, we request and exhort you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us {instruction} as to how you ought to walk and please God (just as you actually do walk), that you excel still more. (1 Thessalonians 4:1)

Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that need not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth. (2 Timothy 2:15)

These passages all indicate the Christian faith is not passive, private, or quiet; it is a dynamic, reborn way of life. *Jesus said to him, “**I am the way, the truth, and the life**: no man comes to the Father, but by me. (John 14:6)* Authentic Christian faith will be the sole foundation from which the pursuit of a life aligned with God’s will flows. It is a life not conformed to the secular world. Biblical teachings, promises, and warnings will naturally become part of our thoughts, words, and actions when we are born again with the Holy Spirit and actively maturing in our Christian walk. These things the Scriptures proclaim.

CHAPTER TEN

All Roads Lead to Heaven?

Have you ever heard anyone say, “All roads lead to heaven”, or “Buddha and Allah are merely different names for God”? These ideas are an example of today’s homogenized, ecumenical concepts which, if embraced as truth, allow people to get along with each other and continue life on their own terms, while at the same time believing they are maintaining an assurance their eternal well-being is 'handled'. It is a belief system tied in with Universalism; a pseudo-Christianized version of the politically correct, "I'm okay, you're okay" philosophy perpetuated by Thomas Harris in the early 1970's.

Universalism ideals are not biblical. God does not want us embracing such anti-scriptural, all-encompassing, ‘tolerant-sounding’ philosophies because they are a deception. How can we know this? In reading the Old Testament we will find any belief system outside of faith in God and His promised Savior is considered evil, idolatrous, corrupt, destructive, sexually immoral, and violent; ultimately well worth eradicating in God’s eyes. The New Testament shows us the same mindset. Remember, one of God’s core tenets is for those who are His to keep themselves separate and set apart from unbelieving cultures; i.e., cultures which refuse to worship Him and instead choose to worship other gods or no god at all. Such societies live as they deem fit; catering to themselves, false idols, and pagan or heathen lifestyle practices which God has defined as wicked.

A Universalism-based faith renders useless Jesus Christ’s commands to evangelize and spread the news of salvation throughout the world. Truly, if all ways eventually lead to God or to an eternity spent in heaven, why worry about those who do not know Who Jesus is or what He has done? Universalism also makes personal repentance, Christ's death on the cross, and the life-application teachings of all Christianity utterly unnecessary.

If a belief system contradicts everything the Bible teaches, such a belief system cannot possibly be embraced as Christian. As loving and accepting as Universalist theology sounds, it wrongly assumes there are several ways for mankind to be saved from eternal spiritual damnation, or even that there is no judgment to worry about in the first place. Yet the Bible tells us repeatedly there is only *one way* to the kingdom of heaven and those who do not belong there will end up in a dimension called ‘hell’. The concept of ‘Christian Universalism’ simply doesn’t make sense. One cannot be a true Christian and embrace Universalistic ideas at the same time. It is an oxymoron, yet it is a worldview widely accepted today by many because biblical knowledge is so lacking.

I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me. (John 14:6)

Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved. (Acts 4:12)

I am the door. If anyone enters by Me, he will be saved. (John 10:9)

For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. (1 Corinthians 3:11)

I, even I, am the LORD, and besides Me there is no Savior. (Isaiah 43:11)

We know that this is indeed the Christ, the Savior of the world. (John 4:42)

Him God has exalted to His right hand [to be] Prince and Savior. (Acts 5:31)

From this man's seed, according to [the] promise, God raised up for Israel a Savior—Jesus. (Acts 13:23)

For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. (Philippians 3:20)

*Our Savior Jesus Christ, [who] has abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.
(2 Timothy 1:10)*

The Bible teaches Jesus Christ is our only way, our only door, our only foundation, and our only Savior. Simple questions can be asked in order to show the ludicrousness of ‘Christian Universalism’. If all ways lead to the one true God and to eternal salvation, then why did the Son of God have to come to earth, live a humbled and perfectly obedient human life, and die an unjust, torturous death upon a cross? Wasn’t the whole ‘crucifixion situation’ pointless if every path in life eventually allows for us all to be with God when we die? Matthew 26:39 tells us, “*He [Jesus] went a little farther and fell on His face, and prayed, saying, "O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will."*”

We can understand from this passage if there were any other way to save mankind from eternal damnation, the Son of God would not have had to take on human flesh and die in our place. Jesus asked the Father for a ‘pass’. He pleaded three times for another way to be found, if possible. Yet historically, archeologically, and biblically, we know Jesus Christ was tortured, crucified, died on the cross, and resurrected three days later. Therefore, we know the Father’s answer was “no.” There is no other way to accomplish God’s spiritual reconciliation with the souls of mankind other than through the eternally significant, human blood atonement of His only Son, Jesus Christ.

We can also take note from the message of the gospel taught throughout the Bible there is an eternal, spiritual destination so dark, so empty, so lacking all that is goodness and light, God was willing to diminish a part of Himself in order to become eternally human and pay the infinitely steep price necessary for the whole world to have the opportunity to be saved from it, if only we

would repent of our self-rule by believing in God's Word, and following Jesus Christ in faith.

Why do people, even some professing 'Christians', insist upon the relevance and validity of the idea there might be many ways to God? Why do so many choose to believe the 'hell' referred to in the Bible might just be a picture of our 'difficult, struggling lives here on earth'? Why are others becoming convinced they can seek a higher divinity and inner spiritual power from inside their own minds through unbiblical forms of spiritual 'meditation' – seeking 'spirit guides' rather than looking in faith to the God of the Bible and what He has already written in Scripture? These are only a few of several dangerously misleading concepts birthed from modern ecumenical and new age philosophies which are seeping into Christian circles. Indeed, they all can be classified as more examples of the *'broad way that leads to destruction'* which Jesus so adamantly warns against.

It should be humbling and outright amazing to us the God of this universe created even one plan for mankind to be brought back into a loving, personal, spiritual relationship with Him. He formed us and provided a beautiful world for us to inhabit. He intended for us to live in a paradise environment filled with beauty, joy, wonderment, learning, purpose, and pleasure while we pursued an eternally glorious, worshipful, and loving relationship with Him. But amidst such wonderful provision, the human race still turned away from God and caused the corruption of itself and the entire earth. Despite this rebellion, God still loves us so much He created a way for us to be fully restored to Him. The fact that He made even one plan for our salvation should bring us to our knees in humility and thankfulness.

Yet somehow in our 'me-oriented' society many have decided there must be several relevant eternal 'salvation' plans. To insist there is only one way to God is considered offensive, hateful, arrogant, and narrow-minded. We tend to think the human race in general simply deserves a wonderful eternity as long as we

aren't hardened criminals. This is because we no longer carry within our hearts a proper fear of God. We have mentally diminished the fierce, righteous, glorious and holy power of our omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent Creator into something more humanly manageable and suitable to our own preferences. Therefore, we prefer to think since everyone on this planet is so different and unique, there must be several different and unique ways for all of us to reach our kindly, old 'Father-time' God in heaven.

Universalism remains extremely popular today because it appeals to the masses, condemns no one, is noninvasive, and sounds very loving and respectful. With our society's over-emphasis on political correctness, new moral relativism, and revised definitions of 'love' and 'tolerance', it is easy to be lulled into this modernized, over-rationalized view of faith, where 'every road in life must lead to the right place.' We must reach the understanding this kind of belief system is not taught in the Bible. It is not reflective of our just, righteous, holy God and Creator, nor does it portray His one plan of salvation. There is a reason why Jesus says, "... *narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it.*" (Matthew 7:14) There are not several ways or many roads to God. Everyone is not arbitrarily going to heaven. Scripture teaches us proportionate to all of mankind in every era only a *remnant* of the human race will be willing to submit to God and accept His gift of salvation. What does the above passage say regarding the way that leads to eternal life? There are few who find it.

The masses like the broad road... the road which does not require personal submission to God. This wide road is inclusive of any path not leading us through the narrow gate of Jesus Christ and it leads to destruction of the soul. *Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it.* (Matthew 7:13)

Universalism is trusting in a liberalized salvation plan tweaked to suit society's preferred philosophies. The Bible warns us specifically against such ideas. *Beware lest anyone cheat you*

through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ. (Colossians 2:8)

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Are You Wax or Are You Clay?

Jesus Christ said, *“He who is not with Me is against Me; and he who does not gather with Me scatters abroad.”* (Matthew 12:30). From the perspective of God, there is no in-between stance we can take with Him. There can be no ‘fence-sitting’. Neutrality is a choice against God, not for Him. There are no blurry or vague areas in Scripture regarding salvation through Jesus Christ’s redemptive work on the cross. People are either true believers or they are not. We are either walking in the light or stumbling about in darkness. We are either born again and following the precepts of Jesus Christ and God’s Word or we are living according to our own dictates and desires. At this very moment, our names are either written in God’s Book of Life and we are appointed to heaven, or they are not, and we are inherently destined for hell.

People cannot call themselves Universalist, Agnostic, Buddhist, or practice New Age spirituality and think they are any better off than an Atheist. According to God, they are all headed to the same place – a place where He is not. Nor can a person say they believe in Jesus Christ as their Savior and yet not live in submission to Him as LORD during their life on earth. The Bible assures us there is no holding steadfastly to the ways of the world while at the same time professing the Christian faith. Jesus stated, *“No servant can serve two masters.”* (Luke 16:13) Again, the apostle John reminds Christians, *“Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.”* (1 John 2:15) When men chose self-rule over God’s rule, Satan was by default given power and authority over our fallen world since it is his scheme we are born following. The Scriptures explain our entire world system is under satanic influence. Satan is an expert at making bad things seem good, hurtful things seem fun, and unimportant or valueless things seem worthy of our time and our passions.

Satan is not only the ‘Great Accuser’ and ‘Great Deceiver’ but he is also the ‘Great Distracter’ and he loves to keep us occupied with our own drives, passions, problems, desires and needs. He is a master at manipulating popular opinion and highly skilled at making Christians look foolish and fanatical in the eyes of contemporary society. But what question does the Bible tell us to ask ourselves? *What will it profit a man, if he gains the whole world but loses his own soul? (Mark 8:36)* When we are led to accept Jesus as Lord and Savior, we will begin to see the world for what it truly is. All the temptations, the hurt, the greed, the sickness, the crime, the selfishness and pride, the disasters and war, is entirely the result of sin, the curse, and consequential satanic rule. If a person is hanging on to a life directed by their own desires and personal goals, they are ultimately in bondage to Satan. *They themselves are slaves of corruption; for by whom a person is overcome, by him also he is brought into bondage. (2 Peter 2:19)*

God enables the faithful and abiding Christian to let go of such things. *For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord, walk as children of light. (Ephesians 5:8)*. This effort will always be an inner struggle for every Christian. It is the internal battle between our self-oriented desires and the will of the Holy Spirit. The draw and temptations of our old ways of life are ever present. We still seem to want what the flesh wants, yet our minds are directed by our regenerated spirits to act upon what God wants. Obedience to God’s will is the key and the only way to know His will is to study the Bible. Yes, true believers will fall down; but they also get back up again in faith and in perseverance. Christians are not perfect people, but they have God working in them, helping them to do what is right in His eyes. Most importantly, they are spiritually reconciled to God and are no longer in a state of spiritual rebellion toward Him. They are forgiven of all sins - past, present, and future. They are seen as righteous in God’s eyes through the atoning blood of His Son and as such, will never face His wrath. Their eternity in heaven is assured through their faith in Jesus Christ. *And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins, in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to*

the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience, among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others. But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ. (Ephesians 2:1-5)

God tells us, “*Set your minds on things above, not on things on the earth*” (Colossians 3:2). We must live with an eternal perspective. Our lives are but a vapor, a drop in the bucket compared to eternity. *For what is your life? It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away. (James 4:14)* Yet it is only during this life we can determine what our eternity will be. The time will come when we can no longer bring others to Christ or do any additional work for God’s kingdom because the end of the age will have arrived, and eternity will finally be ushered into place. *I must work the works of Him who sent Me while it is day; the night is coming when no one can work. (John 9:4)*

People like to point out the thief on the cross didn’t need to ‘live out’ his belief (*refer to the account in Luke 23:39-43*). But notice as he hung there he recognized his sin, he repented of his way of life, and he accepted Jesus was indeed the Son of God who came to die for his sins – he did this all in one sentence, indeed, one thought, as he sincerely pleaded with Jesus to ‘remember him when He comes into His kingdom’. Yes, if a person were to die immediately after making such a profession of faith, and God saw their heart was true and in the faith at that moment, they would be saved. But anyone who has a full life to lead *after* professing belief in the Son of God and they do not find themselves living differently...that is a scary thing. If our faith is not strong enough to *change* us, it likely is not strong enough to *save* us. In these precarious times, we must be very certain we are born again – saved according to the God of the Bible and what He teaches about repentance and faith. Will Jesus see us as washed by His own blood, reconciled to God? Is He

going to say, "*Well done, good and faithful servant.*"? (Matthew 25:21) as we stand before Him, or will it be more along the lines of, "*Why do you call Me 'Lord, 'Lord', and not do the things which I say?*" (Luke 6:46) and "*I never knew you, depart from Me*"? (Matthew 7:23)

Again, God exhorts us to make sure of our faith. *Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Do you not know yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you? -unless indeed you are disqualified. (2 Corinthians 13:5)* Truly, if Christ is not in us, we are indeed disqualified from salvation. There are a lot of people 'playing church' on Sundays or serving God in some religious capacity because they have been taught it is the 'right thing to do' or because it makes them feel good about themselves. What they do not understand is religious involvement has nothing to do with salvation. Salvation is only found in Jesus Christ and our belief and acceptance of what He accomplished on the cross over 2000 years ago. Our repentant submission to this fact causes Jesus to live in us through the power of the Holy Spirit. If Christ is not in us, all the things we do in His name are in vain and nothing we do can be pleasing to God. *But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him. (Hebrews 11:6)*

He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me. And he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and manifest Myself to him. (John 14:21) If we are not abiding in God's Word and striving to understand and obey what is taught within its pages, we are not keeping God's commands. According to Jesus Christ, this means we do not love Him. It is within our actions that we display the true attitude of our hearts. *But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead? Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar? Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect? And the Scripture was fulfilled which says, "Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for*

righteousness." And he was called the friend of God. (James 2:20-23)

Jesus also tells us in Mark 8:38 and in Luke 9:26; "*For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him the Son of Man also will be ashamed when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels.*" Do we make our heart for God visible to those around us? God knows our hearts, and our actions speak truer and louder than occasional words. The "works" James mentions above are not things we do to earn salvation; they are simply the resulting behavior which is produced by our faith. James is saying if our faith isn't active and producing some type of godly fruit, we have a problem. Faith without works is dead – while faith with works portrays the outwardly visible evidence our faith is authentic and real. For whatever amount of time on this earth we have been given, God will faithfully seek to bring us into His kingdom, not willing for anyone to perish. He genuinely wants all of us to have eternal life. *For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. (John 3:16)*

I heard this saying once, and I love the analogy: "It is the same sun that softens the wax and hardens the clay." Let's make it personal: Which are you? Are you wax, or are you clay? Do you find your heart growing softer, like wax, toward God the more you hear biblical truths and teachings? Or are you developing a hard-baked heart of clay, rejecting Him more and more as you increasingly become exposed to His words and biblical truths? If you have a Christian trying to share the good news of Jesus Christ with you, God is personally knocking on the door of your heart and soul. The question is; will you let Him in? *Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me. (Revelation 3:20)*

CHAPTER TWELVE

The Biblical Church

Throughout the New Testament, God gives numerous pictures and descriptions of how the church, a.k.a., God's body of believers, was to operate. We can see a remarkably simple model of what the first churches looked like in the Book of Acts. They spent much of their time going out and evangelizing, baptizing, and teaching new believers. The rest of their activities included praying and meeting with one another regularly (even daily), Scripture study, as well as singing hymns and psalms together, and sharing meals with one another in each other's homes. It is evident from the New Testament the newborn church saw themselves as one united family of God and as such it was filled with love, caring, and concern for one another, as well as an overriding, intense passion for living out the commands of Jesus Christ and His Word. Believers truly did life together and were bold, steadfast, and willing to be persecuted for the Name of Christ.

*And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers.
(Acts 2:42)*

So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved. (Acts 2:46,47)

Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful. And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching. (Hebrews 10:23-25)

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

What we do not see depicted in the New Testament era churches are religious rules, rituals, chanting or repetitious memorized prayers, dress codes, priestly robes, ornate ceremonies, bejeweled bread-holders, golden wine-cups, mystical incense, carved statues, catechisms, structured liturgical prayer and worship books, or preeminent priests and popes. The Bible also does not portray God's people praying to dead believers, nor do we see dead believers elevated to an idolatrous 'sainthood' to which the congregation prayed or assigned power.

Additionally, it is important to note there is absolutely zero worship of the mother of Jesus found in the Bible. No one is shown idolizing her, promoting her status among believers, or praying to Jesus Christ through her. In fact, not once in Scripture do we see any disciple honoring Mary or even *talking* about her in a worshipful manner. She is not a mediator, nor did she help redeem anyone. *For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus. (1st Timothy 2:5).* Mary herself outright stated her own need for a Savior, which means she knew she was a sinful, imperfect human being just like the rest of us. *And Mary said: "My soul magnifies the Lord, And my spirit has rejoiced in God **my Savior**..." (Luke 1:47, 48)*

Jesus publicly denounced any veneration of his mother more than once. Refer to Luke 11:27, 28 (NASB) which reads, "*While Jesus was saying these things, one of the women in the crowd raised her voice and said to Him, "Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts at which you nursed."* But He said, "On the contrary, blessed are those who hear the word of God and observe it." In another set of passages, Jesus downplays her importance again. *Then His mother and brothers came to Him and could not approach Him because of the crowd. And it was told Him by some, who said, "Your mother and Your brothers are standing outside, desiring to see You."* *But He answered and*

said to them, “My mother and My brothers are these who hear the word of God and do it.” (Luke 8:19-21, Matthew 12:46-50, and Mark 3:31-35) The strong, familiar thread running through all four of these passages is simply the idea that God views those who hear His Word and obey it as His true and only family. Bloodlines and genealogy hold no importance when it comes to those who are His, and as far as the human relatives of Jesus, none of them were as important to Him as those who believed and followed Him.

The only ‘church doctrine’ the New Testament disciples had consisted of Old Testament manuscripts and the teachings of Jesus Christ as carried out and written down by the apostles.

Why do so many of today’s churches practice such different things than the simple examples God shows us in His Word? And why is it, when people are asked about their Christian faith, their response is usually the label which identifies their specific type of church, such as; “I am a Catholic”, “I am a Methodist”, or “I am a Lutheran.” This is a problem because scripturally speaking, Christians are to boast in nothing except for Jesus Christ and what He did for humanity on the cross. *But God forbid that I should boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. (Galatians 6:14)* In God’s view, our identities should be based solely upon our status as followers of Christ, so shouldn’t the biblical response to the question of our faith be, “I am a *Christian*.”?

I strongly encourage believers to seek a church which meets solely for the purposes of Holy Spirit-led worship, prayer, fellowship, and serious Bible study; a church involved in encouraging evangelism, biblical Christian living, and mission work; a church which is centered upon Jesus Christ and solidly grounded in the entire Word of God. We all would do well to steer clear of churches wrapped up in unbiblical traditions, rituals, ceremonies, manmade rules, manmade doctrines, and the extra-biblical writings or interpretations of men. Such things lead us away from trusting in Jesus Christ *alone* for the gift of our salvation and keep us from abiding in the Word of God *alone* for our truth. Religion and religiosity were created by men, not

God, ultimately stealing from our spiritual freedom, our peace, our joy, and our personal relationship with God through our faith in Jesus Christ. The false teachings and belief systems birthed out of manmade religiousness often breed hypocrisy and faithlessness, while quenching the work of the Holy Spirit. Religion truly keeps many people from rightly seeking God and finding the one path to eternal life – a personal relationship and faith in Jesus Christ and His sacrificial death for all of mankind.

To complicate things further, today's society is pushing Christian churches to ignore the teachings of Scripture and accept *all* religions and all lifestyles as being viable, complementary, cohesive alternatives for achieving the same eternal glory and everlasting life. As previously stated, this is called 'Ecumenicalism'. Global 'one-world religion' is the stated goal, just as the Word of God prophesied long ago it would be. "Tolerance!" they cry, "Tolerance!" Yet the true definition of tolerance has been altered and changed into something it never was meant to signify. It is so sad to see in this day and age, so-called Christian leaders and their churches giving validity and acceptance to other religions, other gods, and other ways to reach God, thereby assigning eternal glory or salvation to all people no matter how unbiblical their beliefs or lifestyles are. Do they not stop to think about what God would say in light of such compromise? Truly, they must have no fear of the God they profess to serve, and therefore they have no real wisdom. When was the last time these leaders opened their own Bibles and read its contents? The ecumenical movement is biblically heretical and blasphemous. Again, the Bible prophesied it would be like this in the end times – how close we must be to the 'End of Days' and the return of Jesus Christ!

Forcing true Christians to accept unbiblical belief systems as valid methods to appease God is absolutely intolerant of Christianity itself. We need to recognize true Christians *are* persecuted and will *always be* persecuted. Their beliefs *do* cause division and strife because they *aren't* compatible with other beliefs. True Christians *don't* go back to their same lifestyle after being born again so they *don't* blend in with the rest of

society. Therefore, society notices them, judges them, and tends *not* to get along with them. This truth is the nature of living the Christian faith in a world comfortable living in darkness, blindly enslaved to themselves and the devil. It was this way 2000 years ago and continues to be so now. If we think of ourselves as Christians but we really don't find ourselves persecuted or rejected on any level for reasons pertaining to our faith, maybe we need to figure out why. *If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. (John 15:18-19)*

Since becoming a Christian, I have discovered the secular world does indeed hate me for what I believe. The modern day 'mainstream media machine' despises Christian beliefs, rights, and stances; vilifying and ridiculing Christianity whenever possible. Various political groups, countries, and governing bodies are spending a great deal of time, money, and effort trying to stamp out fundamental Christian values and basic religious rights. Sadly, I have lost friends and inadvertently caused tensions between myself and many loved ones because of living and professing biblical Christian faith. The Bible indicates there will come a time when studying or teaching the Bible will actually be considered illegal, even in the United States. There will literally be a 'famine for the Word of God' as the Bible prophetically states in the book of Amos. *Behold, the days come, saith the Lord GOD, that I will send a famine in the land, not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the LORD: And they shall wander from sea to sea, and from the north even to the east, they shall run to and fro to seek the word of the LORD and shall not find it. (Amos 8:11,12 KJV)*

The day is coming when true believers will be forced to meet discreetly in the privacy of their own homes rather than attending public churches because secular society will succeed in labeling the Bible as unlawful 'hate material' through which the reader or teacher of such will be deemed worthy of criminal punishment. This shows just how little the general population

understands the Bible. Love is not a hate crime! Wanting a better life and eternal consequence for somebody who is in bondage to a spiritually dark and damaging lifestyle is not hatred, it is love. But anti-Christian actions such as these are already happening in other modern, seemingly civilized countries, while in some locations of the world Christianity has always been illegal, with heinous and devastating consequences in place for those found practicing their faith.

The time is steadily approaching in which the only publicly accepted churches will be those having utterly compromised the basic truths of God and the Christian faith in order to appease society and its demands for falsely contrived social justice, political correctness, and 'global unity' among all religions. Once such a legislative line against Christian churches and the Bible itself is drawn in our country, where does it stop? What will the next step be for Bible-believing Americans? May God help us all when such a thing takes place. Yet, Jesus encourages his followers with this proclamation. *Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you. (Matthew 5:11-12)*

This world is not our true home. As Christians, God tells us we are merely strangers and pilgrims just passing through. Therefore, let our focus be directed steadily upon our heavenly home, upon our faith in God, and upon His promises which we will see fulfilled, if not in this life, then in the next. *These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced them and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. (Hebrews 11:13)*

In our pursuit for truth in this life we must acknowledge we are created beings temporarily living in a created world. We are both physical and spiritual entities, and while our flesh is mortal and finite, our souls and spirits are eternal. This earthly, fleeting life is the one opportunity we will have to choose the pursuit of a

loving relationship with our Creator for all eternity. The volume of biblical manuscripts which God directed to be spoken of and taught from generation to generation, faithfully written down, meticulously copied, copiously translated, lovingly shared, and vastly disseminated among all mankind in every era is the one and only valid resource in which we can find the answers to questions about God, life, faith, human purpose, and eternal salvation. We must not allow secular society to dictate the bounds of our beliefs or indoctrinate us into a lack thereof. I pray for everyone seeking the truth. I pray such a quest culminates in the very real blessing of personal, spiritual peace, and reconciliation with God through an active, biblical belief in His Son, Jesus Christ, our world's only reigning Lord and Savior. I pray many more people will indeed learn to fear the Lord and begin their journey of wisdom, knowledge, and understanding. Amen.

*Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom,
And to depart from evil is understanding. (Job 28:28)*

Part Two: Fundamentals of the Christian Walk

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Will of God

“What is God’s will for me?” Throughout the ages, Christians have found themselves struggling with the question of God’s will. There is a prevalent and misdirected idea His will for us as individuals cannot clearly be known unless one is a prophet or has experienced a strong prompting or supernatural vision pertinent to a specific person’s life or calling. The premise of this chapter is to display what the Bible openly states is God’s will for every believer. There are several passages in Scripture which discuss what His will is for those of us who believe in Him. The first one to explore is the following:

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God. (Romans 12:1,2)

How do we ‘prove’ or establish what is the good and acceptable and perfect will of God? We daily present our bodies to Him as an ongoing act of sacrifice in the sense that we are purposely living in a manner which is set apart and different from unbelievers. We persistently choose to live for God and not ourselves. As a result, we will not be conformed to the godless and often corrupt ways of the secular world, and instead we will strive to be continuously growing, transforming, and maturing spiritually as we abide in God’s Word.

As previously stated in the first part of this book, transformation and being set apart from nonbelievers is a big deal to God. He loves us enough to not only save us from eternal condemnation, but also to transform us into what He intended for us to be – the absolute best version of ourselves as imagers and ambassadors of Him. God made us in His image, and when we become born

again by His Spirit we are empowered to start the process of looking more and more like Jesus the longer we walk in His ways – as He transforms us into His image “from glory to glory”. The more we mirror the love, servanthood, humility, and wisdom of Jesus, the more we are transformed into His same image. *Now the Lord is the Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord. (2 Corinthians 3:17,18)*

Isn't it wonderful to know God's will for us is not overly mysterious and unattainable? We can simply present ourselves as a living sacrifice to God by picking up our cross daily and living for His purposes rather than for our own materialistic, self-oriented, or flesh-driven purposes. *Then He said to them all, "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me. (Luke 9:23)* We can know we are performing God's will when we put away those behaviors which God commands against and strive to put on the behaviors He encourages. We simply seek to serve God by keeping ourselves separate from things God says are evil, ungodly, unclean, wicked, or sinful. We must endeavor to become imitators of Jesus Christ as we try to bless those around us with loving, patient, and compassionate behavior and the truths of God's Word. This is God's will for us. A second passage discussing the will of God is this:

Bondservants, be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in sincerity of heart, as to Christ; not with eye-service, as men-pleasers, but as bondservants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, with goodwill doing service, as to the Lord, and not to men, knowing that whatever good anyone does, he will receive the same from the Lord, whether he is a slave or free. (Ephesians 6:5-8) Again, we see it is God's will for us to be involved in serving others in such a way our example models Jesus Christ and His love for others. We are commanded to submit to, obey, and serve our masters with an attitude of goodwill. In today's

culture, the concept of ‘masters’ would be equivalent to those who employ us or who are in authority over us. We are instructed to do this in a sincere, glad, and humble manner, as if we are submitting to and obeying God Himself.

Every task, every chore, every assignment, every demand made of us by others can be an opportunity to serve and glorify God. It does not matter if we are cleaning floors, making photocopies, washing dishes, doing laundry, pouring concrete, teaching children, milking cows, selling insurance, or running a business. In every task or assignment, if we work to the best of our abilities with a sincere heart and a stance of goodwill as a direct witness to God and His glory, then we are indeed performing His will. It is such an easy thing to embrace! This is about adjusting the attitude of our hearts as we redefine why and how we go about doing what we do each and every day. For example, because of the above passage I have become empowered to find it rewarding and motivating to take something so menial as unloading the dishwasher and turn it into an act of worship and personal service to my God! This perspective can make everything I do a joy – as long as I take the time to call to mind His presence as I do it. In this way, God shows us how to make all our daily burdens lightened. *Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light. (Matthew 11:28-30)*

We have a continuous ideal taught throughout the New Testament of ‘sanctification’. *Finally then, brethren, we urge and exhort in the Lord Jesus that you should abound more and more, just as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God; for you know what commandments we gave you through the Lord Jesus. For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you should abstain from sexual immorality; that each of you should know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor, not in passion of lust, like the Gentiles who do not know God; that no one should take advantage of and defraud his brother in this matter, because the Lord is the*

avenger of all such, as we also forewarned you and testified. For God did not call us to uncleanness, but in holiness. Therefore, he who rejects this does not reject man, but God, who has also given us His Holy Spirit. (1 Thessalonians 4:1-8)

The will of God is our sanctification. What is sanctification? Sanctification is the process of becoming more holy, increasingly set apart from our former ways and from the unbelieving world, spiritually wiser, more mature in our faith, more loving toward others, closer in our relationship with God, and more knowledgeable in the ways of God. God continually works to sanctify all believers through His Word and through the promptings of His Spirit. This ongoing transformation process takes place over the course of our earthly lives. It is something God initiates in us by the power of His Spirit and continues in us through that power and by our obedience and submission to Him and His commands. We are told the life and likeness of Jesus Christ within us must increase as we decrease. *He must increase, but I must decrease. (John 3:30)* When we abide faithfully in the practices of prayer, studying God's Word, hanging out with other believers, and worshipping, we will find ourselves slowly but steadily being sanctified. This is not something we must force upon ourselves. We will simply be inspired to practice what God commands us to do and seek to avoid what He commands us to not do. We can also continue to note from the above passage in 1st Thessalonians, it is particularly important to God that we do not involve ourselves with sexual immorality or do anything which would stumble our fellow believers on this issue.

The following Bible passage is a practical, hands-on set of instructions for believers to strive toward practicing daily. For anyone who despairs at thinking they cannot know what God's will is, these verses are a must-read: *Now we exhort you, brethren, warn those who are unruly, comfort the fainthearted, uphold the weak, be patient with all. See that no one renders evil for evil to anyone, but always pursue what is good both for yourselves and for all. Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus*

for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophecies. Test all things; hold fast what is good. Abstain from every form of evil. Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely; and may your whole spirit, soul, and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful, who also will do it. (1 Thessalonians 5:14-24)

The first section of the passage contains the command for believers to “warn those who are unruly”. What would that look like in real life? What does “unruly” mean? Our dictionary reveals ‘unruly’ is to act in a disorderly, disruptive, undisciplined, willful, headstrong, wayward, and even lawless manner. If we have a brother or sister in Christ who is behaving in such a manner it does not glorify God nor does it edify fellow believers. One of the fruits of the Holy Spirit is the ability to exercise self-control – clearly the opposite of behavior which is unruly. *But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law. (Galatians 5:23)*

Unruly behavior is not a proper witness of the love and life of Jesus Christ. God is telling us in this passage our duty is to come up alongside any fellow believer who is being unruly or disruptive, whether during church gatherings or in their general life conduct, and warn them their behavior isn’t fitting or glorifying to God and is also destructive to other believers. We may attempt to use the situation as an opportunity to ask if there is something going on in their lives causing such behavior and whether there is anything we can do to help. The warning we are to give is not about condemning the fellow believer, but rather, it is for the purpose of correction and assistance. The next command in the prior referenced Bible passage is for believers to “comfort the fainthearted and uphold the weak”. Sadly, there are many believers who are not walking in the strength and peace of God. They do believe in the gospel of Jesus Christ and understand their sins are forgiven, but they stop their journey of faith at the foot of the cross of Jesus, and somehow do not realize they have a “Christian Walk” to live out, a Bible to study, and a

new way of life to live. They are not regularly built up in their faith or strengthened by God's Word and His Spirit because they are not practicing daily what God instructs them to practice. As such, their faith is weak, uninformed, and spiritually malnourished. These weaker believers have not understood they must feed their spirits daily with God's Word and therefore, they are spiritually starving. *But Jesus answered him, saying, "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word of God.'" (Luke 4:4)*

Weaker believers do not know very much about God's commands, precepts, promises, or ways and this makes them easily misled and fainthearted in their faith, especially when troubled times come around. So, we see God commanding stronger believers to comfort and uphold the weak and fainthearted believer. How do we do such a thing? We encourage them with God's Word and His promises. We remind them of God's love for them. We invest our time with them and teach them how to become stronger believers by showing them how to abide daily in God's Word and be fed by Him through Scripture, through prayer, through fellowship with other believers and through their own obedience. We teach them how to 'walk the walk' and not just 'talk the talk'. Teaching such things and living them out as an example to the weaker believer are very important ways to routinely perform the will of God in our lives.

Now we come to the section in the passage which tells us how to deal with evil behavior. *See that no one renders evil for evil to anyone, but always pursue what is good both for yourselves and for all.* Something we learn as we grow in our knowledge of God is how to walk in the Spirit and not react in the flesh. In all situations we should process everything through the filter of the Holy Spirit and the Word of God, pausing and taking a moment to pray and ask God for leading on how to respond or act. If we are being treated or spoken to in an evil or undesirable manner, God wants us to respond with love, patience, understanding, kindness, and in a way which benefits everyone – even the hateful or spiteful person. This is a difficult thing, yet God has

enabled every believer to do so in the power of His Spirit. We do not render evil for evil because we know from Scripture two wrongs do not ever make anything right. God will judge all things in His time. *If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men. Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay," says the Lord. Therefore, if your enemy is hungry, feed him; If he is thirsty, give him a drink; For in so doing, you will heap coals of fire on his head. Do not be overcome by evil but overcome evil with good. (Romans 12:18-21)* It is every believer's responsibility to imitate Jesus and act in a way which would glorify Him regardless of what others are doing or saying. This precept does not mean we are to become passive doormats welcoming others to walk all over us; it simply indicates we must strive not to react in a flesh-driven, spiteful, or angry manner to that which offends us. Instead, we learn to respond to bad situations by speaking truth and love, while keeping Scripture in mind as we attempt to reflect the image of Jesus Christ toward others.

Now we come to a core message of the passage we have been dealing with, in the following verse. *Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.* Christians are to live with a continual attitude of joy and thankfulness, as well as in constant communication (prayer) with God. That is the essence of God's will for each and every one of us. It is no mystery. Because we are no longer eternally condemned, because our sins have been blotted out forever, because God sacrificed Himself to reconcile us to Him, we can live with joy and thankful appreciation toward Him no matter what trials and tribulations we may be facing on any given day. We have a God and Creator Whom we can trust, depend on, love, and learn from daily. We are heirs to His eternal kingdom! What more could anyone wish for? We have the freedom to approach God in prayer at any and every moment we desire. The Creator of the universe loves us and sacrificed Himself to prove it. Every breath we take is a gift from Him. How can we not rejoice always, pray without ceasing, and have a thankful heart?

Finally, there are few more commands in this passage which we should address: *Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophecies. Test all things; hold fast what is good. Abstain from every form of evil.* Quenching the Holy Spirit is what happens when a believer ignores conscience, spiritual promptings, or God's commands. There are many ways in which God's Spirit speaks to each of us throughout our lives. We may feel an inner urge or a warning, we may hear sound, biblical advice or encouragement from a fellow believer, we may have a revelation during prayer time or our Bible reading time, or we may even have a meaningful dream.

The key to knowing whether we have truly heard from the Spirit of God or not, is to test it against Scripture. That is what it means when Scripture says, "*test all things; hold fast to what is good*". If we feel we are being led to do anything which goes against God's commands or is contrary to anything in His Word, we can know for certain it is not from God. Scripture is the test; the plumb line against which we measure all things. The Lord is also often helpful in giving us confirmation from more than one source when He seeks to assure us He is guiding us in a specific direction. Regardless, one cannot hear from the Holy Spirit if one is not in prayer, abiding in God's Word, or heeding God's instructions in daily life practices. Living a lifestyle of sinful behavior quenches the Spirit. Reacting to people or situations in anger, pride, selfishness, or any other fleshly outburst quenches the Spirit. Ignoring spiritual promptings in favor of selfish desires or material pursuits quenches the Spirit. We must seek to be open to the Holy Spirit; ready vessels for God to fill up – willing to stand up and declare, "Here I am, Lord"!

The following passage is another section of Scripture which makes a declaration as to what God's will is for the believer. It reads as follows: *Beloved, I beg you as sojourners and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul, having your conduct honorable among the Gentiles, that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may, by your good works which they observe, glorify God in the day of visitation. Therefore, submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the*

Lord's sake, whether to the king as supreme, or to governors, as to those who are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and for the praise of those who do good. For this is the will of God, that by doing good you may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men-- as free, yet not using liberty as a cloak for vice, but as bondservants of God. Honor all people. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the king. (1 Peter 2:11-17)

Once again, we see God commanding His people to be good witnesses of Him. It is His will for us to conduct our lives as ambassadors of Jesus Christ, doing nothing which would shame the Name of the Lord. We are also told to “*abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul*” When we become born again, we essentially become a divided person. We are a new creation in Christ Jesus, born again and having a paradigm shift in attitude and worldview. There is a new Spirit residing in our hearts Who leads us to seek the things of God and not the self-oriented goals and plans we used to seek. However, we also still have our old sin nature. We are no longer dominated or mastered by sin, and we are now enlightened as to what sin is. Yet sin still naturally exists in our hearts because at the end of the day, despite being born again we are still fallible human beings living in a broken world. Therefore, as Christians we have a battle continuously raging within us because the flesh wants what the flesh wants, while the Holy Spirit seeks to lead us in doing what God wants.

The battle within our hearts will not end this side of eternity. However, we can change how hard we must fight that battle by choosing to feed our Spirit more than we feed the desires of our flesh. What do I mean? I have heard it said it is akin to having two dogs – a black, sin-oriented one and a white, Spirit-led one. If you feed one and starve the other, which one will win in a fight? So it is with the flesh versus the Spirit. The more we give way to our carnal or fleshly, materialistic, and self-oriented desires, the bigger and stronger and more demanding the flesh gets. Conversely, the more we feed our spiritual nature with prayer, Scripture, worship, and Christian fellowship, the bigger and stronger the Spirit becomes. Which one we feed is a choice. The more often we choose correctly, the easier it becomes to

“abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul.” Sowing to the flesh results in spiritual death and corruption. However, if we choose to sow to the Spirit of God, we shall reap life and peace.

Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap. For he who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life. (Galatians 6:7,8)

For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. For to be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace. (Romans 8:5,6)

The next section in the 1st Peter passage discusses how we must have our *conduct honorable*. This may seem repetitive but clearly our Christian witness to the world is extremely important to God. As the popular saying goes, some of us may be the ‘only Bible somebody else will ever read’. The pattern of our lives and the conduct we portray on a daily basis will either glorify God or it will not. We are His. Therefore, we are told to act according to our calling. In doing so we honor God and are far more likely to draw others toward God than if we were not acting honorably. It is also necessary to state our conduct must be honorable toward all people, not just fellow believers. We must consistently and with humility obey our work standards, our laws, and our government ordinances in order to have an upright standing among all people – completely above reproach and well-respected by everyone so as to not shame the God we serve. In this way, by doing good, we silence those who would accuse us.

In summary, Christians are to be well known for doing good, honoring all people, and loving one another. This is the will of God for every believer. *For this is the will of God, that by doing good you may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men-- as free, yet not using liberty as a cloak for vice, but as bondservants of God. Honor all people. Love the brotherhood. Fear God.*

Honor the king. Finally, let's end this chapter by drawing from a wonderful verse which doesn't explicitly state the words "will of God" yet clearly proclaims what God requires of us all: *He has shown you, O man, what is good; And what does the LORD require of you but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God. (Micah 6:8)*

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Seek First the Kingdom of Heaven

Most people spend their entire lives seeking various means of financial security in order to provide for themselves the basic needs of food, clothing, and shelter – for now and in the future. This is a reasonable and necessary pursuit. Additionally, we may also find ourselves devoting time and energy in the quest of affording the extras – nice clothing, fine dining, higher education, beautiful homes, new vehicles, extravagant vacations, fitness and leisure equipment, and the like – such things are not always attainable and can overly consume us if we do not hold our desires in balance. Still others find themselves expending much effort and expense in accumulating many friends, finding a spouse, or bearing children and building a legacy. Finally, there are those of us who may be driven to seek a high social standing, elevated employment status, power, wealth, fame and a litany of various other achievements. In all these things, what we are really doing is pursuing our definition of ‘happiness’. We have a way of thinking which continually speaks to our hearts, saying, “If I could only have this one thing or achieve this next goal or experience this higher-level lifestyle, I would then truly be happy.” This is the way of mankind. It shouldn’t surprise us then; God’s way is quite different.

Jesus spoke the following words to His followers, imploring them to not excessively waste their time worrying about their wants and needs but to instead depend on God and trust Him. *Therefore, I say to you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink; nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air, for they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? Which of you by worrying can add one cubit to his stature? So why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; and yet I say to you that even Solomon in*

all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. Now if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is, and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will He not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? Therefore, do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you. (Matthew 6:25-33)

Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all things needed in life shall be added to you. What a simple yet complicated command. God is telling us if we make Him our first priority, He will handle our needs in His way and in His timing. We can trust Him just as we can trust the lilies in the fields to always be beautiful through no effort of their own but by God's hand. *But as for me, I would seek God, And to God I would commit my cause. (Job 5:8)* Instead of continually chasing after what we think we should have, we ought to be chasing after God and what *He* thinks we should have. God truly is the source of all good things. *Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning. (James 1:17)*

God is light and abundant life for the human soul. He illuminates for us the paths of wisdom, knowledge, and understanding with His truths. He is our protector, the fount of our strength, and He desires to be with us and guide us as we walk this life and enter the next. We have nothing to be afraid of or worry about when we seek Him and His kingdom first in our lives. *The LORD is my light and my salvation; Whom shall I fear? The LORD is the strength of my life; Of whom shall I be afraid? (Psalm 27:1)* Then Jesus spoke to them again, saying, "I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness but have the light of life." (John 8:12) Through our faith in the life and death of His Son, Jesus Christ, we have been provided the only access possible to God and His throne. *Jesus said to him, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me. (John 14:6)*

Why should we want to seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness? Because He is the ultimate fulfilment for our yearning souls. *As the deer pants for the water brooks, so pants my soul for You, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God? (Psalm 42:1,2)* If we seek Him, we will find Him, and we will always be satisfied. *And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart. (Jeremiah 29:13)* Amazingly, the Bible tells us we are only able to seek God because He sought us first. *We love Him because He first loved us. (1 John 4:19)* Our pursuit of Him and our faith in Him is merely the response of our hearts to His constant call. We might have an impression we made a decision to find God and find faith, but what we learn as we study Scripture is the reason we made such a decision in the first place is because God was drawing us to Him. *No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day. (John 6:44)*

The human pursuit of happiness will continually end in failure. Happiness is a fleeting emotion, entirely destined to fade quickly and leave us feeling unfulfilled once again. To pursue happiness in and of itself leads to dissatisfaction, anxiety, and depression. It is a hopeless and futile cause because once gained, happiness cannot be sustained. When we attain or acquire what we thought would make us happy, we soon find ourselves wanting something else, and therefore we are destined to be unsatisfied once again until we achieve the next thing. It is a perpetual pony ride on a merry-go-round from which we cannot seem to dismount unless we turn to God and set our hearts upon seeking Him and His kingdom first and foremost. In that pursuit, we shall be filled. Instead of ‘happiness’ we will find deep-seated joy, contentment, and a peaceful heart. *Now godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. (1 Timothy 6:6,7)* Instead of unending scurrying and chasing after materialistic ideals and self-created notions of achievement we will find ourselves able to be still and securely rest in knowing God. *Be still and know that I am God. (Psalm 46:10)*

The peace God gives us is a peace beyond our understanding. *Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:6,7)* God-given peace and joy are the very real and permanent benefits of pursuing a personal relationship with Him. When we have God in our lives, we nurture a steadfast, grounded, divinely-given contentment which is rooted in our faith in Him and His unchanging promises. We will have inner peace regardless of the outward and sometimes difficult circumstances and trials life may throw at us. Jesus encouraged His followers on this very issue. *Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid. (John 14:27)* The prophet Amos gave us this declaration from God as well, *For thus says the LORD to the house of Israel: 'Seek Me and live'. (Amos 5:4)* Seek God and live. Abundantly live. Peaceably live. *I [Jesus] have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly. (John 10:10)* In seeking first the kingdom of heaven, we will find we have lives truly worth living.

How does one seek God? We can start by spending time with Him first, if possible, every day. We allow reading and studying of the Bible as well as prayer time and personal conversations with God to be done during the earliest part of our morning. This habit will deeply change how we face each day. It is a wonderful discipline which blesses the believer greatly. Within the pages of Scripture, we continually learn about God and His Son, and all He desires to teach us. Our prayer times are often very revealing and instructive, for as we speak to God, He will sometimes bring to our thoughts something we were not even planning on discussing – do not quench His Spirit but immediately address any issue or person God brings to your mind when in prayer.

Prayer is not a daily recitation of rhyming words; it is a private conversation held with God Himself and its purpose is to draw

us closer to Him relationally as well as to align our wills with His. The Lord encourages us to start our day talking to Him. *With my soul I have desired You in the night, yes, by my spirit within me I will seek You early; For when Your judgments are in the earth, the inhabitants of the world will learn righteousness. (Isaiah 26:9)* Seek Him early. Every morning. God's mercies are new every morning. If we feel we had a bad day or really messed up the day before, we must bring our concerns and apologies to the Lord's throne when we awaken in the morning and leave them at His feet. *Through the LORD's mercies we are not consumed, because His compassions fail not. They are new every morning; Great is Your faithfulness. (Lamentations 3:22,23)* When we begin our day with Scripture and prayer, and perhaps the studying of a well-written devotional, we will find our behavior to be more Spirit-led, our outlook godlier, with our peace and joy more sustaining and strengthening as we go about our daily business of life.

Another manner in which we 'seek first the kingdom of God' is by having an eternal perspective. *If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth. (Colossians 3:1,2)* As we grow in our faith, we learn to have an increasingly eternal focus instead of a 'here and now' temporal focus. We discover how to set our minds on those things which are above, in heaven. It may not seem like it now, but our eternity is far more important than our present life. When we progress and mature in our knowledge and understanding of God we begin to see the world and all its problems as small and pithy compared to His love for us, His gift of salvation to us, and His eternal plans for us. Our newfound spiritual priorities will also put the tedium of daily issues and even the torment of our severe trials into proper perspective. We become more able to see things the way God sees them, and therefore we are empowered to react accordingly – not as the unbelieving world does, in panic, stress, and anxiety – but in the divine peace, strength, and immovable joy of our God and Savior. *For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will*

transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body, according to the working by which He is able even to subdue all things to Himself. (Philippians 3:20,21)

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Led by the Holy Spirit

Before a person becomes a believer, he or she has spent their entire lives living after the flesh. What does this mean? Every choice made, every word spoken, every thought and attitude experienced is dictated by our personal wants, needs, pride, or emotions. We are circumstantially driven – how we feel and how we behave is determined by our situations, our surroundings, or the actions of others. For example, someone or something offends us, we will react in hurt or anger – our sense of pride takes a hit and influences our response. Conversely, if something or someone delights us, we react favorably. We unwittingly ride a virtual rollercoaster of flesh-driven emotions and reactions throughout the day. We are also driven by the flesh in the sense that we daily seek to fulfill our various desires, wants, or pleasures through the venues of money, food, leisure time, relationship, and striving after those things we do not have yet but desire for ourselves in the future.

All our actions are determined by what the Bible calls the ‘lusts of our flesh’. There is nothing spiritual about our decision making and our pattern of living before we become saved. We live instinctually, in a gratification-seeking or self-preserving manner. Flesh driven or ‘carnal’ living is the standard operating status of the unsaved world. *For all that is in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—is not of the Father but is of the world. (1 John 2:16)* Upon becoming born again, the believer immediately develops a new outlook and a new source of behavior which is prompted and empowered by the Spirit of God. This shift of attitude and conduct is what God calls ‘being led by the Spirit’, or ‘walking in the Spirit’ because it involves viewing all of life through the lens of the Holy Spirit as we take the time to pause and filter situations through the teachings of the Word of God and how He has instructed us to respond; as opposed to simply knee-jerk reacting in the flesh. In order to facilitate a better understanding of what kind of behavior

and thought patterns God wants to see in us, He has given us a number of commands and instructions throughout Scripture which amount to the idea that we should be striving to impart the heart of His Son, Jesus Christ and live according to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. The following passage is really a rather comprehensive summary of practical instruction regarding Spirit-led behavior versus the deeds of the flesh.

For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For the whole Law is fulfilled in one word, in the statement, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." But if you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another. But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh. For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the Law. Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these, of which I forewarn you, just as I have forewarned you, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit. Let us not become boastful, challenging one another, envying one another. (Galatians 5:13-26)

We see the first works of the flesh listed are 'biting and devouring one another', which we would interpret as behaving in such a way as to be destructive, injurious, or vindictive toward each other. The other fleshly forms of conduct listed are immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying, drunkenness, carousing, boastfulness, challenging one another.

The common thread found in all such behavior is a lack of love for others in such moments. These actions reflect what people do when they are being self-oriented and self-seeking – not putting the best interests of others first. The Bible informs us our desire for pleasure is a driving factor of flesh-driven behavior. *Where do wars and fights come from among you? Do they not come from your desires for pleasure that war in your members? You lust and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and war. Yet you do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures. (James 4:1-3)* Flesh-driven deeds spring forth from a self-guided nature instead of a God-directed heart. It all traces back to original sin; we inherently are built to serve ourselves as if we were our own little gods, rather than serving others and the God Who created us.

In contrast, the aforementioned Galatians passage indicates a life of walking in the Spirit will exhibit the following spiritual fruits which conquer our flesh-driven nature: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. These attributes do not happen without purposeful practice, a strong prayer life, and abiding in the Word of God regularly. It takes a lifetime to work out how to pursue this manner of living and being, but God empowers us to do so and He ignites in us a passion for wanting to do so. The more a Christian strives to express the life of Jesus Christ, the more he or she is capable of exhibiting unconditional love towards others, regardless of response. The more a believer abides in prayer and the Word of God, the more he or she becomes rooted and grounded in godly knowledge, wisdom, and understanding with regard to Spirit led conduct. Walking in the Spirit will instill an increasingly greater spiritual peace in us as we grow in our discernment and reflect the love and wisdom of Jesus Christ towards those around us. There truly is an inner peace of the heart which surpasses all human understanding and can be experienced no matter what situation or circumstance we are facing. It is bred from the foundations of joy, thankfulness, and gentleness which will naturally result from our fully reconciled, personal relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ.

Rejoice in the Lord always. Again, I will say, rejoice! Let your gentleness be known to all men. The Lord is at hand. Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:4-7)

Patience and self-control are a big part of our spiritual behavior, and often some of the hardest things to manage successfully in a given moment. Both must be purposefully and willfully practiced as the discerning Christian learns to pause and filter all things through the teachings of Jesus Christ. This is worded beautifully in the following verse as the action of “bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Jesus Christ. *For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. (2 Corinthians 10:4,5)* Our natural flesh reactions of anger, impatience, self-promotion, or unkindness can all be brought under control (captivity) and into the obedience of the commands of Jesus Christ.

Our behavior is a choice. Our words are a choice. Our pattern of godly and gentle conduct is something which we must foster and make a habit. Kindness, goodness, faithfulness, and gentleness will flow from the heart of the spiritually inspired and obedient believer as he or she pursues the ways of God instead of giving in to their own will and reactions. Only by the power of the Holy Spirit can the Christian behave in such manners on a regular basis. *Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit,’ Says the LORD of hosts. (Zechariah 4:6)* As believers we have a great well of spiritual joy from which we can endlessly draw, filling us to overflowing and enabling us to bless others with a new countenance and gentle conduct. We really are able to learn not to respond in offense or anger to those things which we used to become angry from. We will want to quench our critical and condemning nature and strive instead to treat others with God-given patience, kindness, mercy, and love. We are empowered

to practice soft words while seeking to bring about peace rather than elevating an argument or generating strife. *A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger. (Proverbs 15:1)*

We are instructed to build up or edify one another, rather than tear down. *Therefore, let us pursue the things which make for peace and the things by which one may edify another. (Romans 14:19)* We will be able to stop our quick tongues and our quick tempers by pausing and prayerfully looking to Jesus and His teachings for how to deal with any given situation. All flesh-driven, human nature-oriented, knee-jerk reactions can be stemmed and prevented by a thought-life which is purposefully focused on God's love, precepts, commands, and promises. *So then, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath; for the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God. (James 1:19,20)* Notice this verse in James so explicitly implores believers to work on listening, really *hearing* others – let listening or hearing be the thing we are quickest to do. There's a humorous saying, "God gave us two ears and only one mouth for a reason!" We are instructed to delay our propensity to speak or interrupt others when they talk, and we must temper any anger or offense which may be stirred up in disagreeing with others.

Personally, I have always had the tendency of jumping in and trying to speak my mind without completely hearing out what others have to say. This verse in James is very convicting to my heart and therefore immensely helpful to me. I greatly appreciate when the Lord brings this particular passage to my mind and I am able to obediently act on it during my interactions with people. What a wonderful and powerful thing it is for God to transform us into better listeners as we learn to let our words be few and chosen carefully! *Do not be rash with your mouth and let not your heart utter anything hastily before God. For God is in heaven, and you on earth; Therefore, let your words be few. (Ecclesiastes 5:2)*

Jesus told His disciples people would know them by their love for one another. *A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another. (John 13:34,35)* The kind of love being talked about here is a Greek word, ‘agape’. It is the love of God – a love which is unconditional, willful, and purposeful; not dependent upon emotion or response but simply, freely given by choice and commitment. One can only learn about and determine to practice such a love by knowing about Jesus Christ and the love He had for the whole world which caused Him to choose to be a sacrifice for our sins though we did not deserve it and many would not respond to it. A servant is not greater than his master, and therefore, as Jesus Christ calls us to be imitators of Him, we are called to love and serve others in the same manner as He did; regardless of response or whether it is deserved. This is the way in which a believer can make an impact on others and affect the lost on such a deep level they can be brought to repentance before God, in search of such a love for their own lives. We are told in the verse below our love for one another is the most important of all Spirit-led behavior and it is referred to as a ‘bond of perfection’.

Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering; bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do. But above all these things put on love, which is the bond of perfection. And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to which also you were called in one body; and be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord. And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him. (Colossians 3:12-17)

We see the repetition of humility or ‘lowliness’ as being part and parcel of all Spirit led behavior. When we become born again,

one of the aspects of our newfound vision is having a correct understanding of our sin nature as viewed by our Creator. This awareness brings forth a humility and repentant heart which allows a shift in our nature, moving from a self-focused mindset to being others-focused. Humbleness is an essential fruit of the Holy Spirit. True humility will bring about the faith, patience, gentleness, servanthood, and love for others which God calls all Christians to have. *I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. (Ephesians 4:1-3)* We notice God also demands a unity of Spirit amongst His children, because we are born of the same Holy Spirit. If we are all led by the same Spirit, we should then be united and bonded together by that Spirit, seeking to serve one another and love one another in any practical way possible.

For you were once darkness, but now [you are] light in the Lord. Walk as children of light for the fruit of the Spirit is in all goodness, righteousness, and truth, finding out what is acceptable to the Lord. (Ephesians 5:8-10) Christians walk in the light of God. The knowledge of God and revelation of Jesus Christ and what He has done for mankind is an enlightenment only the Word of God and His Holy Spirit can provide. *Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path. (Psalm 119:105)* As such, we use God's Word and the promptings of His Spirit to light our way as we walk the path of life. God shines His light onto our conduct, thoughts, attitudes, and words as we live our lives. If we are open to His leading we will see where there is the pitfall of sin and avoid it. We will also see where the way is straight and true, and not stray from it. *Your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, 'This is the way, walk in it, whenever you turn to the right hand or whenever you turn to the left'. (Isaiah 30:21)* This is how we walk 'as children of light'. We allow God's Word to be our mirror and our foundation of wisdom and truth on a daily basis. When we sin, we will immediately recognize it and repent of it. The Christian is not sinless, just forgiven. We will make mistakes, but we have

been handed the power to recognize, master, and defeat sin by God's Spirit, by His Word, and by an active prayer life. *There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death. (Romans 8:1,2)*

The flesh vs. spirit battle is fought daily in the life of every believer. We are soldiers on several levels. We have three enemies actively waging war against us – the secular world, our own flesh or sin nature, and the devil and those who serve him. This may sound daunting, but we can understand Jesus is greater than all our adversaries and has already overcome them for us. *You are of God, little children, and have overcome them, because He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world. (1 John 4:4)* We will have our battles, trials, and tribulations, be they our own inner spiritual warfare or our outward circumstances. But we must never lose heart because Jesus has already won all things and God has put them under His feet in the eternal realm. *He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, far above all principality and power and might and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come. And He put all things under His feet and gave Him to be head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all. (Ephesians 1:20-23)*

However, although from the perspective of eternity Jesus has already won the war, as believers we still have our part to play on the battlefield because we are bound by time, space, and matter while we remain alive this side of eternity. We stay strong and protected in this battle by equipping ourselves with the armor of God. *Therefore, take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. Stand therefore, having girded your waist with truth, having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and having shod your feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace; above all, taking the shield of faith with which you will be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked one. And take the helmet*

of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God; praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, being watchful to this end with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints. (Ephesians 6:13-18)

Our comfort continually lies in the reminder of the everlasting peace we already have in Jesus Christ and in the knowledge of His ultimate triumph: *These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world. (John 16:33)* Again, how powerful are we in Christ Jesus? *He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world. (1 John 4:4)* Jesus Christ is greater than any world system, godless culture, fleshly tendency, devil, or demon. He has conquered them all, and through His Spirit, He is in us. Our spiritual obedience leads to our own overcoming of trials and temptations. As the 2nd Corinthians passage encourages us: *For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. (2 Corinthians 10:3-5)*

We take every thought and attitude captive to the obedience of Jesus Christ. In doing so, we will find we are walking in His Spirit and what a joyful, wonderful, powerful, and freeing thing it is! We will not be tossed about by every circumstance, trial, or challenge, but instead we can simply stand firm, responding to all things with the steady peace and love of God and the underlying joy of His salvation which has been made ours by faith.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

A Life of Worship

Somehow, many of today's Christians have fallen under a general assumption worshipping God translates to singing songs of praise to Him or about Him, whether at home or at church, at Christian music festivals, in the car, or in Christian coffee shops. While music is certainly part of the worship of God, it is not the sole means by which we are called to worship Him. Our worship of God also involves how we speak, how we pray, how we continually present an attitude of thankfulness toward Him, how we witness to others about Him, how we glorify Him with our conduct, and how we treat others in His Name. *Therefore, by Him let us continually offer the sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to His name. But do not forget to do good and to share, for with such sacrifices God is well pleased. (Hebrews 13:15,16)*

Pursuing a life of worship truly has as much to do with how we live our lives and conduct ourselves for God's glory as it has to do with singing or creating music. *I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God. (Romans 12:1,2)* As has been mentioned in a previous chapter, this verse explains we are to present ourselves as a living sacrifice to God. Yes, we have the sacrifice of praise which God loves, but we are also called to bring to Him the sacrifice of our very lives. We pick up our cross daily and strive to serve Him to the best of our abilities, committing to living for God instead of for ourselves, as we follow Jesus Christ and His commands.. *Then He said to them all, "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will save it." (Luke 9:23,24)*

Presenting ourselves as a living sacrifice would invariably include the understanding that we wake up each morning and purposely determine to live the day for our Lord and Savior. We would do well to begin our day by thanking God for the gift of life, both now and eternally. We can certainly also see fit to regularly thank Him for His love, for sending His Son to die for us, and for the faith He has given to us. Additionally, we should be seeking to thank Him for everything else He provides to us in our lives – family, friends, fellowship of believers, His Word, our health, our jobs, our homes, etc. As I have mentioned in previous chapters, we ought to seek God early in the morning, before our day has even begun, thereby setting the tone of our day in aligning our wills with His. We can include any repenting of the sins of yesterday while asking for His help in living righteously today. *O God, You are my God; Early will I seek You. (Psalm 63:1) With my soul I have desired You in the night, yes, by my spirit within me I will seek You early. (Isaiah 26:9)*

The worship of God should widely encompass the activities of prayer, bible reading, devotional studies, and yes, singing or listening to hymns or Christian music...but just as importantly, worship must seep into the conduct and conversation we exhibit throughout daily life. Worship is about holding God in reverence and awe. As a result, we will find ourselves living and walking in the ways of Jesus Christ as His Word has instructed us. Worship is about expressing ourselves in a manner which honors God, shares His truths, and offers His gift of salvation to anyone who is open to hearing about Him. It is an attitude of the heart. Worship involves dedicating each and every daily chore, task, work, duty, and responsibility to God and performing those things as if we were doing them for the Lord Himself. *And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him. (Colossians 3:17)* This is true worship. It is a life lived for the will of God instead of for self.

God indeed created music and song, and He shows us in many places throughout Scripture where His children sing, play instruments, and praise Him via the media of music. However,

a large part of how God requires us to worship Him is by our heartfelt obedience and humble commitment to Him and His commands in daily life. *Therefore, be imitators of God as dear children. And walk in love, as Christ also has loved us and given Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling aroma. (Ephesians 5:1,2)* As Jesus gave Himself for us, a sacrifice, so we give ourselves to God, as a living sacrifice, seeking to please Him and follow His ways. We must worship Him in spirit and in truth – this really is not about singing, but instead is concerned with the condition and focus of our hearts. *But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth. (John 4:23,24)* To worship God in spirit and in truth requires a person to be born again with His Spirit and to be familiar with God’s truths as taught throughout Scripture. We serve God with reverence over the course of every day – confident of our future eternal inheritance and overflowing with His grace toward others. *Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us have grace, by which we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear. For our God is a consuming fire. (Hebrews 12:28,29)*

A life of worship is a life of spiritual abundance filled with the peace of God, the joy of His salvation, the love of others, and a daily imitation of the servanthood of Jesus Christ. It is a life in which the worship of one’s self decreases, while the worship and loving nature of Jesus Christ increases. *He must increase, but I must decrease. (John 3:30)* A life of worship is having thankfulness and willing obedience, as we seek to bless God in all our thoughts, words, and actions. *Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure. Do all things without complaining and disputing, that you may become blameless and harmless, children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the*

world, holding fast the word of life. (Philippians 2:12-16) We work out our salvation with fear and trembling as we shine His light in the midst of a broken, fallen world. Our worship flows from an attitude of awe toward our almighty God and His gift of salvation. The passage above explains how God Himself works to create within us the will and the ability to conduct our lives blamelessly and for His pleasure.

Psalm 103 is a psalm of praise and blessing which aptly describes this worshipful and thankful mindset. When we sometimes get caught up in the worries and cares of our lives, losing sight of all God has done, currently is doing, and will do for us in the future, Psalm 103 is a great place to turn and meditate on in prayer.

*Bless the LORD, O my soul;
And all that is within me, bless His holy name!
Bless the LORD, O my soul,
And forget not all His benefits:
Who forgives all your iniquities,
Who heals all your diseases,
Who redeems your life from destruction,
Who crowns you with lovingkindness and tender mercies,
Who satisfies your mouth with good things,
So that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.
The LORD executes righteousness
And justice for all who are oppressed.
He made known His ways to Moses,
His acts to the children of Israel.
The LORD is merciful and gracious,
Slow to anger, and abounding in mercy.
He will not always strive with us,
Nor will He keep His anger forever.
He has not dealt with us according to our sins,
Nor punished us according to our iniquities.
For as the heavens are high above the earth,
So great is His mercy toward those who fear Him;
As far as the east is from the west,
So far has He removed our transgressions from us.*

*a father pities his children,
So the LORD pities those who fear Him.
For He knows our frame;
He remembers that we are dust.
As for man, his days are like grass;
As a flower of the field, so he flourishes.
For the wind passes over it, and it is gone,
And its place remembers it no more.
But the mercy of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting
On those who fear Him,
And His righteousness to children's children,
To such as keep His covenant,
And to those who remember His commandments to do them.
The LORD has established His throne in heaven,
And His kingdom rules over all.
Bless the LORD, you His angels,
Who excel in strength, who do His word,
Heeding the voice of His word.
Bless the LORD, all you His hosts,
You ministers of His, who do His pleasure.
Bless the LORD, all His works,
In all places of His dominion.
Bless the LORD, O my soul!
(Psalm 103:1-22)*

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Agape Love

Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing. Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails. (1 Corinthians 13:1-8)

What a powerful passage depicting how important love is to God! No matter our talents, no matter our obedience or sacrifices, and no matter the depth of our faith, if we do not practice all things from a foundation of divinely inspired love, our efforts and deeds are useless and meaningless to Him. God further informs us in 1st Corinthians love is the preeminent action in which all Christians should be abiding: *And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love. (1 Corinthians 13:13)*

Our English language can be somewhat stunted in the sense that we often use one word to describe an action which inherently has a variety of applications. For example, we use the word “love” universally to apply to any object and any level of feeling. We love God, we love our spouse, we love our children, we love pizza, we love football, we love going on vacations, and we love our friends. This broad word usage in the English language can result in a slightly incomplete understanding of certain teachings in the Bible because the original languages of Hebrew and Greek invariably will utilize several different words to describe

something which in English is covered by only one word. Therefore, we must realize English translations do not always adequately reflect the unique, varying meanings and intent of the Author when it comes to a word such as “love”. For this reason, it is vital to establish firm definitions for the diverse uses of the word “love” which God uses throughout Scripture. In this chapter, it will suffice for us to survey five different Greek “love” words and one Hebrew “love” word, because doing so will shed great light on what God intends us to practice amongst one another as believers.

Greek Terms:

Epithumia – Strong desire; to set the heart on, long for; when practiced wrongly it becomes to lust or to covet: *Therefore God also gave them up to uncleanness, in the lusts [epithumia] of their hearts, to dishonor their bodies among themselves. (Romans 1:24)*

Eros – Romantic love, passionate, sentimental, yearning to unite with and possess the beloved; emotional feeling-based love, it is changeable and cannot last all by itself. Eros is not used in the New Testament, but the meaning is expressed in several passages of The Song of Solomon, for example: *May he kiss me with the kisses of his mouth! For your love is better than wine. Your oils have a pleasing fragrance, your name is like purified oil; Therefore the maidens love you. Draw me after you and let us run together! The king has brought me into his chambers. (Song of Solomon 1:2-4)*

Storge – comfortable, familiar, natural affection, ‘belonging’ type of love; characterized as ‘familial’ love – shared by spouses, parents, children and siblings. This form is combined with Phileo (brotherly love) in the following verse: *Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil. Cling to what is good. 10 Be kindly affectionate [philostorge] to one another with brotherly love, in honor giving preference to one another; (Romans 12:9,10)*

Phileo – cherishes and has tender affection but always expects response. A love relationship typified by comradeship, brotherhood, sharing, communication, and friendship. *So when they had eaten breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon, son of Jonah, do you love [agapao] Me more than these? He said to Him, “Yes, Lord; You know that I love [phileo] You.” (John 21:15)*

Agape – Values, serves, and gives unconditionally; a love of action and of will. Charity. It is the love God manifested for us when He sent His Son to die for us. It is a love concerned with doing what is best for the beloved, regardless of response. Its source is Jesus Christ. It can be fueled by nothing less than the Holy Spirit and cannot be completely understood by the unsaved world. *For God so loved [agapao] the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. (John 3:16)*

Hebrew Term:

Ahava – the Old Testament counterpart to Agape, the Hebrew word Ahava is made up of 3 Hebrew letters, aleph, hey, and vet. From these root letters comes a root word, hav, which means “to give”. All forms of this word carry the implication of an act of giving from within ourselves toward another. It is the purposeful, servanthood love of the spirit and the will, unconditionally committed to seeking what is best for the beloved at all times, expressed through spiritual, emotional, and physical channels: *You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people, but you shall love (ahava) your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord. (Leviticus 19:18) Since you were precious in My sight, You have been honored, And I have loved (ahab) you; Therefore I will give men for you, And people for your life. (Isaiah 43:4)*

This list of words for love is by no means exhaustive of every type of love found in either the Greek or Hebrew languages but gives us an idea of the many different types of love which are referenced throughout Scripture. What we can learn from this

word study is that the love God has for us is ‘agape’ love and it is this unconditional, purposeful, willful choice-based love which He commands us to practice selflessly toward one another. *By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But whoever has this world’s goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him? (1 John 3:16-17)*

In the following passage God commands believers to love one another with brotherly love, or ‘phileo’ love, yet in the same breath He then commands us to practice agape love in action by listing things we should be doing which sound rather impossible – love our enemies, do not take vengeance on others, put others above ourselves, be patient in trials, bless those who persecute us, do not return evil for evil, and live peaceably among all men as much as it is within our power.

Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil. Cling to what is good. Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honor giving preference to one another; not lagging in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord; rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation, continuing steadfastly in prayer; distributing to the needs of the saints, given to hospitality. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep. Be of the same mind toward one another. Do not set your mind on high things, but associate with the humble. Do not be wise in your own opinion. Repay no one evil for evil. Have regard for good things in the sight of all men. If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men. Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, “Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,” says the Lord. Therefore, if your enemy is hungry, feed him; If he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head. Do not be overcome by evil but overcome evil with good. (Romans 12:9-21) This is quite a string of hefty commands; commands which specifically portray what agape love looks like on a practical level. Agape love is not a feeling-based love. It is an

unconditional, sacrificial, servanthood love borne out of will and purpose.

The first example of what agape love looks like is found within the actions and nature of God Himself. The Bible teaches us God is love. *And we have known and believed the love that God has for us. God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God in him. (1 John 4:16)* God loves us unconditionally though we do not deserve His love. He treats us with His unmerited favor, grace and mercy regardless of our own words, attitudes and behavior. He loves us sacrificially through His Son, Jesus Christ, Who died on the cross to atone for the spiritual rebellion of the entire world; past, present, and future. *For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. (John 3:16)* God sacrificed His Only Son even for those who hate and revile Him as an enemy. *But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us...For if, while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! (Romans 5:8-10)* God loves us in deed and in truth; and He encourages us to love others in the same manner. *My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth. (1 John 3:18)*

God's love for us does not falter based on a bad day or an ugly situation. He is faithful even when we are not. God's agape love for us and the resulting actions of His love do not ever change. As I have stated in a previous chapter, His mercies toward us are new every morning. *Through the LORD's mercies we are not consumed, because His compassions fail not. They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness. (Lamentations 3:22, 23)* His love is everlasting and given to us purely out of His choice and His will for our benefit, for our blessing, and for our good. That is agape love. This kind of love is only possible because God's love is not founded in the flesh but rather in the Spirit, as He is Spirit. *God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth. (John 4:24)*

Because we are God's imagers and ambassadors as born-again believers, we are called to shine His love and His light throughout this fallen world. We are empowered to do this by His Spirit, and we are commanded to do this by His Word. Agape love enables a life to be lived in a joyous pattern of selflessness, consideration, and compassion for those around us. This kind of love produces a steady kindness and gentleness in our behavior. As stated in a prior chapter, we will purposely choose not to react to negative or upsetting situations in anger or defensiveness, but instead we will seek to impart soft words, concern, and compassion for the wellbeing of others in such moments. *A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger. (Proverbs 15:1)* Arguments, relationship strife, dissensions and resentment could be avoided or quickly diffused if believers would simply humble themselves and work to practice agape love toward others in their conversation and behavior. *Therefore, let us pursue the things which make for peace and the things by which one may edify another. (Romans 14:19)*

Agape love is intended to be a witness to the unsaved world. *A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another. (John 13:34,35)* The world is supposed to recognize Christians as being different – not in a ‘holier than thou’ manner, but in the sense that they see an unnatural, God-given humility and unconditional love being practiced among believers. By this, all will know we are disciples of Jesus Christ. When we behave in a loving manner toward the one who is acting unlovable, God softens our hearts toward that person. When we pray for the one who is causing us distress, again, God softens our hearts toward that person. When our intentions are only good toward the one who is treating us badly, God is invited to change, improve, and strengthen the relationship by the power of His Spirit. *Do not be overcome by evil but overcome evil with good. (Romans 12:21)* In a nutshell, God commands believers to practice love in the face of hurt feelings; love in the face of disrespect; love in the face of ill treatment; love in the face of trials, stress, persecution, and tragedy; love in the face of neglect, evil, or hate. He teaches

us to love and be a blessing to others in all diligence and in all sincerity, no matter how we are treated, because that is how we have been treated by Him.

Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God, for God is love. In this the love of God was manifested toward us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. (1 John 4:7-11)

Agape love operates in continual forgiveness and purposeful commitment to the wellbeing of others. There are no grudges when one exhibits such an amazing, freeing love. It is a love which squelches sin, mercifully covers mistakes, and over time, is able to correct wrong behavior. *Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all sins. (Proverbs 10:2) And above all things have fervent love for one another, for love will cover a multitude of sins. (1st Peter 4:8)* The bottom line is, Christians are to be known for their love. Just as Jesus loves us, so we should love others. *Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness in the day of judgment; because as He is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment. But he who fears has not been made perfect in love. We love Him because He first loved us. If someone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen? And this commandment we have from Him: that he who loves God must love his brother also. (1 John 4:17-21)*

And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love to one another and to all, just as we do to you, so that He may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all His saints. (1 Thessalonians 3:12,13)

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Servanthood

There can be no discussion of the love of Jesus Christ without including the servanthood which is also commanded of every believer. *So when He had washed their feet, taken His garments, and sat down again, He said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? You call Me Teacher and Lord, and you say well, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you. Most assuredly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master; nor is he who is sent greater than he who sent him. If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them. (John 13:12-17)*

Servanthood goes hand-in-hand with loving others. This action is a fruit of the Spirit behavior and an attitude which Jesus Christ Himself displayed when He came to earth to dwell among us and die for us. We are reminded God's ways are not the ways of human nature. To God, the greatest of all is the one who is lowly and humble; one who serves and loves others rather than the one who strives to achieve status and power. *But Jesus called them to Himself and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave – just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many. (Matthew 20:25-28)*

To the secular world, servanthood sounds menial and demeaning – it is seen as drudgery and tediousness, lacking value, and status. To God, servanthood performed for His Name is to His great glory and gives Him great pleasure. Jesus states the Father will elevate and honor those who serve Him and those who serve others in the Name of Jesus.

Then a dispute arose among them as to which of them would be greatest. And Jesus, perceiving the thought of their heart, took a little child and set him by Him, and said to them, "Whoever receives this little child in My name receives Me; and whoever receives Me receives Him who sent Me. For he who is least among you all will be great. (Luke 9:46-48)

But he who is greatest among you shall be your servant. And whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted. (Matthew 23:11,12)

Then the King will say to those on His right hand, 'Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: 'for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; 'I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.' Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You? Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?' And the King will answer and say to them, 'Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.'" (Matthew 25:34-40)

If anyone serves Me, let him follow Me; and where I am, there My servant will be also. If anyone serves Me, him My Father will honor. (John 12:26)

You call Me Teacher and Lord, and you say well, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you. Most assuredly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master; nor is he who is sent greater than he who sent him. If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them. (John 13:13-17)

No servant is great than his master. We are told this truth more than once in the Scriptures. Whatever Jesus Christ did, we are to

do. If He washed the feet of those who followed Him, we are commanded to wash the feet of our brethren as well. In those times, it was a cultural norm to wash the feet of any guest who visited a home, because most people walked and they did so in sandals, thereby continuously having dirty feet after a long day's trek or a day of work. Today, we don't have feet-washing as part of our daily routine, but we can receive the teaching as a picture which shows us our servanthood toward others should be in the nature and character of Jesus Christ.

Interesting that Jesus tells His disciples they are blessed if they serve others in the manner which He taught them to do. *If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them. (John 13:17)* To be blessed means to be happy. Happy are you if you serve others! When our focus is on the wellbeing of others, we will experience joy and satisfaction in serving and caring for the needs of the people around us. Self-focus is a sure-fire way of fostering anxiety, dissatisfaction, and selfishness. God knows this and it is why He continually promotes the idea His children should have an attitude of servanthood and agape love towards others. When we become involved in loving and serving others, we will hardly have time to dwell on ourselves and our perceived problems. As a result, our own issues will cease to carry such a weighty or burdensome importance to us and instead we will be overcome with the blessings which flow from doing all things for the glory of God.

We are free; free from the domination of sin and death...and therefore we willingly give ourselves as bondservants to Jesus Christ. In serving Him, we fulfill His purposes by serving one another. *For you, brethren, have been called to liberty; only do not use liberty as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. (Galatians 5:13)*

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Forgiveness

The concept of forgiveness is a key element of a Christian's life because God has ultimately forgiven us of all sin through our faith in the atoning sacrifice of His Son, Jesus Christ. Forgiveness is also a fruit of the Holy Spirit and is an action commanded by God to be practiced by the believer.

Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice. And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you. (Ephesians 4:31, 32)

Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering; bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do. But above all these things put on love, which is the bond of perfection. And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to which also you were called in one body; and be thankful. (Colossians 3:12-14)

Lack of forgiveness is a flesh-driven product of our sin nature and as such it is incredibly harmful to us. When we don't allow ourselves to forgive others we will have no peace in our hearts with regard to that person or that situation. We are warned in the Book of Hebrews about breeding a root of bitterness which will only cause trouble in our own soul and defiles us from the inside out. *Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord, looking carefully lest anyone fall short of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble, and by this many become defiled. (Hebrews 12:14, 15)* The cause of bitterness is an unforgiving attitude. When we do not forgive, we open ourselves up to feelings of resentment and strife—both of which are strong tools easily used by the devil for destruction. We hurt ourselves far more than we

can hurt anyone else with our lack of forgiveness. An unforgiving heart harbors stress and negative feelings which pollute and poison our thoughts, behavior, and speech. The Bible teaches us our thoughts and speech flow from what is rooted in the heart. *But those things which proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and they defile a man. For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, and blasphemies. (Matthew 15:18, 19)*

This is why it is so important to continually dwell in God's Word; daily considering, learning, and memorizing His precepts to ensure the outflow of our heart is God's goodness and righteousness instead of our own innate sinfulness. *Your word I have hidden in my heart that I might not sin against You. (Psalm 119:11)* The Book of James commands us to lay aside our tendencies toward wrath and wicked behavior by allowing God's Word to become implanted into our hearts: *So then, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath, for the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God; Therefore lay aside all filthiness and overflow of wickedness, and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls. (James 1:19-21)* There is also a passage in the Book of Matthew which directly discusses the subject of forgiveness. *Then Peter came to Him and said, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?" Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven." (Matthew 18:21, 22)*

The point of Jesus' response is simply our attitude must be consistently humble and forgiving toward those who sin against us. We are directed to break our tendency to hang on to offended feelings or insulted pride when others say or do wrong things toward us or our loved ones. We are a fallen race living in a fallen world and therefore, sinful behavior is most certainly going to happen and negatively affect us. Jesus told us we would have trials and tribulation throughout our lives and yet we act surprised and insulted when we experience such things. How does He tell us to handle it? We must overcome our troubles and trials with a peaceful heart firmly rooted in Jesus Christ. *These*

things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world. (John 16:33) Our peace and joy can only come from knowing Jesus Christ and abiding in His Word and His ways. Everything else which happens to us over the course of our lives is trivial in comparison to our personal relationship with Him and therefore should not bother us or move us. *I have set the LORD always before me; because He is at my right hand I shall not be moved. (Psalm 16:8)* *He only is my rock and my salvation; He is my defense; I shall not be greatly moved. (Psalm 62:2)* The Apostle Paul testifies to the same idea in the Book of Acts. *But none of these things move me; nor do I count my life dear to myself, so that I may finish my race with joy, and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God. (Acts 20:24)*

Forgiveness is an expression of agape love. When love is unconditional, forgiveness is a natural resulting outflow of that love. What does Jesus demand of us? *A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another. (John 13:34, 35)* Strife often is a result of people not practicing the forgiveness which is a key component of agape love. What could have been a trivial issue quickly sorted out and moved past instead becomes a long-term offense and relationship barrier when anger, bitterness, and resentment are allowed to build and fester. We have heard the phrase which says we are not go to bed angry and it holds great truth because it is in fact a biblical teaching found in the Book of Ephesians. *Be angry, and do not sin: do not let the sun go down on your wrath, nor give place to the devil. (Ephesians 4:26, 27)* Unless it is a righteous anger derived from an offense towards God, most anger is a fleshly reaction of our sin nature. God advises we immediately repent of such anger and get rid of it, applying forgiveness where necessary. Look at the words in the above passage, “nor give place to the devil”. If we hold onto wrath, nursing it and refusing to forgive, we are giving an opportunity for the devil to attack and injure our relationships and our witness. Any small chink in our armor as soldiers of

Jesus Christ and the devil will find a way to make it bigger and worse. *Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. (1 Peter 5:8) The devil will find ways steal your peace, kill your love for one another, and destroy your relationships and godly witness if you give him an opening to do so. The thief does not come except to steal, and to kill, and to destroy. (John 10:10)*

Finally, the Bible carries several disturbing warnings concerning a lack of forgiveness. *For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. (Matthew 6:14, 15)* Essentially, we are being told if we do not forgive others just as we have been forgiven by God, then God will not forgive us. What a terrible thought! *And whenever you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive him that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses. But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses. (Mark 11:25, 26)*

The Book of Matthew gives us the following parable which further substantiates the warning: *Therefore the kingdom of heaven is like a certain king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. And when he had begun to settle accounts, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. But as he was not able to pay, his master commanded that he be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and that payment be made. The servant therefore fell down before him, saying, 'Master, have patience with me, and I will pay you all. Then the master of that servant was moved with compassion, released him, and forgave him the debt. But that servant went out and found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii; and he laid hands on him and took him by the throat, saying, 'Pay me what you owe!' So his fellow servant fell down at his feet and begged him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you all.' And he would not, but went and threw him into prison till he should pay the debt. So when his fellow servants saw what had been done, they were very grieved, and came and told their master all that had been done. Then his*

master, after he had called him, said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you begged me. Should you not also have had compassion on your fellow servant, just as I had pity on you?' And his master was angry, and delivered him to the torturers until he should pay all that was due to him. So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses. (Matthew 18:23-35)

To truly forgive is to stop feeling hurt, angry, or resentful toward someone because of something they said or did. It means we treat them and think of them as if they had done nothing wrong toward us. Forgiveness is wiping the slate clean as if the offense never happened and involves choosing not to punish or take revenge on someone who has sinned against us. If we find ourselves in a situation where hurt or angry feelings simply are not going away and therefore having forgiveness seems unattainable, we must pray for God to open up our ability to forgive. He will answer that prayer, for it is His will that we forgive others. Another excellent passage which addresses us having an abundant attitude of generosity and forgiveness is the following:

But I say to you who hear: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, and pray for those who spitefully use you. To him who strikes you on the [one] cheek, offer the other also. And from him who takes away your cloak, do not withhold your tunic either. Give to everyone who asks of you. And from him who takes away your goods do not ask them back. And just as you want men to do to you, you also do to them likewise. But if you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. And if you lend to those from whom you hope to receive back, what credit is that to you? For even sinners lend to sinners to receive as much back. But love your enemies, do good, and lend, hoping for nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High. For He is kind to the unthankful and evil. Therefore be

*merciful, just as your Father also is merciful. Judge not, and you shall not be judged. Condemn not, and you shall not be condemned. **Forgive, and you will be forgiven.** (Luke 6:27-37)*

CHAPTER TWENTY

Thankfulness

In everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. (1 Thessalonians 5:18) It is an amazing thing to realize our thankfulness is God's will for us. We know God's will is always His best plan for us whether we understand it or not, and it is quite clear throughout the Scriptures God demands our thankfulness for *all* things, good and bad. We are to have a thankful heart and seek to actively and sincerely thank Him for everything – to Him our thankfulness is a sacrifice and therefore an act of worship. *I will offer to You the sacrifice of thanksgiving and will call upon the name of the LORD. (Psalm 116:17)*

An attitude of gratitude changes our heart and greatly improves our mindset. When we take the time to meditate upon all we have to be grateful to God for, it puts everything else into proper perspective. We could have the worst day ever or be facing a terrible trial but if we would just stop and write down everything we are grateful for, our whole outlook would be changed. We can begin by having appreciation for the fact that we are alive and have been given eternal life through faith in Jesus Christ. We can add to our list a thankfulness for free access to the Word of God. Most of us would also be able to thank God for prayer, good health, a place to live, the ability to walk, talk, see and hear, take in nourishment, have loving relationships with family and friends, hold a job, or belong to a Bible-believing church. Each of us could make a list which covers pages and pages in a notebook of all the things to thank God for and for which we can be deeply appreciative.

As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him, rooted and built up in Him and established in the faith, as you have been taught, abounding in it with thanksgiving. (Colossians 2:6,7) We are to abound with thanksgiving! Yet so many Christians walk through life without this outlook. We are often far too caught up in the worries and cares of everyday life

and as such our ability to have an attitude of thankfulness is overwhelmed and extinguished. Yet, what does Scripture say? *Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:6,7)*

Thankfulness is a choice. We truly can choose to wake up every morning and simply be thankful we exist; appreciating the fact we are alive and capable of experiencing so many wonderful things – the beauty of nature, the fulfillment of love and relationships, the peace and joy of knowing our Creator is a gracious, loving, merciful and just God... The foundational understanding our God is *good* should bring us a sense of thankfulness and gratitude. *Know that the LORD, He is God; It is He who has made us, and not we ourselves; we are His people and the sheep of His pasture. Enter into His gates with thanksgiving, and into His courts with praise. Be thankful to Him and bless His name. For the LORD is good; His mercy is everlasting, and His truth endures to all generations. (Psalm 100:3-5)*

Even when we have angst-ridden or sleepless nights, we can find opportunity in those wakeful hours to have conversation with the Lord, praying and interceding for those He brings to our minds, or reading Scripture, and thanking Him even though we have lost some of our sleep. *At midnight I will rise to give thanks to You, because of Your righteous judgments. (Psalm 119:62) My eyes are awake through the night watches, that I may meditate on Your word. (Psalm 119:148).* Again, the Bible is consistent in showing us our thankfulness is a form of worship and praise. *Therefore, by Him let us continually offer the sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to His name. (Hebrews 13:15)* Even in our trials we can thank God for what He will purpose for us through those trials and in spite of them. What the devil means for our harm, God will always turn around and use for our good – in His timing, not our own. We can count on this because the Scriptures teach it. Joseph said the following

to his brothers who had thrown him into a pit and then sold him into slavery. *But as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive. (Genesis 50:20)* It wasn't until many decades after Joseph's terrible trial at the hands of his brethren that the wrongs done to him were corrected and used mightily by God for multitudes of people...yet during his entire exile Joseph did not lose faith and he trusted God until finally, God's purposed outcome was accomplished. We, too, must not lose faith when undergoing our own trials, for nothing happens without God allowing it to happen. We must trust He allows our difficulties for worthy reasons and future blessings which we cannot see or may not presently understand.

In the Book of Romans, Paul explains to us God uses ALL things – not just good things – but works out ALL things, good or bad, for our benefit. *And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. (Romans 8:28)* What an amazing truth! See how much we have to be thankful for! We can be thankful even for hard, painful, and challenging times because we know God will somehow use those times for our good. *Giving thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. (Ephesians 5:20)* What a peace we can foster through such knowledge as this! *Oh, give thanks to the LORD! Call upon His name; Make known His deeds among the peoples! (1 Chronicles 16:8)*

We rejoice in knowing God is continually working toward growing our faith, refining us, and causing our relationship with Him to become deeper, stronger, and closer than ever. These gains oftentimes are attained through difficulties and hardship. We can rest in believing God has a plan despite troubled times and we can continue to bless His Name and thank Him for His faithfulness to us even during such painful phases. In the Book of Job, we see God allowing everything Job had acquired throughout his life to be destroyed – family, livestock, home, and health. But because of his great trust and faith in God, Job was able to proclaim: *Naked I came from my mother's womb, and*

naked shall I return there. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; Blessed be the name of the LORD.” In all this Job did not sin nor charge God with wrong. (Job 1:21,21) Despite his horrific and tragic losses, Job was able to continue to be thankful toward God and reverent toward His Name. Job did not understand why such catastrophe had befallen Him, yet he was still so firmly grounded in knowing God is good he blessed God anyway. Oh, if only we all could learn to cultivate such an attitude of thankfulness, gratefulness, and humbleness before God! *Oh, that men would give thanks to the LORD for His goodness, and for His wonderful works to the children of men! (Psalm 107:31)*

As Christians we must find ways to continually foster an eternal focus – which is the foundation of our thankfulness. We are thankful when we hold fast to the knowledge of God’s salvation plan and the triumphant understanding all evil, sin, and even death, has already been victoriously overcome by Jesus Christ. *Now thanks be to God who always leads us in triumph in Christ, and through us diffuses the fragrance of His knowledge in every place. (2 Corinthians 2:14)* *But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Corinthians 15:57)* In Christ, we have true victory. In Christ, we are partakers of an eternal, heavenly inheritance. *Giving thanks to the Father who has qualified us to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in the light. (Colossians 1:12)* What more could we possibly ask for?

Yes, thankfulness is a choice. Attitude is a choice. We can either choose to meditate on that which blesses us and is good in our lives, or we can choose dwell in misery and anxiety on what is evil and upsetting to us. Please understand, the Bible instructs us to meditate on the former. *Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever*

things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy—meditate on these things. (Philippians 4:6-8)

When we purposely choose to focus on our blessings instead of our afflictions, and when we opt to replace a complaining attitude with a thankful attitude, the result will be a transformation in how we view and respond to every detail of our day. We improve and uplift our witness to others, our personal feelings of health and wellbeing, and our own relationship with God. Whatever we are doing, day or night, we should be striving to shine the love, light, and life of Jesus Christ with a continual attitude of thankfulness and praise. Regardless of our circumstances, we must develop the ability to say within ourselves, “I will find the joy in each and every day God allows me to live and be thankful for all He has done for me.”

And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him. (Colossians 3:17)

Rejoice in the LORD, you righteous, and give thanks at the remembrance of His holy name. (Psalm 97:12)

I will praise you, LORD, with all my heart; I will tell of all the marvelous things you have done. I will be filled with joy because of you. I will sing praises to your name, O Most High. (Psalm 9:1,2)

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Holy Living – Departing from Sin

How do we stop sinning? How do we know if something we are doing is godly or ungodly? How do we stop living in the ways of the secular world? What is the process and is it difficult?

When we first become born again, we experience feelings of conviction which lead to a desire to turn away from living a godless, spiritually apathetic life in order to turn toward God and begin living for His purposes. As stated previously, repentance is a key factor in becoming born again. It is having your eyes opened to seeing your way of life the way God sees it, and being convicted or cut to the heart by that knowledge enough to want to make a change. Once we give ourselves to the headship and lordship of Jesus Christ, believing in His death on the cross as the payment for all our sin, we begin living a new life – we are indeed a new creation, with the Holy Spirit of God residing in our hearts as a seal of our eternally redeemed status in Jesus Christ. *He died for all, that those who live should live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again. Therefore, from now on, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know Him thus no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new. (2 Corinthians 5:15-17)*

So, old things have passed away and all things have become new. What does this mean? Well, as has been pointed out previously, we have a new perspective, a new worldview, a new empowerment, and a new motivation to live for God in faith. This includes feeling led to change or turn away from certain behaviors which are not glorifying to God and His commands. We spend our entire earthly lives growing in this process. The Bible calls it ‘sanctification’. Contrary to how it sounds, this transforming process really is not something we must force ourselves to do, but rather, it is a natural progression which

happens within us as we begin obeying certain convictions which the Holy Spirit causes to arise in our hearts and minds. One of our first promptings will be a new desire to learn all we can about the things of God, Jesus Christ, and our faith. This aspiration is an urge and a hunger we never had before because it is divinely given to us by the Holy Spirit. Therefore, we will feel strongly led to pore over our Bibles, studying its commands, promises, histories and precepts. We will also feel an inclination to gather with other believers, to learn from them and be strengthened in faith by our fellowship with them.

Additionally, a new believer will feel inspired to seek the activities of worship and prayer. As we begin a new routine of daily speaking with God and abiding in His Word, we will increase our understanding of what is sinful behavior and what is not, according to Him. This new knowledge will become the foundation for how we develop additional convictions in our spirits when we do something God does not want us to be doing. Our part to play is simply the process of making a choice as to whether we will be obedient to those convictions or whether we attempt to ignore them because we still want to hang on to a pet vice or sin. Numerous times throughout the New Testament we are told to throw off our old ways and strive to live righteously before God.

Therefore, put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. Because of these things the wrath of God is coming upon the sons of disobedience, in which you yourselves once walked when you lived in them. But now you yourselves are to put off all these: anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy language out of your mouth. Do not lie to one another, since you have put off the old man with his deeds and have put on the new man who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him. (Colossians 3:5-10)

Really, this command circles us right back to the issue of walking in the flesh versus walking in the Spirit. The more we learn and understand what God teaches us to do and not to do

throughout Scripture, the more we will be equipped to notice certain warnings and leadings of His Spirit with regard to behaviors and attitudes He wants to see us cultivate, versus those He wants to see us put to death or get rid of in our daily conduct. Again, the Bible tells us this is about walking in the light – allowing God’s Word and Spirit to illuminate and reveal to us our sin and empowering us to make corrections, as opposed to our former ways of walking in darkness while avoiding the light of His truths. *Then Jesus spoke to them again, saying, “I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness but have the light of life.” (John 8:12) Therefore let us cast off the works of darkness and let us put on the armor of light. Let us walk properly, as in the day, not in revelry and drunkenness, not in lewdness and lust, not in strife and envy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill its lusts. (Romans 13:12-14)*

God tells us to avoid ‘works of darkness’ and put on the ‘armor of light’. His call is for us to be holy in all conduct – for His Name’ sake and for our wellbeing. *Therefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and rest your hope fully upon the grace that is to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ; as obedient children, not conforming yourselves to the former lusts, as in your ignorance; but as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, because it is written, “Be holy, for I am holy.” (1 Peter 1:13-16)* God is not directing us to ‘stop having fun’. He is simply seeking to protect us because He knows what is harmful to us and what will be destructive to us, both now and down the road. Sin in and of itself is anything which goes against God’s will for us. It is a rebellion against His purposes, His precepts, and His ways. Since we can trust and know God is good, loving, and all-knowing, we can also trust He is the very best judge of what is best for our lives. We can certainly grasp the logical understanding sin is harmful because by its very nature it operates against the good things God wants for us. This is why we are continuously instructed to resist sin or put it off and away from us. Daily, we have this challenge. Will we sow to the flesh? Or will we sow to the Spirit of God? *Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that*

he will also reap. For he who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life. And let us not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart. (Galatians 6:7-9) The path of fleshly or carnal living leads to corruption, which is a destruction of all that is good, righteous, and healthy. The path of spiritual or spirit-led living leads to life and peace.

Like all believers I can share I absolutely love having peace *with* God, and additionally, I genuinely love having the peace *of* God abiding in my soul and in my heart. Such a peace is an anchor to my soul. But there is one thing which can uproot this strong anchor and destroy my peace. It is my sin. When I mess up and do things which I know are not what God wants for me, I can attest I immediately lose the peace *of* God within my heart. It is not a pleasant feeling and leads me to be on my knees before Him in prayer, asking for His forgiveness so my inner peace can be restored. Psalm 51:10 is a perfect example of my heart – and truly, any believer’s heart – in those instances. *Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me away from Your presence, and do not take Your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of Your salvation and uphold me by Your generous Spirit. (Psalm 51:10)*

We are so blessed to have been given the wisdom of God on this matter of sowing to the Spirit versus sowing to the flesh. Before I was a believer, I had no idea of such things. None of us do. Yet in hindsight, as Christians we would do well to regularly remind ourselves to consider the harm we formerly caused by living in sinful, carnal manners. In doing so we can further prevent and avoid the stumbling which such things will bring to us. Thanks to God and His Spirit I do not wish to sow a life of destruction and death. By His merciful intervention I am quickly corrected when I do slip off the right path. We are so blessed that God, in His great grace and mercy, divinely gives the Christian a deep-seated desire to live in a way which leads to abundant, spiritual life and which pleases our Creator and Savior. *For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of*

the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. For to be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace. Because the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be. So then, those who are in the flesh cannot please God. But you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. Now if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not His. (Romans 8:5-9)

Let us again examine the Galatians passage which we discussed back in Chapter 15: *Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told you in time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. (Galatians 5:19-20)* God gives us this very practical list of behaviors and attitudes which He considers works of the flesh and therefore, it is conduct which must be gotten rid of by those of the faith. Most people understand adultery or drunkenness are unrighteous, damaging behaviors, but many Christians are slow to learn their outbursts of wrath or selfish ambitions are actually conduct prohibited by God as well. When we lose our temper, it is a carnal reaction born out of pride and selfish ambitions. God says the fruit of the Spirit is self-control, kindness, gentleness, patience, and mercy. Therefore, as Christians we must learn to stop losing our self-control. This idea of self-control can apply to many things, and certainly one of them is about losing our temper. It takes practice, wisdom, and discernment about our own personal tendencies to mature this type of spiritual fruit.

The reason God commands and instructs us so many times and in so many different ways about such things is because we have inherent behaviors and mindsets which must be willfully challenged and changed. Walking in the Spirit has to be learned and put into practice – it does not come to us naturally, but rather, the Holy Spirit begins prompting us on these issues while revealing the heart of Jesus abiding within us. Our obedience

brings growth and maturity in these precepts. The more we heed the Holy Spirit and the commands of God, the better we will become at ‘crucifying’ the flesh and walking in the Spirit. *And those who are Christ’s have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another. (Galatians 5:24-26)*

When we did not know God, and when we were not born again, we lived in a very carnal manner; feeding the flesh with every desire and whim which raised itself in our minds and hearts. We were formerly dominated by sin, the ways of the devil, and his godless, secular world. But God has made our spirits alive and gifted us with eternal life. *And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins, in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience, among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others. But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, that in the ages to come He might show the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. (Ephesians 2:1-9)*

Because of this wonderful salvation through faith in Jesus Christ we will no longer have our understanding darkened by sin and the blindness of worldly deception, nor will we desire to continue fulfilling wrong yearnings. We will instead seek to live for Jesus Christ and the purposes of God. *This I say, therefore, and testify in the Lord, that you should no longer walk as the rest of the Gentiles walk, in the futility of their mind, having their understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness*

of their heart; who, being past feeling, have given themselves over to lewdness, to work all uncleanness with greediness. But you have not so learned Christ, if indeed you have heard Him and have been taught by Him, as the truth is in Jesus: that you put off, concerning your former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and that you put on the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness. Therefore, putting away lying, let each one of you speak truth with his neighbor, for we are members of one another. Be angry, and do not sin: do not let the sun go down on your wrath, nor give place to the devil. Let him who stole steal no longer, but rather let him labor, working with his hands what is good, that he may have something to give him who has need. Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice. And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you. (Ephesians 4:17-32)

Again, our conduct is so incredibly important to God for two reasons; godly behavior is our proper witness to the world of Jesus Christ and all He has done in us and through us, and additionally, we must avoid sin and ungodly behavior for our own physical and spiritual health. *But fornication and all uncleanness or covetousness, let it not even be named among you, as is fitting for saints; neither filthiness, nor foolish talking, nor coarse jesting, which are not fitting, but rather giving of thanks. For this you know, that no fornicator, unclean person, nor covetous man, who is an idolater, has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. Therefore, do not be partakers with them. (Ephesians 5:3-7)*

Do not be partakers with the sons of disobedience. Once a believer begins his or her walk with Jesus Christ and starts to put

off old behaviors and sinful vices, he or she may notice the loss of friendship and a lack of acceptance or understanding amongst unsaved acquaintances and family members. People will not understand the sudden lifestyle changes – and they also will not like it. There is a propensity for unsaved friends and family to inherently feel judged by the different behavior being exhibited in a new believer’s life and as such, they will condemn it and the believer. Many relationships suffer and some are even ended when one becomes a Christian, because the Christian no longer wants to participate in the same activities, speech, and worldviews they once did – becoming almost like a stranger to those they used to spend time with.

*Therefore, since Christ suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same mind, for he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, that he no longer should live the rest of his time in the flesh for the lusts of men, but for the will of God. For we have spent enough of our past lifetime in doing the will of the Gentiles—when we walked in lewdness, lusts, drunkenness, revelries, drinking parties, and abominable idolatries. **In regard to these, they think it strange that you do not run with them in the same flood of dissipation, speaking evil of you.** (1 Peter 4:1-4)* Our friends and loved ones will think it is strange we no longer want to do the things we used to do with them. We do not wish to get drunk or high, go to strip clubs, or have sex outside of marriage anymore. We will no longer desire to engage in dirty jokes or unsavory language. There are a multitude of things we used to do and formerly consider normal which will suddenly become undesirable to us. Our dissimilar behavior and God-directed perspectives will often alienate us from those who do not choose to believe in the God of the Bible. This separation can be one of the most difficult challenges which occurs in a new believer’s life because it is a form of persecution and can be very painful when it causes a loss or damage to deeply valued relationships.

However, Jesus calls us to love Him over all others, telling us our faith in His work on the cross will cause division. *Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth. I did not come to bring*

peace but a sword. For I have come to 'set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law'; and 'a man's enemies will be those of his own household. He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me. (Matthew 10:34-39) We are also told by Jesus, as believers and disciples we must count the costs of following Him in this fallen world. *If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple. And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple. For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not sit down first and count the cost, whether he has enough to finish it. (Luke 14:26-28)*

Because we will not act, think, speak, or live our lives like the unbelieving world, those of the unbelieving world will hate us and feel judged by us – just as they hated Jesus Christ. *If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. (John 15:18,19)* Directly in line with this understanding is the command for all believers to not love the world or the things in the world – it is about not loving all that sets itself against God and His Son, Jesus Christ.

Christians will no longer be willing partakers of the sin and spiritually apathetic ways of the secular world. We are called to be *in* the world, living after the ways of Jesus Christ and witnessing to the lost as we seek to shine the light of His love and His salvation message, but we are not to be *of* the world, participating in their philosophies, practices, and attitudes. *Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—is not of the Father but is of the world. And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever. (1John 2:15-17)*

We are to continuously strive to receive, accept, and obey the commands of Jesus Christ; paying heed to the convictions of the Holy Spirit in our consciences when we find ourselves acting or thinking in a rebellious or sinful manner. *Therefore, lay aside all filthiness and overflow of wickedness, and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls. But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.* (James 1:21,22) Holy living is about being doers of the Word of God, and not hearers only. It is about walking the walk – not merely talking the talk. It is our witness to the world and to fellow believers; a calling which benefits us throughout our lives because by doing so we are continually keeping our minds and spirits at peace with God, while keeping our bodies and minds healthy and safe; set apart for the service and love of God.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Dealing with Anxiety and Fear

Rest in the Lord and wait patiently for Him. Do not fret – it only causes harm. (Psalm 37:7,8) The Bible tells us fretting and worrying can only cause harm to us. How true that is! To fret or worry is a form of stress which is destructive to our health and our emotional wellbeing. Many people in our world today suffer from chronic anxiety and numerous directly-related physical ailments because they continually function in a worried, fretful state – mostly over things they cannot control. Such people have no inner peace and no ability to soothe their souls without utilizing a false bandage of medical prescriptions or the abuse of mind/mood altering substances such as alcohol, marijuana, powerful street drugs, or even cigarettes. But why do people fret? Where does all this worry, stress, and anxiety come from?

First and foremost, the tendency toward anxiety, worry and fretting is foundationally rooted in self-rule. Mankind was never meant to rely on himself and his own decisions to get through this life. It is a burden God did not intend for us. We were created to live a God-directed and God-ruled life, and within those parameters we would have had steady peace and joy while resting confidently in God's best plans for us as He daily directed our paths. There would certainly be no need for stress or worry if the God of all Creation was allowed to be in charge of our lives and actively relating with us on a daily basis! However, when mankind determined to live life directed by self instead of by God, the burden of life's every decision, every goal, every desire, and every mistake became man's own. The weight of the world was laid directly upon the weak and incapable shoulders of the human race from that point forward. Therefore, if we attempt to take control out of lives without God, doing whatever seems right in our own eyes, we will most certainly find ourselves ceaselessly contending with the afflictions of worry, stress, anxiety, and fretting. Without God leading, people do not have the tools to stop this problem from happening. Since mankind is

not equipped with God's divine knowledge, divine wisdom, and divine power, no one has any idea what choices or paths will truly turn out to be best for themselves or their loved ones. Everything is a 'best guess' scenario when people direct their lives from a human perspective – whether it is determining the best career choice, how to raise children, what house to buy, which stock to invest in, how to pay next month's bills, or which medical treatment to choose when suffering a disease or sickness. The burden of having to make decisions without the wisdom of our Almighty God causes the human psyche to be in a constant state of questioning, planning, wondering, worrying, and generally not knowing if the outcomes of decisions made will be what was hoped for.

Another element of human anxiety has to do with the fact that those who do not believe in God really have no idea why they exist and what their purpose is. They daily deal with a gaping, spiritual hole in their lives which makes them feel empty, dissatisfied, purposeless, valueless, and directionless. They find no real solution for their lack of peace and as such, anxiety and depression can become a regular part of their existence. Truly, when people wake up every morning with an underlying worldview of thinking they accidentally evolved from a speck of matter through a series of random chance and time occurrences, such a perspective will undoubtedly lead to personal feelings of meaninglessness, purposelessness, irrelevance, hopelessness, and ultimately, depression. If we are merely accidents of evolution, our existence verily holds no purpose and no meaning. What a horrible state of mind which is unfortunately endured by so many individuals who do not know God! No wonder we see so much chronic human suffering and oftentimes, fatal mental damage in today's world.

The effort it takes for people to handle or process every disastrous world event, political arena struggle, personal trial, distress, tragedy, sickness, or accident without a trusting dependence on God and a right understanding of Who God is, can be absolutely detrimental to the frailty of human nature; mentally, emotionally and physically. People unwittingly face

their days preparing for the worst while simply hoping to scrape by with their sanity and health intact. We are not built to shoulder any of these things in our own power and yet millions of people attempt to do so daily. What a tragedy!

Now, when one becomes aware of God and turns to Him in faith; becoming born again and seeking to follow Jesus Christ and His commands, some of the above issues become alleviated immediately. However, let us address the fact there are multitudes of born-again Christians who are still living with anxiety, fear, and worry. We must examine why and learn how to correct this among the brotherhood of believers. We have already learned from Scripture about the concept of sin, and how sin is anything which goes against the will of God and the commands of God. We also have learned Christians are completely forgiven of all sin; past, present, and future, by their faith in Jesus Christ and His sacrifice on the cross. However, believers continue to need encouragement and instruction throughout the Bible in the effort to avoid sin and be obedient to God's commands and precepts – for their own wellbeing as well as for God's glory and witness of His power to the unsaved world.

We are encouraged, empowered, and led by the Holy Spirit and the Word of God to obey God's instructions. Knowing this, we must ask ourselves, as believers, why in the world do we think it is acceptable to be racked with fear, worry, anxiety, and fretting? Because, you see, throughout His Word, God commands and encourages those who follow Him to not worry, to not be afraid, to be anxious for nothing, and to not fret. If God gives us such commands numerous times and in a multitude of ways, is it not outright sin if we continually disobey His instructions? Why do we find ourselves worrying, fearing, fretting, and anxious? *The LORD is my light and my salvation; Whom shall I fear? The LORD is the strength of my life; Of whom shall I be afraid? (Psalm 27:1)* What are we afraid of? If God is with us and for us, who can stand against us? Why are we so caught up in fear and worry over the troubles and trials of

our daily lives when we have the love and power of Jesus Christ living in our hearts through His Holy Spirit?

The answer is actually quite simple. It is because we are allowing our sin nature to dictate our feelings and thoughts on this issue. What do I mean? We have a natural propensity to strongly desire our own way and our own preferred outcomes with regard to any and every situation – this in and of itself, leads to our fretful and stressed condition. If we were truly trusting in God and His purposes we would not ever fret. We would be at peace in all circumstances, trusting in God and accepting whatever unfolds in our lives as something He is allowing for His reasons and His plans. *You will keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on You, because he trusts in You. (Isaiah 26:3)* Our ways are not akin to God's ways. God is eternal and therefore He sees the beginning, the middle, and the end, all at the same time. His ways are higher than ours, more informed than ours, and ultimately farther reaching and beyond better than our own small plans and purposes. *For 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)*

We know God loves us so much He sent a part of Himself to dwell on earth, be tortured, and die for us, so why do we not trust Him in all other facets of our daily lives? God wants what is best for each of us, and He knows more about what we need than we do. *For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the LORD, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope. (Jeremiah 29:11)* Do we believe this? Sometimes, the means God uses to bless us or our future do not look or feel like a blessing when we are in the midst of them, but He calls us to trust Him regardless. *Fear not, for I am with you; Be not dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, Yes, I will help you, I will uphold you with My righteous right hand. (Isaiah 41:1)* One of the ways God blesses us is to refine, grow, and strengthen our faith as well as our personal relationship with Him, by allowing struggle and trials in our lives. *My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have*

its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing. (James 1:2-4) Trials and tribulations test our faith and cause us to seek God more intensely in prayer, in thought, in His Word, and in our actions. We are told such things will produce patience, maturing, and the perfecting of our faith as we allow the Lord to work in us during such times. The burden of our afflictions must continually be laid at God's feet and left there. Doing so will free us from worry and allows God to sustain us through such trials. *Cast your burden on the LORD, and He shall sustain you; He shall never permit the righteous to be moved. (Psalm 55:22)*

Though we might think we trust God for our wellbeing and the welfare of our loved ones, if we are fretting and worrying, it is clear we are not truly casting our burdens onto the LORD and leaving them there. So, what are we doing wrong? Again, the answer is so simple. We are still trying to control our circumstances, and ultimately, we want to control the outcome of those circumstances. Did you catch that? Our distress, angst, worries, and fears are a result of wanting to see a specific, personally desired outcome in any given circumstance or problem. Our focus tends to be upon desperately wanting our own way, and not trusting God's way. We find ourselves longing for a specific result which we have personally contrived as desirable to us, rather than resting in whatever means and results God determines are best. The bottom line is, we are simply caught up in self-rule again, permitting our personal wishes to supersede the things God allows. But Scripture tells us our peace can only come when we trust God fully for all things, including the means and the outcomes of all situations.

For example, if we are struggling with finances or health issues, we must trust God for whatever outcome unfolds and accept it as His will for us at that time. We cannot solely demand a healing or a financial bounty as the only acceptable solutions to our health or money conflicts, but rather, we pray for God's best will to be worked out in our lives as we ask for His strength, peace, and joy to be ours regardless of uncertain circumstances and regardless of actual outcome. We should always seek to pray

for God's will in every situation, and accept in faith what He allows. Again, keep in mind, His ways are not our ways. We are to receive that truth in peace.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; For You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me. (Psalm 23:4) No matter what happens to us this side of eternity, God is with us, and our inheritance is in heaven with God. As He promised Abram, He also promises us He is our reward. Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your exceedingly great reward. (Genesis 15:1) When we submit our lives to God, He is always with us, both now and forever. And lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age. (Matthew 28:20) If God is with us and for us what can successfully stand against us? Who can overcome the will of the God of this universe? Nothing and no one! If God is for us, who can be against us? 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? (Romans 8:31,32) As believers, we truly have nothing to fear!

Yes, we will experience suffering and terrible loss at times while on this earth, some of us more than others. But our anguish here is nothing compared to the wonderful inheritance God has prepared for us in eternity. *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. This inheritance is 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. In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the end*

result of your faith, the salvation of your souls. (1 Peter 1:3-9)
Do you notice in this encouraging passage God explicitly is telling us our suffering and trials are for proving, refining, and testing the genuineness of our faith? He means for these things to strengthen our relationship with Him and mature our faith. God wants to cause every believer to draw as near to Him as possible while life unfolds. Sometimes only trials and tribulations can truly mete that process out in a beneficial way.

It is so easy to drift away from dependence on God when things are wonderful and easygoing. And while we know God's plans for us are for good and not evil, and we do understand from Scripture there is nothing wrong with enjoying blessings of good times and abundance, there is always a time for trials and hardships to be experienced in everyone's lives as well. There are hills and valleys in life. There are the joys and contentment of mountaintop experiences and the treacheries and doubts of deep-water trials. We must accept both things from the Lord, knowing He is with us at all times *Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by your name; You are Mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; And through the rivers, they shall not overflow you. When you walk through the fire, you shall not be burned, Nor shall the flame scorch you. (Isaiah 43:1, 2)* We must continually remember it is God's prerogative to allow what befalls us and He is able to work all things out for our good and for our benefit. *And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose. (Romans 8:28)*

Again, let us look at Job and what happened in his life – he was one of the most respected, wealthy, powerful and godly men of his era, having many children, much land and livestock, good health, faithful servants, and friends. Yet God allowed for it all to be taken away – and from Job's perspective, for no apparent reason whatsoever. His wife wanted him to curse God and die. The Bible tells us Job's response was far from such despair. *But he said to her, "You speak as one of the foolish women speaks. Shall we indeed accept good from God, and shall we not accept adversity?" In all this Job did not sin with his lips. (Job 2:10)*

This is the attitude God wants to see in us! In all his adversity, Job did not sin against God but continued to trust in Him, accepting the overwhelming and horrific trial as something God purposed for him though he did not understand the reason. We must learn to do the same.

Now godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. (1 Timothy 6:6,7) Paul the Apostle certainly experienced many great afflictions and severe trials during his life on this earth. He explains in the following passage he had learned to be content no matter what his circumstances were, and he also gives us the means on how to do so: *Not that I speak in regard to need, for I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content: I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me. (Philippians 4:11-13)* How did Paul cultivate such a contentment regardless of his outward circumstances? Through Jesus Christ, Who strengthened him.

We are no different than Paul. We too are already empowered and strengthened by Jesus Christ to cultivate contentment and a peaceful heart no matter our situation. As with anything, this attitude and mindset is a choice, requiring willful practice and a continual submission to God – a realization and an acceptance that what we might want may not necessarily be what God wants for us. Such a perspective will breed peace and contentment in the heart of every believer. What a powerful witness this can be to the unsaved world! When nonbelievers observe unhindered and authentic peace and joy in an afflicted believer's countenance, they will want to know how and why – they will be drawn to know what the 'secret' is and where to get it! It is a powerful way to shine the light of God in this darkened world.

And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to which also you were called in one body; and be thankful. (Colossians 3:15) We are given instruction to pray, be anxious for nothing, be thankful, and meditate on all that is good. *Be anxious for nothing, but in*

everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy—meditate on these things. The things which you learned and received and heard and saw in me, these do, and the God of peace will be with you. (Philippians 4:6-9)

Be anxious for nothing. This instruction is a command from God. Disobedience to the commands of God is openly sinful and a poor witness to the world of the strength of our faith and of God's power in our lives. We must learn how to depend upon and trust in God, and to help us even further in such a goal we are encouraged to dwell on those things which are good, and pure, and lovely – the positive things in our lives, the blessings...We can take great comfort in meditating on all God has already provided and done for us when we go through hard or difficult times. Such a practice takes our mind off of our troubles and puts them on Jesus Christ and all He has given us. We can completely change our perspective when we focus on God, His blessings, and His great power, rather than wallowing in the angst of the problems we may face. *Anxiety in the heart of man causes depression, but a good word makes it glad. (Proverbs 12:25)*

We are given a very colorful picture in Matthew's account of Jesus and Peter walking on the Sea of Galilee. *But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, "Be of good cheer! It is I; do not be afraid." And Peter answered Him and said, "Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water." So He said, "Come." And when Peter had come down out of the boat, he walked on the water to go to Jesus. But when he saw that the wind was boisterous, he was afraid; and beginning to sink he cried out, saying, "Lord, save me!" And immediately Jesus stretched out His hand and caught him, and said to him, "O you of little faith, why did you doubt?" (Matthew 14:27-31)*

Let us examine what took place in the above passage. Firstly, we have Jesus commanding the disciples, “*Do not be afraid*” and as Peter looked to Jesus and asked Him to command him to come to Him upon the raging waters, behold, Peter was initially able to walk toward Jesus on top of the sea. A miraculous feat indeed! However, the moment Peter took his eyes off Jesus and put them on the blustering wind and raging waters he became incredibly afraid and began to sink. This loss of faith is what happens to all Christians who take their eyes off Jesus Christ and focus only on the seemingly overwhelming problems in their lives. Perspective is lost, divine guidance is forgotten, fear engulfs them, and they sink in despair.

Worrying is an evidence of our lack of faith and our lack of trust in God. We must correct this pattern of thinking and keep our eyes on Jesus, setting our hearts and minds on the goodness and greatness of our living God. *For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind. (2 Timothy 1:7)* When we operate from a position of God-given strength, power, and love, we will have a clear, sound mind – a mind not muddled and overpowered by fear, anxiety, distress, and depression. God loves us with His perfect, unconditional love. There is no fear when we are loved in such a manner. But we must truly receive God’s love as a fact and work toward perfecting our understanding of His love for us in order to cast out our fears. *There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment. But he who fears has not been made perfect in love. (1 John 4:18)*

Jesus gives a lengthy discourse in both Chapter 12 of Luke, and Chapter 6 of Matthew, regarding God’s view on worrying: *Then He said to His disciples, “Therefore I say to you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat; nor about the body, what you will put on. “Life is more than food, and the body is more than clothing. “Consider the ravens, for they neither sow nor reap, which have neither storehouse nor barn; and God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds? And which of you by worrying can add one cubit to his stature? If you then are not able to do the least, why are you anxious for the rest?*

Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; and yet I say to you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. If then God so clothes the grass, which today is in the field and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will He clothe you, O you of little faith? And do not seek what you should eat or what you should drink, nor have an anxious mind. For all these things the nations of the world seek after, and your Father knows that you need these things. But seek the kingdom of God, and all these things shall be added to you. Do not fear, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell what you have and give alms; provide yourselves money bags which do not grow old, a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches nor moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. Let your waist be girded and your lamps burning; and you yourselves be like men who wait for their master, when he will return from the wedding, that when he comes and knocks they may open to him immediately. Blessed are those servants whom the master, when he comes, will find watching. Assuredly, I say to you that he will gird himself and have them sit down to eat, and will come and serve them. And if he should come in the second watch, or come in the third watch, and find them so, blessed are those servants. But know this, that if the master of the house had known what hour the thief would come, he would have watched and not allowed his house to be broken into. Therefore, you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect. (Luke 12:22-40)

Therefore, I say to you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink; nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air, for they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? Which of you by worrying can add one cubit to his stature? So why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; and yet I say to you that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. Now if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is, and tomorrow is

thrown into the oven, will He not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? Therefore, do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you. Therefore, do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about its own things. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble. (Matthew 6:25-34)

An underlying truth in the relaying the entirety of both passages is worry can accomplish absolutely NOTHING! Jesus rhetorically asks whether any of us can literally increase the height of our stature, or in today's verbiage, 'grow taller' by our worrying. He is clearly telling us our worrying can do nothing, and in fact, as we know from earlier verses given in this discussion, worrying is harmful to us. Jesus implores us to not be anxious in our minds. This is a command given by God throughout Scripture – not a lighthearted suggestion. Do not fear. Do not be afraid. Do not worry. Do not be anxious. Do not fret. As believers we must intently seek to put off worrying and anxiety while putting on the peace of God and the practice of trusting in Him.

One of the most misleading and damaging practices found in today's society is the idea that those who are anxious and depressed should seek psychiatric or psychological counsel, over the course of which much time is spent digging into and focusing upon one's past trials, past failures, past mistreatments, past abuses, past catastrophes and past afflictions. As the person is brought through many instances of reliving old hurts, terrors, and regrets, essentially wallowing in past misery in an effort to gain understanding of their current anxiousness, they are also given mind-altering or mood-altering prescriptions to numb or alleviate their pain, depression, and anxiety. Such processes are prolifically opposite what God teaches throughout Scripture. *Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ. (Colossians*

2:8) We must not become involved with the secular solutions of the godless, unsaved world. Altering the natural state of our minds via medicines or drugs merely opens a spiritual highway for demonic traffic to invade our being, because we are not in a true state of spiritual and mental alertness or control when we take such powerful drugs. It is sobering to know the word in the Greek language used for ‘sorcery’ is ‘pharmakia’ – the root of our modern English word, ‘pharmacy’ or ‘pharmaceutical’. God condemns sorcery as wicked and evil. *When you come into the land which the LORD your God is giving you, you shall not learn to follow the abominations of those nations. There shall not be found among you anyone who makes his son or his daughter pass through the fire, or one who practices witchcraft, or a soothsayer, or one who interprets omens, or a sorcerer, or one who conjures spells, or a medium, or a spiritist, or one who calls up the dead. For all who do these things are an abomination to the LORD, and because of these abominations the LORD your God drives them out from before you. (Deuteronomy 18:9-12)*

We must take great care to stay away from drugs which alter the state of our minds or moods. They will leave us helpless and defenseless to the infiltration of demonic oppression and deception. In the Old Testament, God continually warned the Israelites against going to Egypt for help and alliances in troubled times. *Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help, and rely on horses, who trust in chariots because they are many, and in horsemen because they are very strong, but who do not look to the Holy One of Israel, nor seek the LORD! (Isaiah 31:1)* Throughout the Bible, Egypt is spiritually portrayed as a picture of the unsaved world. When we return to the secular, ungodly world for solutions to our problems we risk destruction and corruption. Our answers must instead lie with God and His wisdom. Our help is in His hands. *Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, yes, I will help you, I will uphold you with My righteous right hand. (Isaiah 41:10)*

Turning to the secular world’s answers of psychiatry, psychology, and drugs is not wise. It is foolish, past-focused,

harmful, painful, mentally debilitating, and unbiblical to say the least. The faith of Christianity which God presents to mankind is a future-focused way of life. When we are born again, we become a new creation. The old nature is dead, and we are born anew by the Spirit of God. *Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new. (2 Corinthians 5:17)* There is truly no reason to go backward. That life and that person are gone. There is only further harm to be found indulging in old miseries. We must leave our past behind us. Forgetting what our old life was and pressing forward into our new life in Jesus Christ is God's best plan for us. *Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and **reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal** for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 3:13,14)*

We are instructed to look forward, press forward, set our minds on things above, and set our meditations upon God's Word, His promises, and all that is good. In doing so, we will prosper and be greatly blessed. *Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stands in the path of sinners, nor sits in the seat of the scornful; But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and in His law he meditates day and night. He shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that brings forth its fruit in its season, whose leaf also shall not wither; And whatever he does shall prosper. (Psalm 1:1-3)*

Praising, praying, trusting, worshipping, abiding in God's Word and fellowshiping with other believers – these things will teach us to depend upon God and stop our anxious thought patterns of worry and fear. *In God (I will praise His word), in God I have put my trust; I will not fear. What can flesh do to me? (Psalm 56:4)* When we stop trying to bear the burdens of self-direction and self-reliance and turn instead to God and a solid trust in His guidance and His plans for us, we will find the sweet relief of peace, contentment, and the ability to seek the joy which can be found in every day we are given. *Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; In all your ways*

acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your paths. Do not be wise in your own eyes; Fear the LORD and depart from evil. It will be health to your flesh, and strength to your bones. (Proverbs 3:5-8)

The unsaved world has good reason for experiencing the chronic afflictions of fear, anxiety, and worry. They bear all of life's burdens and trials on their own with no divine guidance or input from God. They have no knowledge or understanding of why they exist or what happens to them when they die. Their worries are all quite justified. They should be afraid. Conversely, the Christian has no excuse. God has conquered sin and death through the sacrifice made by Jesus Christ, His only Son, on the cross of calvary. God has provided mankind His guidance for this life and His gift of eternal life for the next, to all who seek Him and willingly receive His Son, Jesus Christ, in faith, as their God and Savior. What more could anyone desire? We have been given everything we need and more, to foster a steady attitude of peace, joy, and contentment.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Hope in God

The way we use the word ‘hope’ today is different than how it is meant throughout Scripture. When we say “I hope for this or that to happen” it is usually a wish-based thought; not founded on a sure thing but simply something we desire or want to happen. When ‘hope’ is used in the Bible, however, it does not infer merely a wishful thought, but rather, the scripturally accurate meaning of ‘hope’ in its original language is ‘the assured, expectant anticipation of something which is absolutely going to come to pass, but just hasn’t yet’. Biblical hope is a future truth – an absolute which has not only been promised but has already taken place outside of time.

Many of God’s promises are worded in Scripture as though they have already occurred and been accomplished even though we have not witnessed the fulfillment. From God’s eternal perspective, He has already completed what He has declared. Therefore, the hope of a Christian is an assurance which can be trusted in faith by all who believe God is Who He says He is and will perform what He says He will perform. Hebrews 11:6 explains it well. *But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him. (Hebrews 11:6)*

Our hope in God and all He has done for us – and will do for us – is the core strength of our faith. *For we were saved in this hope, but hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one still hope for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we eagerly wait for it with perseverance. (Romans 8:24,25)* Without the assurance and trust lying at the root of divine hope we would not be able to have much faith in anything. Our faith and hope in God and His works are intertwined with one another. When we commit ourselves to eagerly hoping in the Lord, we are strengthened, settled, encouraged, and blessed. The hope which is founded upon certainty and assurance is a hope from which

flows Holy Spirit-led courage, joy, and godly patience. *Be of good courage, and He shall strengthen your heart, all you who hope in the LORD. (Psalm 31:24)* When we realize our hope in God and His promises are a sure thing, a future certainty, we can rise up out of the mire of depressions, worries, and fears of the moment. Remembering Who is in charge and Who is always with us in all our trials will cause us to praise and rejoice in God rather than drown in the anxiety and mourning of current adverse circumstances.

Why are you cast down, O my soul? And why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God, for I shall yet praise Him; For the help of His countenance. (Psalm 42:5) We must remind ourselves that as His children, God's countenance is towards us, not against us. His face and therefore, His love, continually shines upon those who believe in Him. He does not ever stop beholding us in such a manner though it may feel like it during the temporal afflictions or sorrows we may be experiencing. *For the LORD is righteous, He loves righteousness; His countenance beholds the upright."* (Psalm 11:7) *"Blessed are the people who know the joyful sound! They walk, O LORD, in the light of Your countenance. (Psalm 89:15)*

Scripture tells us God's eye is upon all who fear Him and all who hope in His mercy. *Behold, the eye of the LORD is on those who fear Him, on those who hope in His mercy, to deliver their soul from death, and to keep them alive in famine. Our soul waits for the LORD; He is our help and our shield. For our heart shall rejoice in Him, because we have trusted in His holy name. Let Your mercy, O LORD, be upon us, just as we hope in You. (Psalm 33:18-22)* Notice the two opposing ideas; fear and hope. The Christian obviously has a fear of the Lord – an awe, a reverence, and a submission to God in recognition of the fact He is Creator, Lord, and Judge of all things. If we so fear Him that we daily strive to obey His commands and heed His warnings, would we not then so trust and hope in Him that we also daily rest in His promises and are assured of His grace, mercy, and love? It is two sides of the same coin. We trust and obey. We fear Him yet we hope in Him. If the daunting attributes of God are real to us, then

the gracious and merciful attributes must be real to us as well. We can hope in God for all things – for our salvation, for the truth of His Word, for His protection, for His faithfulness to us, for His peace to be given to us, for His love and unmerited favor, for His strength and power which bring us courage.

There is nothing good which cannot be hoped for from God through faith in Jesus Christ – He is the Author of our faith itself – we have no reason to be discouraged when our hope is fixed on Him! *Looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself, lest you become weary and discouraged in your souls. (Hebrews 12:2,3)* We must consider what Jesus Christ underwent for us and trust the love which motivated Him. Discouragement can be banished from our souls if we pause long enough in our own wearying trials to bring our focus back to God and all He has done for us through Jesus Christ.

God is a giver of all that is good. *Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning. Of His own will He brought us forth by the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures. (James 1:17,18)* In His great love and mercy God purposefully and willfully chose to save us by means of His Word and through the atoning blood of His Son. *My soul faints for Your salvation, but I hope in Your word. (Psalm 119:81)* What more could we ever want? And yet He gives us more blessings still, while we walk this earth.

You are my hiding place and my shield; I hope in Your word. (Psalm 119:114) No matter what our turmoil, no matter what our troubles, we have the ability to cover ourselves in God's Word and the lovingkindness of His promises. We can trust in all He tells us; hiding under His wings of protection and waiting for Him to bring us out of our struggle. *Keep me as the apple of Your eye; Hide me under the shadow of Your wings. (Psalm 17:8)*

How precious is Your lovingkindness, O God! Therefore, the children of men put their trust under the shadow of Your wings. (Psalm 36:7) When we exercise such an active hope, such an assurance in God, we will be prosperous and fruitful in our faith. We will find ourselves at peace and spiritually flourishing, fed by God's Word. Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD, and whose hope is the LORD. For he shall be like a tree planted by the waters, which spreads out its roots by the river, and will not fear when heat comes; but its leaf will be green, and will not be anxious in the year of drought, nor will cease from yielding fruit. (Jeremiah 17:7,8)

A prevalent truth which God puts forth throughout Scripture is the practice of patience. We must learn patience if we are to rest in God. *Be still and know that I am God. (Psalm 46:10)* When we wait upon the LORD and focus on His love, His mercies and His goodness, we can gain strength in our faith, rejoice despite harsh times, and have hope in our deliverance, if not here in this life, certainly in the next. *But they that wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint. (Isaiah 40:31)* No matter the tragedies and uncertainties of this temporal life, we are assured of one thing as believers; God is ours, and we are His. He has already allotted us an eternal inheritance as His sons and daughters. *The LORD is my portion," says my soul, "Therefore I hope in Him!" The LORD is good to those who wait for Him, to the soul who seeks Him. It is good that one should hope and wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD. (Lamentations 3:24-26)*

Storms will come. Storms will pass. God is with those who are His through good times and through bad. We must take great care to remember Him and seek Him in both. The foundation we have which will keep us standing firm in even the worst of storms is our sure hope, our God-given faith in Jesus Christ and the salvation He earned for us. We have peace with our Creator because of Jesus, we have access to His grace and His throne through prayer, through His Word, and through our assured hope in His promises. *Therefore, having been justified by faith, we*

have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God. And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope. Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us. (Romans 5:1-5)

Hope in God does not disappoint. God's love and assurance is poured into our hearts by His Holy Spirit, whom He has given to those who believe. We must trust and understand every trial and storm of life is sifted and filtered through God's permission. He allows only what makes us grow closer to Him, stronger in our faith, more abundant in perseverance, more Christlike in character, and steadfast in our hope – our certain assurance all things God has promised WILL come to pass; if not in this life, then in eternity. We must build our very lives upon the solid foundation of hope in Jesus Christ and His commands so when the storms of life come, we will stand and not fall. *Therefore whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock: and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it did not fall, for it was founded on the rock. (Matthew 7:24,25)*

God gave us the Scriptures not only so we can learn about Him and His plan of salvation but also for building up our hope. We are comforted and encouraged by the assurances found in His Word and by the examples and experiences of those of faith which have been recorded and given to us. *For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope. (Romans 15:4)* Our hope in God is a hope which brings a continual sense of purpose, expectation, joy, and even excitement to the heart of every believer. We have the blessed and wonderful perspective in knowing whatever unfolds in our lives, it is permitted by God; and since God loves us more than we can understand, we can safely trust Him through every

experience. Nothing we face can move us when our hope is solidly founded upon on Him! *Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. (Romans 15:13)*

God cannot lie, for He is righteous and holy. *Thus God, determining to show more abundantly to the heirs of promise the immutability of His counsel, confirmed it by an oath, that by two immutable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we might have strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold of the hope set before us. This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast, and which enters the Presence behind the veil. (Hebrews 6:17-19)* Because He is all-powerful and eternal, His promises are immutable, and as such, our hope in Him is the anchor to our souls. God does not change. *For I am the LORD, I do not change. (Malachi 3:6)* His Word also does not change. *My covenant I will not break, nor alter the word that has gone out of My lips. (Psalm 89:4)* What God has spoken and promised will indeed stand, both now and forever. *Forever, O LORD, Your word is settled in heaven. (Psalm 119:89)* Throughout the Bible God proclaims this truth. It is as though He knows we will doubt and be unsure of whether His promises will stand in our era or apply to each of us, individually. We can know simply by the certain repetitiveness of His assurances that His Word and promises will stand forever.

The entirety of Your word is truth, and every one of Your righteous judgments endures forever. (Psalm 119:60) *The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever. (Isaiah 40:8)* Since God's promises are immutable and since His Word will stand forever, we must strive to be diligent in our hope, no matter what we face. We must seek to not become sluggish or feeble in our faith, knowing we will inherit His promises. *And we desire that each one of you show the same diligence to the full assurance of hope until the end, that you do not become sluggish, but imitate those who through faith and patience inherit the promises. (Hebrews 6:11-12)*

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Prayer

And when you pray, you shall not be like the hypocrites. For they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the corners of the streets, that they may be seen by men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. But you, when you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly. And when you pray, do not use vain repetitions as the heathen do. For they think that they will be heard for their many words. Therefore do not be like them. For your Father knows the things you have need of before you ask Him. (Matthew 6:5-8)

What is prayer? Is it a memorized recitation dutifully spoken at specific, allotted times throughout the day or week, or performed in penance when one has sinned? For indeed there are many believers who pray in such a manner. But clearly, as the passage in Matthew 6:5-8 indicates, this is not what Jesus wants from us. The intention of prayer according to what we see in Scripture is simply that of conversing with God. God loves us and wants a personal relationship with us. He has opened the way for us to do so by sending His Son, Jesus Christ to die for us and spiritually reconcile us into a relationship with Him in the manner He originally intended when He created the human race. Prayer is the vehicle by which we can now approach God and have conversation and relationship with Him. Through prayer God works in us; growing our faith, aligning our wills to His, and deepening our relationship with Him. Even with this understanding, many believers do not quite know how God wants us to pray.

The disciples of Jesus Christ were unsure of the correct way to approach God, so they asked Jesus how to pray. *Now it came to pass, as He was praying in a certain place, when He ceased, that one of His disciples said to Him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John*

also taught his disciples.” So He said to them, “When you pray, say:

*Our Father in heaven,
Hallowed be Your name.
Your kingdom come.
Your will be done
On earth as it is in heaven.
Give us day by day our daily bread.
And forgive us our sins,
For we also forgive everyone who is indebted to us.
And do not lead us into temptation,
But deliver us from the evil one.”*
(Luke 11:1-4)

Matthew 6:9 further clarifies Jesus’ instructions by stating the above command in this way: “*In this manner, therefore, pray:*” The most important concept to be found in the above excerpts from the books of Luke and Matthew is that Jesus gave us a *model* or *manner* of praying. He provided a basic framework for the kinds of things we should be praying – not a rigid Bible verse which we should recite to God every day. The above passage is such a misunderstood section of Scripture it has led to multitudes of Christians memorizing and reciting the above words like a repetitious litany. Clearly, we can recognize merely rehearsing the above words of Jesus in a routine or repetitive manner does not constitute anything resembling a personal conversation with God. However, in breaking down the instructions of Jesus we can see a pattern of discussion which we are told to pursue when we come before the Lord.

Firstly, Jesus tells us to address God as a father – ‘Our Father’. This implies an understanding we are His children and therefore we are in His family, deeply loved and valued by Him. It suggests a relationship with God which is personal, intimate, and secure. Secondly, we are to recognize where the Father is – ‘in heaven’. Again, this is about understanding and acknowledging Who we are addressing in prayer – the God of the Bible, our Father God, Who exists outside of time, space, and matter, in

eternity, specifically in a place the Bible calls ‘heaven’. Next, we have the phrase ‘hallowed be Your name’. Hallowed means ‘holy’ or sacred – set apart from all else. We can see we are directed by Jesus to continue spending our initial time in prayer by acknowledging and revering our Father as He has made Himself known to us through Scripture. He is our Father, He resides in heaven, He is holy, and His name is holy. At this point we are then directed to pray in His will – ‘Your kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven’. It is the Father’s will for His kingdom to ultimately come into power on the earth, just as it is already in power in heaven right now. It is also the Father’s will for His purposes to be pursued and accomplished in every believer’s life on earth. This is the part of our conversation with God where we begin seeking to align our will to God’s will. We must daily ask for Him to empower us in pursuing His desires for us and not our own.

‘Give us this day, our daily bread’ – this is our humble request for God’s daily provision. In our prayer life we ought to be regularly submitting ourselves to relying upon God to provide all we need in life on a daily basis; be it food, shelter, clothing, health, relationships, or finances. This does not mean we shouldn’t work hard or utilize the talents and gifts we have been given to make a living and pay our bills. But it does mean, at the end of the day we recognize it is only through God’s grace and by His provision we are able to do so.

Continuing on with our prayer model we can see we are instructed to ask for forgiveness for whenever we sin or trespass, and we are also to regularly forgive those who have wronged us. Any wrongs we have knowingly or unknowingly committed we must bring before God and ask His forgiveness. We additionally request for His help in softening our own hearts to be able to sincerely forgive those who may have wronged us.

Next, we are told to seek God’s help in keeping us from being tempted or getting off His narrow path – that is the ‘lead us not into temptation’ section. Another passage words the same idea in the following way: *Watch and pray, lest you enter into*

temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak. (Matthew 26:41) An additional meaning can be layered in with this prayer request because the Greek word used here is more accurately reflected as “testing”. So, in essence, we are asking God to ‘lead us not into a testing’. Such a plea may not make sense on the surface but it has a deeper, end-times oriented meaning which specifically implies we are asking God to protect us from falling victim to the severe circumstances which will be occurring on earth after Jesus Christ draws all believers to Him before God’s wrath is poured out. The same word usage is found in the Book of Revelation as Jesus Christ promises His faithful believers He will keep them from the hour of ‘testing’ or ‘trial’. *Because you have kept My command to persevere, I also will keep you from the hour of trial which shall come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth. (Revelation 3:10)* Finally, we can note the ‘keep us from evil’ or ‘deliver us from evil’ section is also plea for God’s protection, protection from the devil, protection from the influence and wickedness of the secular world, protection from sickness and catastrophe, and protection from our own fleshly lusts.

So, we know Jesus Christ specifically instructs us to routinely address these basics whenever we talk to the Father. However, they are not the only issues we can discuss in our prayer life. We are also free to talk to God in great detail about any of our troubles, intercede for the wellbeing of others, and generally praise and give thanks to Him for all He has done and continues to do for us. We pray in the power of the Holy Spirit residing within us. Our prayer life with God is intended to strengthen our relationship with Him, build up our faith, and keep ourselves operating in the light of His love. *But you, beloved, building yourselves up on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in the love of God, looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life. (Jude 1:20,21)*

As mentioned in previous chapters, we are shown in the Psalms it is desirable to talk to the Lord first thing in the mornings, before we start our day. *Give heed to the voice of my cry, my King and my God, for to You I will pray. My voice You shall hear*

in the morning, O LORD; in the morning I will direct it to You, and I will look up. (Psalm 5:2,3) Looking up to God before we face the challenges of the day will impact how we respond to what unfolds in our daily lives. This is about putting God first in our thoughts, words and actions, seeking first the kingdom of heaven so all else falls into place according to the Lord's will and purposes. *O LORD, You are the portion of my inheritance and my cup; You maintain my lot. The lines have fallen to me in pleasant places; Yes, I have a good inheritance. I will bless the LORD who has given me counsel; My heart also instructs me in the night seasons. I have set the LORD always before me; because He is at my right hand I shall not be moved. Therefore my heart is glad, and my glory rejoices; My flesh also will rest in hope. (Psalm 16:5-9)* What a gift it is to begin our mornings blessing God, thanking Him for His guidance, His mercy, His truths, and the joy He has imparted to our hearts! The passage states God gives us counsel in the 'night seasons.' Often when the word 'night' is used in the Bible it has a two-fold meaning, the first being the simple straightforward meaning of 'nighttime' but secondly it can be indicative of evil or dark times and difficult seasons. So, whether we are awake at night and finding ourselves fretting about something or whether we are enduring a dark, wicked or evil affliction, we are able to be given counsel from God if we reach out to Him in prayer during those times.

Another reason for us to pray is in order to ask God for wisdom and understanding. The Bible tells us if we ask for wisdom, God will give it to us. But we must ask in faith without doubting. *If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind. For let not that man suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways. (James 1:5-8)* We have a great example of this type of prayer in the Old Testament when a very young and inexperienced King Solomon began his reign. We are told God came to him and asked if there was anything He could give him. Solomon responded he did not feel equipped to lead or judge God's people and therefore he asked

for wisdom. God was so pleased with Solomon's request He gave him the most wisdom any man had ever been given and He also gave him everything else a person could dream of desiring: *On that night God appeared to Solomon, and said to him, "Ask! What shall I give you?" And Solomon said to God: "You have shown great mercy to David my father and have made me king in his place. Now, O LORD God, let Your promise to David my father be established, for You have made me king over a people like the dust of the earth in multitude. Now give me wisdom and knowledge, that I may go out and come in before this people; for who can judge this great people of Yours?" Then God said to Solomon: "Because this was in your heart, and you have not asked riches or wealth or honor or the life of your enemies, nor have you asked long life—but have asked wisdom and knowledge for yourself, that you may judge My people over whom I have made you king—"wisdom and knowledge are granted to you; and I will give you riches and wealth and honor, such as none of the kings have had who were before you, nor shall any after you have the like. (2 Chronicles 1:7-12)*

Believers are even instructed to pray for their enemies. This sounds like a strange and unwarranted thing to do because we think in human terms instead of from God's perspective. Praying for our enemies – specifically for their repentance and salvation – opens a way for God to move in their lives and bring them to belief and faith in Jesus Christ. Think about it. If such a thing is accomplished, we will no longer have an enemy but rather, we gain a brother or sister in Christ. They will become part of our forever family and we will no longer suffer at their hands. *But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. (Matthew 5:44,45)*

Persistence in prayer is an ideal taught heavily throughout the Bible. Just because we do not seem to receive an answer or a line of direction from God immediately after we pray does not mean we are not heard or have been told 'No.' Sometimes it simply means 'Not Yet'. Oftentimes, we are not truly listening

and waiting for God's still, small voice to speak to our hearts. Whatever the situation may be, we are given an instruction to ask, seek and knock, with regard to prayer in both the Books of Matthew and Luke: *Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. (Matthew 7:7,8)* The verb tense in the original language is that of a 'continuous tense' which can literally be read as, 'keep asking, keep seeking, keep knocking'. This action portrays the perseverance of faithful and persistent prayer. We are also shown a parable in which a woman was persistent in her request of a judge and how her persistence pays off. Jesus tells us, if she received what she persisted in asking for, how much more shall our own persistence in prayer to God achieve the requests of our hearts?

Then He spoke a parable to them, that men always ought to pray and not lose heart, saying: "There was in a certain city a judge who did not fear God nor regard man. Now there was a widow in that city; and she came to him, saying, 'Get justice for me from my adversary.' And he would not for a while; but afterward he said within himself, 'Though I do not fear God nor regard man, yet because this widow troubles me I will avenge her, lest by her continual coming she weary me.' Then the Lord said, "Hear what the unjust judge said. And shall God not avenge His own elect who cry out day and night to Him, though He bears long with them? I tell you that He will avenge them speedily. (Luke 18:1-8) Therefore, do not give up on your prayers and petitions to God. He is faithful and if your prayer is within the parameters of His will, what you are praying for will be given to you when God decides the time is right. *Most assuredly, I say to you, whatever you ask the Father in My name He will give you. Until now you have asked nothing in My name. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full. (John 16:23,24)*

As Christians, much of what we pray for is genuinely good and righteous in the eyes of God. We ask for the salvation of our loved ones, we ask for strength and peace when we suffer a loss or tragedy, we ask for God to avenge evil and dispel it. God will

bring our righteous requests and petitions to pass, however it must be in His timing and not ours. If we are praying in the will of God and specifically for the things of God, we will indeed receive what we ask for – it just may not be when or how we expect. We are encouraged to have faith and believe our prayers are being responded to in the best manner possible. *So Jesus answered and said to them, “Have faith in God. For assuredly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, ‘Be removed and be cast into the sea,’ and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that those things he says will be done, he will have whatever he says. Therefore, I say to you, whatever things you ask when you pray, believe that you receive them, and you will have them. And whenever you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive him, that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses. But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses. (Mark 11:22-26)* Notice we are told in the above passage if we have a grudge or an unresolved issue with someone we must forgive and settle the matter before we approach God in prayer. It is essential we treat others the way God has treated us – with mercy, forgiveness, compassion, and love. If we are not doing this, it means we have not repented of our own behavior and involvement in the argument or disagreement, and therefore God cannot forgive us of our part in the matter until we do. God’s forgiveness requires our repentance.

Spiritual pride and arrogance do not get us anywhere with God. We see throughout the New Testament Jesus Christ condemns such attitudes from the pharisees and scribes of His day. Jesus even gave His disciples an example of the kind of prideful prayer God will not hear versus the kind He listens to in mercy and grace. *Also He spoke this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others: Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, ‘God, I thank You that I am not like other men—extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.’ And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven,*

but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me a sinner!' I tell you; this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted. (Luke 18:9-14) God hates pride because it is the original sin of the human race and borne of the devil himself. Pride will stop our prayers in their tracks because it is open sin. *God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble. (James 4:6)* He instead draws near to the broken hearted. *The LORD is near to those who have a broken heart, and saves such as have a contrite spirit. (Psalm 34:18)* He loves to bless the spiritually humble. *Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 5:3)*

There will be times when we know we must pray for someone, something, or some situation but we literally do not know what to pray. We can find ourselves agonizing over what we should pray for. God assures us, as we bring those issues to His throne and talk to Him about them, He will help us in our prayer by empowering His Spirit within us to pray exactly what we ought to be praying. Isn't that an amazing thought? *Likewise, the Spirit also helps in our weaknesses. For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered. Now He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He makes intercession for the saints according to the will of God. (Romans 8:26,27)*

We are encouraged to hold a continual thought conversation with God as we live out each day, chatting with Him and seeking His direction as situations are presented to us. This habit does not seem realistic or even possible at first but when we begin to practice this type of prayerful thought life it grows to be a very natural pattern of behavior. With the Holy Spirit leading us, we will indeed find ourselves ceaselessly praying as we shoot up various thoughts and questions to the Lord in a routine of everyday discussion with Him. This is the path of relationship which God wants us to travel – seeking His will and enjoying our own intimate, private relationship with Him in a consistent manner. That is what praying without ceasing should look like.

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18)

There is a form of prayer which is fleshly or carnal and therefore, wrong. James tell us about it in the following verse. *You lust and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and war. Yet you do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures. (James 4:2,3)* How do we ask amiss? When we ask for things which are according to the lusts and desires of our flesh, we are asking amiss. Praying for a shiny new red corvette or a lucky lottery ticket is not really the goal of Christian prayer. We are directed and encouraged throughout Scripture to beseech the Lord to provide us our daily needs – but there is nothing godly or spiritual about praying for excessive material bounty which surpasses the necessary and borders on covetousness, indulgence, and splurging. Again, there is nothing wrong with owning such things, but to desire them so badly we find ourselves begging God for them indicates we are not operating in a spiritually healthy or godly manner.

Obviously, any prayers which ask God for something unscriptural or sinful are also a form of ‘asking amiss’; such as prayers for God to bring about a divorce, to harm the innocent, or to help achieve success in any type of immoral behavior or sexual relationship outside of biblical marriage. When we pray, the goal is to align our own wills with God’s will. Our conversations and petitions should bring about godly clarification and guidance which shed increased light upon God’s will for each issue we bring before Him. It is important to have quiet time as well, in order to wait on the Lord and allow Him to respond and speak to our hearts. God is not a genie in a bottle, and He intends for our prayer life to be much more than Him receiving from us a grocery list of requests. Again, it is a personal conversation which we are to foster and seek. God desires our hearts and wants an abundant personal relationship with us. Think of it this way: If you and your spouse or your child only spoke to one another once or twice a day and then only

to list your requests and petitions of each other, what kind of relationship would that be? Let that perspective be with you as you seek to further your prayer life with God.

Prayer should be our first solution to every obstacle and problem, not our last resort after we have tried everything else. Prayer gives us clarity, direction, encouragement, and allows God to move in our lives. *Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing psalms. Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much. (James 5:13-16)*

APPENDIX A

The Practice of Baptism

Baptism is a widely disputed topic among Christian churches today, yet it does not have to be. Some churches teach the ritual plants a ‘seed of faith’ in infants, some believe it is an act which actually produces eternal salvation, others teach baptism completes the process of salvation, while still others simply understand it to be a command from the Lord Jesus Christ which new believers should obey primarily because Jesus said so. The disputes Christians have regarding baptism are clearly centered upon the perceived power behind the act and at what point in life it should take place.

Certainly, according to the Bible, the first thing we need to take note of is baptism is a command given *to the believer* to perform. At no point in Scripture are nonbelievers told to be baptized. What this immediately makes clear is baptism has nothing to do with salvation, since only a believer – one who has already repented and become born again by faith in Jesus Christ – is commanded to perform this ritual. Yet today we have many churches placing a significant emphasis upon the act of infant baptism as if it were a means to become saved or an act to assure salvation for our children. The glaring problem anyone should have with this is such a practice teaches ‘another way’ or an ‘additional means’ to earn or guarantee eternal salvation besides our faith alone in Jesus Christ and His atoning sacrifice on the cross of Calvary. But we know Jesus Christ said, “*I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father except by Me.*” (*John 14:6*) He did not say, ‘No one comes to the Father except by baptism’. We are also told, “*Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.*” (*Acts 4:12*) and “*For by grace you have been saved through faith*” (*Ephesians 2:8*) Clearly, the verse does not read, ‘For by grace you have been saved through baptism.’

Looking deeper into Scripture, we find the Bible reveals *zero* passages which teach baptism saves souls or contributes in any way to receiving true faith or making our salvation complete. We must realistically ask ourselves, does God need our help to add to His gracious and merciful gift of salvation? Does He need us to perform a special act or religious ritual like baptism in order for our salvation to begin or for our justification through faith in Jesus Christ to be complete? Aren't we trying to accomplish our own salvation and the salvation of our children by believing the act of baptism itself has the power to 'wash away' sins and implant the 'seed of faith'? When you get right down to it, isn't baptism something mankind physically must *do*? Therefore, is it not a 'works' or a human effort? Why would any Christian church attribute such power to something people must physically do? God instructs us throughout His Word what Jesus Christ accomplished through His death on the cross we may not add to or attempt to 'complete'. Yes, the act of baptism itself indeed is commanded – but not as a means of 'getting saved' or becoming 'more saved'. As Jesus Christ proclaimed upon the cross, "*It is finished.*" (*John 19:30*) Salvation has already been accomplished, in full, by our God.

Every week in various churches, congregations will hear from the pulpit, "baptism washes away sin", or "plants faith" or 'seals faith. If baptism is such a powerful tool for 'washing our sins' and 'planting' or 'sealing faith', then why are Christians not running around and forcibly baptizing every unbeliever we know? Honestly, if the act plants a saving faith right into our hearts, let's get to work dunking or sprinkling water on all our unbelieving loved ones' heads in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Such a proposal is silly, isn't it? In the Bible, we see John the Baptist actually denying the Pharisees access to his baptism of repentance. This is because John knew the Pharisees did not believe what he was proclaiming, and because they did not believe, they were certainly not repentant – both of which are *required conditions* if one wants to become baptized in the manner which the Lord commands. (Refer to Matthew 3:7 and Luke 3:7). If indeed baptism brought forth faith, wouldn't John have immediately invited the Pharisees down to the river to

be baptized so they could become repentant believers ready to receive their coming Messiah? Of course, he would have.

Both belief and repentance are biblically required to exist in one's heart *before* one should become baptized. The Scriptures teach us it is our living and active belief in Jesus Christ's death on the cross as the atonement for all sin which assures us we are true children of God. Nothing else, not the fact that we were baptized; not the partaking of 'Holy Communion' (i.e., the 'Lord's Supper'); nothing but our living, active, repentant faith in Christ's atoning death is what saves us. Again, Jesus Christ said on the cross, "*It is finished.*" We can add nothing to His work. It is tragic so many churches regularly name baptism and the 'Lord's Supper' ('Holy Communion') as *sacraments* integral to a believer's faith, salvation, and walk with Christ. This is a confusing and religion-oriented doctrine.

The Bible is our infallible resource of truth according to God. So, thinking biblically, we can agree Jesus Christ never taught a person could be saved by the personal wishes of their parents or grandparents. But isn't that what the baptism of infants really is? We are never told by Jesus to perform a ritual in order to achieve eternal salvation for our babies. We cannot get into heaven by hanging onto the coattails or hopes of those who went before us. Just because a parent *wants* their child to have eternal life does not mean they can actually save the child by having him or her baptized. That would mean the power of salvation lies within the parent who brought the child in to be baptized, as well as the priest or pastor who performs the service – both of whom are making this choice *for* the infant. The Bible does not teach this – not anywhere. We are required by God to establish our own repentance, our own faith, and our own relationship with Him through His Son, Jesus Christ. We do this by hearing the truths of Scripture and the gospel, and being convicted and moved to respond to what we have heard, allowing the Holy Spirit present in the Word to work a new faith in our hearts.

Here is a great question: If infant baptism saves us, how long is the baptism good for? When does it expire? I only ask because,

you see, thousands of infants are baptized in churches across the world and yet they grow up unbelieving, dying in their sin, and doomed to eternal condemnation. So, how long does the saving power of an infant baptism last? A couple of years? All the way to adolescence? My husband was baptized in a Catholic church as an infant, but he was not a true believer in the Lord Jesus Christ as his Savior until he reached 35 years of age. If his infant baptism washed away all his sins and magically created or sealed within him a saving faith in Christ, how long did such a faith last? How long was he saved for? At what point did he officially become an unbeliever in God's eyes? Age 5? Age 13? Age 20? There is no logical or scriptural answer. The Bible teaches us, had he died before he gave his life to Jesus at age 35, my husband would have spent eternity in hell. He was not a true follower of Jesus Christ until he was led by hearing the Word of God to believe and repent of his spiritually apathetic, godless way of living.

I have heard the defense that because he was baptized as an infant, a seed of faith was planted in his heart causing him to eventually seek Jesus Christ as an adult. This is a baseless statement. As I have mentioned before, thousands of people have been baptized as infants and do not *ever* seek God or become followers of Christ. They die unrepentant and unforgiven. Additionally, thousands of people who do *not* get baptized as infants *do* become true believers at later ages. How does that work? I was not baptized as a baby. How then, did I become a believer as an adult? I did not have a 'magically' saving baptism working in my heart from infancy. What I did have, however, was different people sharing the Word of God with me at various, crucial times throughout my life making my heart ready for a life of faith. The evangelistic efforts of other believers teaching me God's Word is what eventually brought me to my own belief and my own repentance before God. The Word of God and the conviction of conscience caused by His Holy Spirit is truly what brings every person to their own repentance and biblically sound faith.

Scripturally speaking, baptism is not necessary for salvation. It is simply an outward proclamation and a *result* of conversion, not a *means* to it. The entire New Testament supports this. For example; see Mark 16:16, which clearly indicates, belief, not baptism, is the condition for salvation; “*Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.*” While the first part of his statement shows baptism should follow belief, it is equally clear from the second part belief alone is required for salvation. The historical account of the thief on the cross who went to join Jesus in ‘paradise’ after professing belief in Him as Lord can also attest to this. Belief and repentance always come before baptism in Scripture. This is why John the Baptist came before Jesus Christ. John preached of sin and repentance in order to prepare people’s hearts to receive Jesus as their Lord and Savior. It is the humbled and broken spirited person who seeks God’s grace and mercy. Knowledge of our sin is what humbles our hearts and eventually moves us to repent, becoming broken in spirit before our holy God and therefore open to receiving His gift of salvation. The point is, we don’t get baptized first, and *then* experience repentance and belief. That would reverse the process, making it entirely backwards and contradictory to Scripture. Yet many church doctrines teach this in every infant baptism performed.

Scripture shows us baptism is merely one of our first (and most important) acts of obedience after coming to the cross in faith. The Bible emphasizes the necessity of our faith existing first, before anyone can be baptized. Nowhere in Scripture are we taught baptism has the power to create faith, but rather, faith will *lead* us to undergo the baptism experience. Throughout the New Testament, repentance and faith happen by hearing and believing the Word of God, and after repenting, the new believer is then moved to perform the act of baptism.

Baptism of infants is not supported by any verses in Scripture. Those who use Matthew 28:19-20, “*Go ye therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy spirit; teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I commanded you*”... as the

biblical imperative behind baptizing infants are taking a giant leap at defining the word “nations” to be inclusive of the decision-making capabilities of infants. The normal meaning of the word “nations” implies a group of adults who share a common geographical area, culture, and government. They may have families, but it is the adults within the nation who operate as a nation. When a “nation” votes, declares war, changes economic policy, or creates a trade agreement, small children and infants are not involved. They do not have the capacity to understand the issues or make such decisions. It is the same with the call of the Holy Spirit in turning one’s heart and mind toward repentance, belief, and Christian faith. With the exception of very special, God-appointed circumstances (John the Baptist responded to the power of Jesus Christ while still in the womb) most infants are not given such an early calling and therefore, logically speaking, most infants are not mentally or spiritually capable of responding to such a call.

The Bible shows us we need not have concern about the eternal fate of infants or children who die before they are capable of understanding and genuinely believing the gospel. We read in 2nd Samuel 12:23, of David’s simple faith he will see his dead infant son in heaven (not baptized); *“And he said, "While the child was alive, I fasted and wept; for I said, 'Who can tell whether the LORD will be gracious to me, that the child may live?' But now he is dead; why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? **I shall go to him**, but he shall not return to me.”* Jesus states several times the kingdom of heaven already belongs to children (of whom no evidence is given of their baptism or even if their parents were believers):

But Jesus said, "Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 19:14)

But when Jesus saw it, He was greatly displeased and said to them, "Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of God. (Mark 10:14)

Assuredly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will by no means enter it. (Luke 18:17).

The Bible tells us Jesus was dedicated to the Lord as an infant (see Luke 2:21-39), but Jesus was not baptized as an infant. Jesus was baptized as an adult. We should not ask, ‘What would Jesus do?’ (WWJD) but instead, ‘What *did* Jesus do?’ If we read the Matthew 28:19-20 command correctly, we can see we must make disciples first [by sharing the gospel with those who can understand it and then believe it], *then* we baptize them, and finally, we teach them all Jesus has commanded so the new believer can go out into the world and live their lives as witnesses worthy of the salvation to which they have been called. This is the stated order in Jesus’ command, straight from God’s Word. Yet many church doctrines change this order in practice by putting the baptism first, which redefines the meaning of the command, because baptizing then becomes *the means* of creating a disciple. These doctrines call for the baptism of a baby *before* it can even think about becoming a disciple, asserting the baptism itself creates the faith and therefore creates the disciple. Such a viewpoint contradicts every passage in the New Testament which describes the baptism process. God’s Word shows the making of disciples comes first, and only then do they perform the act of baptism. We must hear the gospel, repent, and in faith accept God’s gift of salvation before we can become disciples who then seek to be publicly baptized. Let us look at a sample of how the apostles put Jesus Christ’s instructions into practice. There is a clear pattern of hearing/believing, repentance, and finally, baptism:

Acts 2:36-38: (1) when they heard this (the gospel), they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Men and brethren, what shall we do?” Then Peter said to them, “(2) Repent, and let every one of you (3) be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.

Acts 2:41: Those who gladly (1) received his word (2) were baptized.”

Acts 8:12: *But (2) when they believed Philip (1) as he preached the things concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, both men and women (3) were baptized.* Notice this statement does not include children or infants.

Acts 8:35-38: *Then Philip... (1) preached Jesus to him...And the eunuch said, "See here is water. What hinders me from being baptized?" Then Philip said, (2) "If you believe with all your heart, you may." And he answered and said, (2) "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God." So, he commanded the chariot to stand still. And both Peter and the eunuch went down into the water, and (3) he baptized him.* Note the apostle makes belief a condition for whether the eunuch can be baptized. Also noted by this author that many modern Bible translations have removed verse 37 completely from this passage. The King James Version and NKJV both show verse 37.

Acts 16:13-15: *And we sat down and (1) spoke to the women who met there. Now a certain woman named Lydia (2) heard us.... The Lord (3) opened her heart to heed the things spoken by Paul. And when (4) she and her household were baptized, she begged us, saying...come to my house and stay.*

Acts 16:30-33: *Then (1) they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house... And immediately (2) he and all his family were baptized.*

Acts 10: In this slightly longer story, Peter (1) preached to Cornelius' entire household and as a miraculous act to prove salvation was for Gentiles as well. *The Holy Spirit fell upon all those who (2) heard the word...And he (Peter) commanded them (3) to be baptized in the name of the Lord.*

Every one of these incidents portrays an apostle preaching first, and baptizing afterwards. The baptizing happens *only* after the apostles witnessed the recipients' belief. There are no cases of infants being baptized in Scripture. There is a reason for this. Hearing the gospel comes first, belief and repentance come second, and obedience to the baptism command comes last.

Infants cannot do this. Historically, infant baptism seems to have been unheard of in the Christian church until well after 150 A.D. One of the earliest church historians, a man from Africa named ‘Tertullian’ is said to be the first person in church history to mention infant baptism in writing, and his writings attest he was against the ‘growing practice’ of such a thing. (Tertullian, *De Baptismo*, Ch. XIV). This further solidifies our understanding infant baptism was not done in the original apostolic churches.

According to history, the baptism of infants became prevalent primarily when the Roman emperor Constantine implemented ‘mandatory Christianity’ as a requirement for Roman citizenship. This was simply one of many changes ultimately leading to the corruption of Christian faith in Rome and the introduction of pagan-influenced practices and rituals into the church. Constantine began to use infant baptism as a means to increase and guarantee church membership (and therefore, Rome’s finances), as well as to verify Roman citizenship and gain collective power and control over the people of that era. The Roman church and the Roman government became as one entity. Constantine’s goal was to effectively raise up generation after generation of people who would be automatically ‘born into’ the church, and therefore born under his power and control.

Sadly, such a plan resulted in generations of people growing up as members of a theologically skewed Catholic establishment *without ever experiencing a true, biblical, born-again conversion at any point in their lives*. Christianity in mainstream Rome became distorted, transforming into a societal culture and a form of government instead of a personal faith. Catholicism was merely a label; an institutional identity and a popular ideal, but the faith which was disseminated among the masses had lost all recognition as a biblically-founded, born-again, faith relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. The remnant of true believers who refused to be a part of the papal influenced church in Rome became those who were historically hunted down and ceaselessly persecuted throughout the ages for their fundamental faith in Jesus Christ and the Scriptures which tell us all about Him. “The New Foxe’s Book of Martyrs” by John Foxe is an

excellent albeit highly disturbing resource for more information on this subject.

The Bible teaches we cannot force a ‘mandatory’ Christian faith upon anyone, nor is any person capable of being born a believer straight out of their mother’s womb via parental church membership or infant baptism. We are told to trust in God alone for the increase and prosperity of the true Christian church. *So then neither he who plants is anything, nor he who waters, but [it is] God who gives the increase. (1 Corinthians 3:7) Our duty as believers is merely to Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching. (2 Timothy 4:2)* We are not to concern ourselves with numbers or the quantitative growth of God’s people, for true spiritual conversion is God’s department, not ours. King David got himself into great trouble with the Lord when he became overly concerned with numbers. *And David's heart condemned him after he had numbered the people. So, David said to the LORD, "I have sinned greatly in what I have done; but now, I pray, O LORD, take away the iniquity of Your servant, for I have done very foolishly. (2 Samuel 24:10)*

In summary, according to the Bible, baptism is for those who are already believers. The act of baptizing is important for Christians primarily because Jesus commanded believers to do it, but it has absolutely no power to create faith. Therefore, on the part of the believer, becoming baptized is an act of obedience and an act of love toward their Savior. Baptism is our public witness to the rest of the world, proclaiming Christ’s death and resurrection as well as the new believer’s status as a born-again disciple of Jesus Christ. As a believer it is our responsibility to become baptized and it is our privilege to symbolically experience through water what Jesus’ blood has done for us. It is a command, but it is also a gift which helps us identify ourselves with Jesus Christ. Baptism is integral to our comprehension of what has happened to us as believers in Christ. We are symbolically buried with Christ *“through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.”*

(Romans 6:4-6) Baptism does not save us, but it does explicitly set us apart as those who belong to the community of faith in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior.

In the Old Testament, God commanded circumcision to be performed by all His children of faith; it was a covenant made with Abraham and all his descendants, setting them apart and reminding them they were not like the rest of the pagan world; but rather they were heirs to the promised land, and their bloodline would produce the Seed [Jesus Christ] Who would conquer Satan and death, saving all people from eternal condemnation. The circumcision itself had no power to save, for it was the inward circumcision of the heart toward God which really mattered. In the New Testament, baptism accomplishes a very similar thing. It is our public testimony and our personal agreement with the New Covenant; through it we are set apart from the rest of the world.

Scripture tells us the importance of baptism is not about any power lying within the religious act of cleansing the body with physical water, but instead the power of salvation is inherent in the inner response of our good conscience towards God. *There is also an antitype which now saves us—baptism (not the removal of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God), through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. (1 Peter 3:21).* Like so many other instances in the Bible, the act of baptism is a picture. It is a portrayal of the inward baptism of our spirits into a faith in Jesus Christ and His atonement and resurrection. The word ‘baptism’ in its original language literally means ‘to be put under’ or to ‘be submersed into’. Believers become spiritually baptized ‘into Christ’ or ‘submersed into Christ’ or even ‘put under Christ’ upon becoming born again, because the new Christian now begins to live life in Him and under Him. He is our ‘Head’ and we are His ‘body’ of believers. Through the Holy Spirit, Christ is in us, and we are in Him – thus, we are baptized into Christ. The water of the believer’s baptism ritual is an outward picture to help us identify with what has happened to us on the inside when we become born again. It is important to understand God often

teaches His precepts through imagery such as this. Again, God does not need help. Salvation is a *gift* from God to us. Our only part is to receive His gift by humbly opening our hearts to His Word and His Spirit, gratefully accepting the faith He offers!

Belief that baptism actually saves us, washes our sins, gives us faith or ‘makes good’ our promise of heaven, is simply man trying reach God on his own merit by putting himself through a ritual. Such a viewpoint turns the gift and privilege of baptism into the performing of a works by mankind in order to earn salvation. But if we feel the need to ‘make sure’ of our salvation by placing our trust in something we can physically see and do (the ritual of baptism) then we do not have the true faith required to accept God’s gift for what it is. Dependence on a visible ritual is the evidence we are not trusting in Jesus Christ’s atonement on the cross alone. Yet the Bible assures us the work is already done. It is finished. God tells us all who confess Jesus Christ with their mouth and believe on Him in their hearts are saved. We are washed clean by the sacrificial blood of Jesus dying on the Cross, not by the water of an act or ritual which is meant to be a picture and public proclamation of our transition into a new life in Christ. Sadly, many churches throughout the world glorify the ‘sacrament’ of baptism as a saving ritual. There are people in church congregations who are relying upon their infant baptism as proof they are saved, yet their personal walk with Jesus Christ has never gone any further than the initial sprinkling of water on their tiny little heads. *Not everyone who says to Me Lord, Lord’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. (Matthew 7:21)* How many people are spiritually deceived by the belief this one act of religion is their ticket to heaven? Too many. They are in bondage to a manmade tradition and teaching which has been engraved into their minds regardless of the opposing biblical truths available to them should they study God’s Word. Such people cannot see the deception because they are assured from the pulpit their church is the only one who “has it right”. I am deeply saddened when I see folks who become completely engulfed in fear when they find out about a child who has not been baptized as an infant, because they then assume that poor

child will go straight to hell if it dies before being baptized. A line of thinking which places the eternal wellbeing of a baby's soul in the hands of fallible, sinful human beings instead of in God's hands... well, this line of thinking cannot be from God. Salvation is from the Lord, not from parents.

APPENDIX B

Observing the Lord's Supper

As stated in Appendix A, many churches teach a person receives faith from a combination of several different 'sacraments' such as the Word of God, Baptism, Confirmation, and 'Communion' or the "Lord's Supper", just to name a few major ones. But if you were to look up every incidence in which the word "faith" is used in Scripture to see if God shows us examples of faith coming from anything other than Himself through the vehicle of His Word and His Spirit, you will find no verses. Scripture only shows us faith in Jesus Christ and His sacrificial atonement upon the cross comes to mankind upon exposure to God's Word and His Spirit. The strongest biblical testimony which teaches us where faith comes from lies within this passage in the book of Romans: *So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God. (Romans 10:17)* Here we have an outright declaration of where faith comes from. We need to be very aware there is nothing said in Scripture about faith coming from being baptized, or from partaking of the communion, i.e. the Lord's Supper. We see faith coming from God in this passage: *For I say, through the grace given to me, to everyone who is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think soberly, as God has dealt to each one a measure of faith. (Romans 12:3).*

In Acts 3:16, speaking of Jesus Christ and a healed man, we see the following statement: *And His name, through faith in His name, has made this man strong, whom you see and know. Yes, the faith which comes through Him has given him this perfect soundness in the presence of you all.* If we were able to actually obtain faith or somehow 'complete our salvation' through partaking of a ritual such as the Lord's Supper or baptism, you would think we could see examples of this in the early church, or at least the apostle Paul or one of the others teaching about it within the letters of the New Testament. No such examples exist. The following verses, however, all point to the Word of

God being preached as the method for establishing faith and strengthening faith in a person.

Romans 10:8 states: *But what does it say? 'The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart'; (that is, the word of faith which we preach): that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.* There is no mention of a “baptism of faith which we preach” or a “Lord’s Supper of faith which we preach” but merely “the Word of faith” being preached.

2nd Corinthians 10:14-16 tells us: *For it was to you that we came with the gospel of Christ, not boasting of things beyond measure, that is, in other men’s labors, but having hope that as your faith is increased, we shall be greatly enlarged by you in our sphere to preach the gospel in the regions beyond you.* Again, did Paul come to them with baptism? Did he come to them with the Lord’s Supper? No. To them he came with the gospel of Christ. Why is Paul indicating their faith will increase? Will it increase because of being baptized? No. Will it increase through partaking of the Lords Supper? No. Will it increase by hearing the gospel preached? Yes. And what is their goal to be? They are to preach the gospel to everyone in the regions beyond. Receiving faith and strengthening faith is all about hearing God’s Word preached.

In Galatians 1:23, we find this statement: *He who formerly persecuted us now preaches the faith which he once tried to destroy.* Does it say Paul now baptizes for the faith or distributes the Lord’s Supper of faith? No. He preaches the faith. Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 1:17: *For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel.* What was his stated goal? It was to preach the gospel, and nothing else. Indeed, Paul actually refutes the importance of baptizing because it is so secondary to preaching and teaching God’s Word. Clearly, in his day people were already fighting over the significance of baptism, which should indicate to us how careful we must be to avoid elevating it to a level of importance not intended by Jesus Christ. God is truly telling us not to misinterpret or misplace the value of rituals

such as baptism. The rebuke in this passage is about not letting a ritual overshadow Jesus Christ and His gospel of salvation. I know this is getting repetitive, but some people just really need to hear and be assured about this issue of faith and where it comes from. Look at Galatians 3:8: *And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand, saying, "In you all the nations shall be blessed.* Was Abraham baptized beforehand? Did he partake of the Lord's Supper beforehand? The answer is 'no' to both questions. The gospel was *preached* to Abraham beforehand.

1st Thessalonians 1:5-10 proclaims: *For our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Spirit and in much assurance, as you know what kind of men we were among you for your sake. And you became followers of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became examples to all in Macedonia and Achaia who believe. For from you the word of the Lord has sounded forth, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place. Your faith toward God has gone out, so that we do not need to say anything. For they themselves declare concerning us what manner of entry we had to you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, even Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.* We see the gospel is the powerful, supernatural instrument through which the Holy Spirit works faith into the hearts of men.

In 1st Thessalonians 3:2-4 Paul says the following: *And sent Timothy, our brother and minister of God, and our fellow laborer in the gospel of Christ, to establish you and encourage you concerning your faith, that no one should be shaken by these afflictions; for you yourselves know that we are appointed to this. For in fact we told you before when we were with you that we would suffer tribulation, just as it happened, and you know.* Who did they send to Thessalonica to encourage and strengthen them in their faith? They sent their 'fellow laborer in the gospel of Christ'. And how is it portrayed he would minister to them?

If he is a fellow laborer in the gospel of Christ he is going to be preaching and teaching the word of God to them. They didn't send their 'fellow baptizer', or a 'minister of the Lord's Supper'. They sent one who will share the gospel and teachings of Jesus Christ with them because abiding in the Word of God is how we are encouraged and strengthened. The following is an interesting passage found in 1st Timothy. It is a chronological summarization of events describing the plan of salvation God gave our world:

God was manifested in the flesh

Justified in the Spirit

Seen by Angels

Preached among Gentiles

Believed on in the world

Received in glory.

(1 Timothy 3:16)

There is nothing in the above passage which mentions baptism or the 'Lord's Supper' but we do see the words 'preached' and 'believed'. Jesus Christ was preached and then believed upon in the world. This passage makes clear it was the Word of God and His gospel which caused faith to proliferate in the world. 1st Timothy 4:6 tells us: *If you instruct the brethren in these things, you will be a good minister of Jesus Christ, nourished in the words of faith and of the good doctrine which you have carefully followed.* Timothy is being promised he will be nourished by the words of faith and sound, biblical doctrine. Regarding the gospel recordings of the actual Lord's Supper event, let's read the following:

Matthew 26:26-29: *And as they were eating, Jesus took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to the disciples and said, "Take, eat; this is My body." Then He took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you. For this is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins**.* But I say to you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in My Father's kingdom. **Note: be very clear, the grammar

here is not saying we should drink the cup for the remission of sins... it is saying that Christ's blood was shed for the remission of sins.

Mark 14:22-25: *And as they were eating, Jesus took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them and said, "Take, eat; this is My body." Then He took the cup, and when He had given thanks He gave it to them, and they all drank from it. And He said to them, "This is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many. Assuredly I say to you, I will no longer drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God."*

Luke 22:14-20: *When the hour had come, He sat down, and the twelve apostles with Him. Then He said to them, "With fervent desire I have desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; for I say to you, I will no longer eat of it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God." Then He took the cup, and gave thanks, and said, "Take this and divide it among yourselves; for I say to you, I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes." And He took bread, gave thanks, and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is My body which is broken for you; do this in remembrance of Me." Likewise He also took the cup after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood, which is shed for you."*

1 Corinthians 11:23-34: *For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you; that the Lord Jesus on the same night in which He was betrayed took bread; and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, "Take, eat; this is My body which is broken for you; do this in remembrance of Me." In the same manner He also took the cup after supper saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood. This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till He comes.*

In these passages, we see Jesus Christ commanding His followers when they meet as a church and dine with one another

in fellowship, they must remember Him while drinking their wine and eating their bread. He proclaims the wine to be a picture of His blood poured out for us, and the bread as a picture of His body, broken and sacrificed for our sins. We also see Jesus telling us to do these things in order to *proclaim* His death until He returns – not to magically create faith or strengthen it. After declaring the cup as His blood, Jesus then makes the statement He will not drink of *this fruit of the vine* until the kingdom of God comes. It is noticeably clear then, the cup Jesus is referring to holds real wine, made from grapes, i.e., ‘the fruit of the vine’; not His blood. The wine is merely a picture of His blood. Many churches teach the wine and the bread either supernaturally change into Jesus Christ’s body and blood (transubstantiation) or supernaturally take on the physical properties of Jesus Christ’s flesh and blood right along with the wine and bread (consubstantiation). The Bible teaches neither. In both cases, Jesus would be asking us to drink His blood and eat His flesh, if not all, at least in part. Those who have been led to believe the physical quality of the wine and bread given at the Lord’s Supper changes or is added to in a supernatural manner at any time are misguided.

God states in His Word the drinking of blood is a sin. Leviticus 17:10 shows the command: *And whatever man of the house of Israel, or of the strangers who dwell among you, who eats any blood, I will set My face against that person who eats blood and will cut him off from among his people. For the life of the flesh is in the blood and I have given it to you upon the altar to make atonement for you souls; for it is the blood that makes atonement for the soul. Therefore, I said to the children of Israel; No one among you shall eat blood nor shall any stranger who dwells among you eat blood.* The book of Genesis, chapter 9:4 also tells us the following: *But you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood.*

Jesus came to *fulfill* God’s law, not to *break* it: *Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. (Matthew 5:17)* Knowing this, why would anyone believe God is telling us in the New Testament to drink

the actual blood of Jesus Christ? Why would we think Jesus Himself drank His own blood at the last supper? It is a sin to consume blood and the command against it has not been changed or refuted anywhere in the Bible. We know Jesus was sinless. Therefore, we can be assured by these verses Jesus drank actual wine and not His own blood; and He ate actual bread, not His own flesh. Jesus would never command us to commit the sin of drinking blood or eating flesh. He merely meant for us to drink real wine and eat real bread during our Christian fellowship, and remember Him and what He did for us on the cross to fulfill God's new covenant.

It is also important to note when He spoke about the bread and wine, Jesus was standing right there, fully God but also still fully human and still fully alive. His flesh and blood were intact because He had not yet been crucified. The apostles were physically present with Him in body and flesh as well. Had they honestly thought they were all to consume Jesus' true blood and body, they would have reacted violently. Notice the outraged reaction to the very identical thought in the book of John when Jesus lost many of His followers because they thought He was speaking of cannibalism. *I am the living bread which came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread that I shall give is My flesh, which I shall give for the life of the world." The Jews therefore quarreled among themselves, saying, "How can this Man give us His flesh to eat?"... From that time many of His disciples went back and walked with Him no more. (John 6:53-67)*

Isn't cannibalism exactly what we are talking about if we are to be consuming the true blood and flesh of Jesus Christ with every 'Holy Communion or Lord's Supper' we partake of? Yet, there was no outrage or shock exhibited by the apostles at the Last Supper event, even though there was during the speech of John 6:53-67. This is likely because the disciples did not even for a moment think Jesus was telling them to commit cannibalism. No one could conceivably drink His actual blood or eat His real flesh because He was not yet crucified, and the New Covenant was not yet in force. Since His body and blood had not yet been

sacrificed, how could anyone partake of it? Why do so many churches believe we are eating and drinking the body and blood of Jesus Christ when even the apostles did not have to believe such a thing? We must concede this last supper was merely a picture of what *was* yet to come (the crucifixion), and what *is* yet to come as well (our reuniting with Christ in heaven at the ‘Marriage Supper of the Lamb and His Bride’). It is prophecy, as well as an accurate depiction of specific events which took place the night Jesus was captured. We are to repeat them because Jesus told us to, in light of their spiritual significance. Jesus died and shed His blood for all sin, *one time*, and its salvation effect was accomplished for eternity.

*For Christ has not entered the holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us; **not that He should offer Himself often**, as the high priest enters the Most Holy Place every year with blood of another He then would have had to suffer often since the foundation of the world; but now, **once at the end of the ages, He has appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself**. And as it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment, **so Christ was offered once** to bear the sins of many. (Hebrews 9:24-28)*

*By that will we have been sanctified through the **offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all**. (Hebrews 10:10)*

*But this Man, after He had offered **one sacrifice for sins forever**, sat down at the right hand of God. (Hebrews 10:12)*

*For by **one offering** He has perfected forever those who are being sanctified. (Hebrews 10:14)*

Jesus Christ is now physically seated at the right hand of God, enthroned in heaven, interceding for all believers. Of course, in spirit, He is in every believer through the work of the Holy Spirit. But physically, bodily, He sits in heaven, according to the Bible. If we are to believe the bread and wine of the Lord’s Supper actually becomes His physical flesh and blood, then in essence,

we are forcibly bringing Him down from heaven and crucifying Him over and over again, every time we partake in Communion or the Lord's Supper. We are saying His physical body comes down from heaven to this earth to become a repeated physical blood and flesh sacrifice in our wine and in our bread. This is very wrong theology and extremely unbiblical. The Bible says Jesus Christ will not come back to the earth physically until the Last Day. Look at these passages which teach us Jesus is physically in heaven until His return:

Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven. (Acts 1:9-11)

If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. (Colossians 3:1)

We have such a High Priest, who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens, a Minister of the sanctuary and of the true tabernacle which the Lord erected, and not man. (Hebrews 8:1-2)

I came forth from the Father, and am come into the world: again, I leave the world, and go to the Father" (John. 16:28); I am no more in the world, but these (disciples) are in the world. (John. 17:11)

It is expedient for you that I go away: for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come among you. (John. 16:7).

It came to pass, while he blessed them, he was parted from them, and carried up into heaven. (Luke. 24:51).

Whom the heaven must receive until the times of restitution of all things. (Acts 3:21)

The Lord himself shall descend from heaven with the voice of the archangel. (1 Thessalonians. 4:16).

We know from these Scripture passages Jesus Christ departed physically from earth and is now in heaven until He returns on the Last Day. He is currently at the right hand of God, interceding for believers. He is not *physically* present in any form on earth, because such a thing would be contrary to what is written in the Word of God. If Jesus were going to be accessible as flesh and blood within our wine and bread, wouldn't He have comforted his disciples with such a concept when warning them about His imminent departure? Shouldn't He have explained to them He would depart but still be with them as their physical food and drink at every Holy Supper? He instead taught the disciples He will send the Holy Spirit to them; a Comforter, as a replacement for His own physical presence. He also told them this Helper (Holy Spirit) would not come until He (Jesus Christ) physically goes away. So, Jesus told us in order for the Holy Spirit to come, He [Jesus] must indeed be gone [physically].

Inconsistencies like these cannot be dealt with logically or more importantly, scripturally, by those churches which teach of transubstantiation and consubstantiation (i.e., wine and bread changing in full or in part to Christ's true blood and flesh). The Bible simply does not teach Jesus Christ's blood or flesh is physically in or becomes a part of our wine and bread when we participate in Holy Communion/The Lord's Supper. The figurative speech Jesus employs when He states "*This is my body*" is common throughout the New Testament. It was customary for Jesus to share spiritual truth by making examples of physical things. He fed five thousand people in a miraculous way which caused the people to follow Him again the next day in hopes of getting more food. Yet Jesus used the moment to portray a spiritual truth when He stated He was "*the Bread of Life*" (See John 6). He switched their focus from a desire for real bread to what they should really pursue; God's truths, grace, mercy, and salvation through Jesus Christ.

Jesus also used the water at the well with the Samaritan woman to show us an example of Who and What He was to mankind. (refer to John. 4:10). But although Jesus said He was the "*living water*" He did not actually become water, and He is not present

in our water when we drink it today. So why would anyone think He becomes what He pictures when comparing Himself to wine and bread in another passage? Jesus also professes to be “*the door*” (John 10). Do we then treat every door as something holy and consisting of the same physical bodily properties as Jesus’ flesh and blood? We are also told Jesus is “*the true Light which gives light to every man coming into the world.*” (John. 1:9) In all cases, we are comparing spiritual to physical. It is a way of giving vivid pictures to teach uneducated people what Jesus Christ was supposed to be to them; the Savior, the Giver of Life, the Sustainer, the Way or Door to Eternal Life, and the Source of Light, Truth and Knowledge.

Since the Bible tells us Jesus Christ’s death on the cross has washed away all sin for all time, why would anyone teach other things wash away our sins as well? Such a belief leads to the conclusion Jesus Christ’s atoning sacrifice wasn’t altogether sufficient. To assert there is saving power within any religious ritual causes serious damage and misdirection to the gospel of Jesus Christ. No wonder multitudes of people are confused and ‘turned off’ by church and ‘religion’. They have no idea what to trust or believe. Many communion/holy supper doctrines are basically saying, when Jesus Christ said, “*It is finished*” (John 19:30), He did not really mean it. These church doctrines are teaching we shall have our sins forgiven even more, or all over again each time we participate in the Lord’s Supper. But Jesus does not lie, because God cannot lie, and He really did say, “*It is finished.*” Therefore, I believe Him.

The primary focus of all passages regarding the Lord’s Supper is one of looking forward to the future, to our dinner with Jesus Christ in the kingdom of God, when Jesus will once again partake of wine and bread with His church - His bride. All 4 passages have verses looking forward to His return. God tells us the reason why we must eat and drink the Lord’s Supper. It is found in the 1st Corinthians passage: *As often as we eat the bread and drink the cup, we proclaim His death until He returns.* It is a witness to the unbelieving world. Proclaiming Christ’s death and resurrection, while personally looking forward to our

blessed assurance of His return, are the true purposes behind the command.

When we partake of the Lord's Supper in the fellowship of other believers, it is a public proclamation of the cross, and it also helps us to regularly re-focus and renew our spiritual perspective by remembering the amazing work which has been done to accomplish our eternal salvation. The wine and bread do not create faith, supernaturally strengthen faith, or forgive sins and certainly do not turn into holy blood and flesh. We are merely urged to accept the freely given sacrifice of Jesus Christ's physical life and death as a complete, one-time atonement for all human sin and we are commanded to partake in the Lord's Supper regularly with other believers in order to proclaim our acceptance of such truths. Just like baptism, there is no saving power in the act. Ideas like these come from manmade, religious traditions, not Scripture. If it cannot be found in the Bible, then it must not be. We are not given the freedom or authority to add meanings and mysteries to the Bible which are not really there in the first place. These two rituals are holy only because Jesus Christ commanded us to do them if we are believers. They are important because they cause believers to focus upon their Savior, His finished work on the cross, and His imminent return. The Scriptures tell us nothing more.

APPENDIX C

Is Confirmation Biblical?

What is the purpose of the practice of ‘Confirmation’? According to history, the religious ritual of ‘Confirmation’ was instituted by the Roman Catholic Church to face the dilemma not all baptized infants were growing up to embrace the Roman Catholic faith. Therefore, it was determined an older child must go through a formal church indoctrination via catechism studies which culminated in a final religious ceremony, to “confirm” the faith decision the parents had previously made for him or her at birth. It is interesting to note, although even Martin Luther carried forward this practice, according to his own writings he wasn’t a zealous advocate of the process, because it tended to weaken the doctrine of infant baptism. No kidding!

The Bible contains no verses which discuss or point to a ceremony of confirmation. Jesus Christ did not command his apostles to be confirmed in order to partake of the Lord’s Supper or for any other reason. No person in the Old or New Testament participated in a confirmation class or ceremony, nor was there any process in biblical existence which one could point to as being somewhat similar in purpose. The ritual of confirmation was simply created by men, as all historical writings on the matter will attest. Since confirmation is not found in Scripture, it is not something God commands or requires of us. The ceremony itself does not accomplish anything for the believer other than to obtain permission from a particular church to partake of communion with the rest of the congregation.

For those who believe infant baptism saves souls, the confirmation ritual is problematic. The very practice of it denies the success of the ‘supernaturally created’ salvation supposedly created by the infant baptism. If you personally have been taught to believe baptism saves your baby, what are you saying [and what is your church teaching] when you force that same child through the confirmation process 8 or 12 years later? The only

deductions to be made are either the faith which the infant baptism created has somehow expired, thus creating the need for a brand new commitment to Christ via confirmation classes and a rite involving a personal oath; or else the infant baptism doesn't really work; it's a hit and miss type of thing, or it doesn't actually have saving power...hence the need for a second ritual.

This is the kind of quandary one is placed in when manmade rules and doctrines are implemented into a belief system, rather than simply adhering to the Word of God alone. False teachings and religious doctrines of men always, *always* result in a faith founded upon illogical and shaky precepts. Sooner or later, the unbiblical stances and pillars of manmade church doctrine come under scrutiny and crumble; failing to pass the tests of truth and logic when biblical teachings are applied to the case.

We must recognize God only accepts the faith of an individual who comes to Him in repentance and belief *of their own free will* after hearing the gospel. Giving one's life to Christ must be an action which comes from the heart in obedience to the prompting of the Holy Spirit. Confirmation, on the other hand, is an educational, indoctrinating, and ceremonial process usually forced upon a child by the will of the church, its teachers, and the child's parents. It is obvious we can have no confidence in the memorized responses of children who are performing primarily for parental and instructor approval. A confirmation document cannot be held up to God as proof a person is saved. Being born again cannot be made into a mandatory, forced procedure. Coming to faith in Christ is a personal, conscious response of the will to the Word of God, resulting in repentance, belief, and acceptance of God's rule over one's life. Our duty is to share and explain the Word of God to our children. The rest is up to God and the heart of the individual.

APPENDIX D

Dealing with New Age

A large portion of our nation's population has been deceived into seeking other gods, inner spiritual powers, secret ways, positive thinking mantras, meditative 'oneness', reincarnation, and various additional New Age or Eastern-influenced paths, all of which ultimately lead one away from Jesus Christ into the demonic, spiritual realm and the worship of pagan gods (a.k.a. demons). Such religions and practices do carry within them certain powers, but not the kind you should ever want to be involved with for they will all eventually destroy the soul. Any power which is not from God is by its very nature from a satanic origin. Moses refers to pagan gods in Hebrew as "shedim" and the Apostle Paul refers to pagan gods in the Greek as "demonoi". In English, both original language words used would be accurately reflected as "demons."

God is far more powerful than anything He created, and He retains two thirds of His created godly, holy, angelic host. But, while angels are divine and powerful, they are still created beings and not deities. Demons are simply fallen angels – angels who rebelled against God under the direction of Satan (the devil). The Bible tells us, as a fallen archangel, Satan took one third of the angelic host with him when he rebelled against his Creator, and from that point forward, we have not only Satan to contend with but also his fallen angels – demons – who spend much time distracting, deceiving, oppressing, possessing and tormenting humanity.

So, while there is a certain level of power to be found coiled behind pagan god worship and related pursuits such as new age ideology; all power not directed by God through His Holy Spirit or His holy host of angels is directly traceable to Satan and his minions. I must include the practice of yoga in this discussion, for simple research confirms yoga positions are age-old, pagan worship positions which, when performed, effectively call upon

a specific pagan god/demonic spirit. Additionally, the practice of yoga often encourages unscriptural spiritual meditation and hypnotic chanting which purposes to lead one into contact with the spiritual realm, often under the guise of seeking a seemingly angelic being, ‘Spirit Guide’, or even an alleged level of ‘Christ Consciousness’ while meditating.

There is no such thing as a ‘good’ spirit guide, nor can we elevate ourselves to divinity or attempt to reach ‘Christ Consciousness’ via eastern meditation or chanting disguised as Christian prayer and Christian worship techniques. This is merely a new manner of spiritual warfare raising its ugly, serpentine head. It is Satan battling for our attention and our souls as he devises anything he can to turn our focus away from Jesus Christ and the truths of God. We cannot allow ourselves to be deceived into the vanity of thinking we can raise our own spiritual consciousness to a level of ‘god-hood’ by becoming ‘One with Christ’ in spiritual meditation. Never forget; *the pursuit of power and self-deity is what led to mankind’s fall in the first place!* We must refuse to allow ourselves to fall into the trap of thinking there are latent powers inherent in our own thought patterns which can, if used properly, cause us to gain anything we desire in life. These are all lies straight from the pits of hell, designed to mislead and distract us from the truths of God.

Anything which causes us to focus on self-gratification and the temporary, material pleasures of this world, instead of upon Jesus Christ and the kingdom of heaven, is rooted in idolatry and rebellion towards God. The only power you will ever find yourself tapping into when practicing such things is that of demons. While such experiences may seem heady and empowering at first, your soul *will* become enslaved and overpowered by evil entities who are not looking out for your best interests, to say the very least. Highly recommended books on this subject include, “Running Against the Wind” by Bryan Flynn, “The Light That Was Dark” by Warren Smith, “Faith Undone” by Roger Oakland, “A Time of Departing” by Ray Yungen, or “Spiritual Warfare” by Karl Payne. New Age and ‘positive thinking’ ideas can sound so wonderful and many even

seem to have a Christian ‘tone’ to them – often they are purposely presented as being Christian. I urge you not to fall for any of them. Just as a little bit of rat poison changes edible food into something fatal, so does a little bit of false teaching corrupt what may look like a correct biblical premise. The Bible likens false teaching and/or sin, to yeast. Even a tiny portion put in the dough will cause the entire batch of bread to rise. What many people fail to realize is these ‘New Age’ meditation experiences are blasphemous and warned against in the Bible. They are founded upon the practices of witchcraft, sorcery, and ‘divination’ or the calling upon of spirits, a.k.a., demons. The Bible repeatedly warns against such things.

Nor shall you practice divination or soothsaying. (Leviticus 19:26)

He practiced soothsaying, used witchcraft and sorcery, and consulted mediums and spiritists. He did much evil in the sight of the LORD, to provoke Him to anger. (2 Chronicles 33:6)

And the LORD said to me, "The prophets prophesy lies in My name. I have not sent them, commanded them, nor spoken to them; they prophesy to you a false vision, divination, a worthless thing, and the deceit of their heart. (Jeremiah 14:14)

They have envisioned futility and false divination, saying, 'Thus says the LORD!' But the LORD has not sent them; yet they hope that the word may be confirmed. Have you not seen a futile vision, and have you not spoken false divination? You say, 'The LORD says,' but I have not spoken. (Ezekiel 13:6,7)

Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told you in time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. (Galatians 5:19-21)

New Age and all its various entrapments are simply birthed from an old lie coming at us straight out of Old Testament paganism. It is entering our churches faster than we can warn against it. There is nothing biblical about chanting, self-hypnosis, visualization, 'breath prayers', 'positive thinking', contemplative thought/prayers, or any other subtle form of eastern meditation disguised as Christian prayer or Christian worship.

EPILIOQUE

My heartfelt prayer is for all who read this book to be deeply encouraged and wholly inspired to seek God and His Word more diligently, more trustingly, and with the expectant hope of great, spiritual blessings as God becomes more personal, real, and relevant to you in the process. Wisdom, knowledge, and understanding will be your increase as the reverence, awe, and fear of the Lord becomes more authentic, more active, and more anchored in your soul. May God bless those who journey past the beginning of wisdom into an abundantly fruitful and blessed relationship with the One Who created us all. Amen.

*Show me Your ways, O LORD;
Teach me Your paths.
Lead me in Your truth and teach me,
For You are the God of my salvation;
On You I wait all the day.
Remember, O LORD, Your tender mercies and Your
lovingkindnesses,
For they are from of old.
Do not remember the sins of my youth, nor my transgressions;
According to Your mercy remember me,
For Your goodness' sake, O LORD.
Good and upright is the LORD;
Therefore, He teaches sinners in the way.
The humble He guides in justice,
And the humble He teaches His way.
All the paths of the LORD are mercy and truth,
To such as keep His covenant and His testimonies.
For Your name's sake, O LORD,
Pardon my iniquity, for it is great.
Who is the man that fears the LORD?
Him shall He teach in the way He chooses.
He himself shall dwell in prosperity,
And his descendants shall inherit the earth.
The secret of the LORD is with those who fear Him,
And He will show them His covenant.
(Psalm 25:4-14)*

~ The End ~