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Mosaic in Bet She'an, Israel 2013

Prologue

Much has been written about the faithfulness of God and His merciful gifts so readily available to mankind. Truly, He offers such transcendent and heavenly treasures as eternal salvation and its resulting spiritual rebirth through the power of His indwelling Spirit. He has made us able to walk this life in a reconciled relationship with Him, having freedom from sin, peace of heart, and an abundant life of spiritual blessings which all come to us by faith in the cross of Jesus Christ. But the focus of this book is not as much about God's astounding gifts as it is about our response to those gifts. It is an in-depth exploration of what God says His gift of faith is and does in the lives of those who believe.

There is a very strong emphasis on God's grace being taught today. While it is absolutely necessary for us to know the salvation of our souls is a gracious gift of God and not a religious work we can do, a "hyper-grace" mentality has drifted into many modern churches. It creates an unbiblical mindset which hangs over the flock of Christ like a cloud, obscuring the Holy Spirit's light and powerful, divine life from our view. Hyper-grace causes faith to become a theological ideal instead of a Spirit-led, commanded way of living. This leads many Christians to lose sight of God's higher will for them. As a result, we can end up living rather carelessly and with a lack of concern toward really following Jesus in the ways He so specifically commands. Such compromise never benefits us and causes a great deal of trouble and spiritual turmoil. The Bible teaches that there is a spiritual transformation which our loving Lord desires to accomplish in the hearts of His sheep, but tragically, many of us are not allowing Him to do so. We tend to cling to various worldly mindsets and cater to our own flesh more than we obey the Word and Spirit of God.

The kingdom of the believer's heart will grow increasingly divided as the One who ought to be sitting on the throne is kept from taking His rightful seat. The primary culprit causing the standoff is not always the devil but the stubborn tyrant known as 'self'. Let us prayerfully walk through our end of faith's covenant to discover if we have withheld any territories from the Lord's ruling scepter. May we surrender all rogue lands to God's sovereign will, for only then can He free us from the inner chains still deceptively binding us; chains Jesus came to break.

~ Miranda A. Darling

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*Your people refused to obey,
And they were not mindful of Your wonders
That You did among them.
But they hardened their necks,
And in their rebellion
They appointed a leader
To return to their bondage.
But You are God,
Ready to pardon,
Gracious and merciful,
Slow to anger,
Abundant in kindness,
And did not forsake them.
(Nehemiah 9:17)*

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Hidden Thrones



Divided Heart

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(Cover photo and opposite page: A tapestry shop in the Jewish Quarter of the Old City, Jerusalem, Israel)

Chapter 1

Choose This Day

“...Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve...But as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.” (Joshua 24:14,15)

Christians are called to follow Jesus Christ. We are commanded to walk with Him by faith on His lesser-traveled path. Scripture teaches us all believers must strive to imitate the higher ways of Jesus, demonstrating a spiritual and moral rectitude of which the world is not familiar with nor comfortable observing. This truth is a crucial factor contributing to why the Lord tells us the way of faith which leads to eternal life is difficult. *“Narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it.”* (Matthew 7:14) To walk by faith is a choice each of us must make every single day as we dwell in the midst of spiritually corrupt cultures. This ongoing decision has been the challenging predicament facing God’s faithful servants since the fall in Eden. Serving the Lord requires intentional effort and a continual, mindful humbling of our own heart attitudes. Choose for yourselves *this day*...and the next, and the next. God’s people are to die daily to their innate propensity to serve idols; be they of the world’s contriving or the flesh’s own persistent demands. *“I affirm, by the boasting in you which I have in Christ Jesus our Lord, I die daily.”* (1st Corinthians 15:31) *“And those who are Christ’s*

have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.” (Galatians 5:24) Moses tells God’s people they have a choice. Joshua famously reminded the Israelites of their choice. Jesus Christ extends His hand in the New Testament and offers the same choice by saying to us all, ‘Follow Me’. “...*I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both you and your descendants may live; that you may love the LORD your God, that you may obey His voice, and that you may cling to Him, for He is your life and the length of your days...*” (Deuteronomy 30:19,20) “*And if it seems evil to you to serve the LORD, choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.*” (Joshua 24:15) “*Then He [Jesus] 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 really can live an eternally purposeful, spiritually whole, divinely blessed life. How do we do this? Every single day, we simply choose to walk in a morally righteous and spiritually reconciled relationship with God. This is an intentional choice to daily love God, obey God, serve God, and cling to God by way of His Word, belief in His Son, and the leading of His Holy Spirit. We know this biblical truth in theory, but I believe many of us have not accurately defined what loving and obeying God really means or looks like in our modern world. We do not seem to realize faith’s victories can only rise up from our very real, very practical, ongoing surrender to the Lord’s precepts and commands. “*For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome. For whatever is born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith.*” (1st John 5:3,4) The Word

of God and the Spirit of God beckon us to embrace a life of faith in Jesus Christ. This is not a one-time decision but a continual choice of faithfulness and commitment. It is my goal to bring forth that choice and examine it under the bright light of the Lord's living Word.

This book is written for Christians who are longing to experience more of God's presence in their walk of faith. It is for those who are seeking deeper peace, greater freedom from sin, and a clearer purpose on faith's journey. The way these wonderful things are accomplished in the lives of those who are lacking them is by discovering what may be impeding or hindering such blessings so we can be pruned of them. Pruning seems a harsh process at first, but it is the only way we can flourish more fruitfully in the Vinedresser's care. *"I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit."* (John 15:1,2) All too often, we make fleshly compromises or let worldly mindsets settle into our lifestyles. Left uncorrected and unpruned, these things easily cause us to be unfruitful in the Lord. Worse, any worldly or flesh-driven practices which we do not let God trim off and cast away will only grow into a carefully covered nest of inner rebellion. We start nurturing little hidden kingdoms of self-rule within the heart. Whether the errors stem from a willful refusal to submit to God on a specific issue or just an unwitting waywardness, we must recognize them for the stumbling blocks they are and place them at the foot of the Lord's throne for cleansing and correction. Only then will we begin to experience the Holy Spirit flowing more freely and dynamically in our faith. There are teachings on the following pages which might step on toes or cause a sense of convicting discomfort as they are read, but I can make no apologies for the Lord's written precepts. Nor am I able to

ignore the very real chastisement I have personally undergone after making some naïve, spiritual compromises of my own. I pray God uses both my humbling testimony and His holy Word to provoke others into considering their own ways more seriously. May the Spirit of God open the sleepy eyes of the spiritually sluggish, break through the silence of those whose ears are grown dull, and reignite His fiery flame in the lukewarm hearts of those in the church who are due for a spiritual wakeup call, just as I was. It is for God's glory and for our own spiritual growth that we should always seek to gain a deeper understanding from the Bible as to the kind of life Christians are really called to live and why.

“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) This passage carries a wonderful promise. Jesus declares that those who choose to serve Him in this life will experience an inner state of steady, spiritual restfulness. *“You will find rest for your souls.”* This is a divine and unfailing promise of God. But some of us have not yet experienced much restfulness even though we are believers. Instead, we are more apt to be tossed about like a ship on the ocean in many facets of our existence. Listen, if we are just as anxious, stressed, sleepless, or rattled by life as the unsaved world, it may be that we still bear the burdens and cares of having hearts and minds set on attaining our own ways in any given situation. We are carrying the stresses and anxieties that come with trying to achieve or fulfill our preferred outcomes, self-directed endeavors, quasi-worldly lifestyles, or flesh-driven demands. Instead of resting peacefully in the Lord's character and higher purposes, we are endlessly striving to have our own hopes and plans pan

out instead. Yes, we believe in the Lord and His salvation, but we have not fully abdicated the ruling throne of our lives to His sovereign reign. In this, there is no peace. The average Christian (myself included) tends to have certain areas in their lives where God is not yet leading, and it is because He is not being allowed to do so. Our stubborn self-will has persisted in wielding its own scepter and until we lay it down, we will not find the inner restfulness of the soul which Jesus promised.

Thankfully, the Lord is faithful even when we are not. He endlessly prompts our spirits and encourages us throughout His Word to set aside the heavy burdens of our self-governing ways in every area of life, attitude, or conduct we may have unwittingly kept from His authority. If we are really listening, we will sometimes awaken to His still, small voice of correction. We can then cast aside the area of anxious reign with a sigh of relief. But more often than not, we merely brush His guiding hand from our shoulders and ignore the point of decision. We trudge along laden with the familiar tasks of catering to the ceaseless pull of fleshly or worldly tendencies because truthfully, those ways feel more comfortable. When we disregard the Spirit's quiet cautions and inner convictions like this, we foster a divided heart toward God. Our walk of faith then grows fraught with a variety of frustrations, lack of peace, and increasing spiritual compromise. All such things weaken our ability to truly have close fellowship with the Lord. If not rectified, they can lead to spiritual apathy, backsliding, strongholds, and even demonic assault down the road. How Jesus must ache for our freedom! But we alone hold the keys to unlock those rooms in our hearts where He is not yet King. *“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) Jesus is always knocking, waiting to be invited into the places where we still privately reign. May we heed those soft taps and turn the knob to let Him in. A heart surrendered to God is a heart set free. “...*If you abide in My Word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.*” (John 8:31,32) The Lord has promised His faithful ones a life of spiritual abundance, victory, freedom, and inner peace. “...*I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly.*” (John 10:10) “...*the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.*” (Philippians 4:7) “*But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.*” (1st Corinthians 15:57)

If God’s Word is true and we are really given these amazing promises, why are so many Christians lacking the fulfillment of them? Why are we endlessly disheartened by lives of faith which seem far less impactful than what the Bible portrays they should be? The Scriptures show us the faithful in Christ are meant to live incredibly special, uncommon lives. Believers have been designated to travel an uplifting path of spiritual strength and joy in the Lord no matter what circumstances befall us on a day to day basis. If we have not been experiencing the dynamic life of faith which the Bible describes, we must examine ourselves and figure out why this is the case. Any resistance we might have toward abandoning attitudes, conduct, or distracting pursuits which the Lord has quietly asked us to leave behind time and again is the first place to start looking. Many of us will find we have feet not entirely treading the straight and narrow way of Christ. We keep skirting the edges of His commands and wandering into forbidden lands instead. Christian author, Oswald Chambers discusses the following passage,

“I am crucified with Christ; nevertheless, I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me.” (Galatians 2:20 KJV) and has this to say about the choice of faith we must make: “These words mean the breaking of my independence with my own hand and surrendering to the supremacy of the Lord Jesus. No one can do this for me; I must do it myself. God may bring me up to the point three-hundred and sixty-five times a year, but He cannot put me through it. It means breaking the husk of my individual independence of God and the emancipating of my personality into oneness with Himself; not for my own ideas, but for absolute loyalty to Jesus. There is no possibility of dispute once I am there. Very few of us know anything about loyalty to Christ – “For My Sake.” It is that which makes an iron saint. Has that break come? All the rest is pious fraud. The one point to decide is – Will I give up, will I surrender to Jesus Christ, and make no conditions whatever as to how the break comes? I must be broken from my self-realization, and immediately that point is reached, the reality of the supernatural identification takes place at once, and the witness of the Spirit of God is unmistakable – “I have been crucified with Christ.” The passion of Christianity is that I deliberately sign away my own rights and become a bond-slave of Jesus Christ. Until I do that, I do not begin to be a saint.” (“My Utmost for His Highest”, by Oswald Chambers)

These are sobering words for today’s Christian. It does not seem as if the masses are being taught the biblical truth that self-will must be broken, cast aside, or nailed to the cross – however we want to word it does not matter. The self-will must die if we want God’s Holy Spirit to powerfully live within. It is so easy for us to view the mountains of God as though they were far off and towering in the distance. We like to think of them as a steep and lofty terrain to be climbed only in eternity or at a future date when our faith is more mature. But God calls us to walk with Him *now*. Eternity

begins at the foot of the cross. Forever starts the moment we are saved. Our ascent up the narrow path of God's high and holy mountain beckons us onward and upward as we seek to grow closer and closer to Him in faith. Any lack of surrender on our part – any decision we intentionally make to disregard the Lord's commands, promptings, and precepts – cannot help but interfere with the quality of our relationship with Him. Instead of pressing forward, we will end up sitting by the wayside chained to a bench we have carved out for ourselves. It is a rebellious little throne from which we have chosen to sit and reign while at the same time proclaiming Jesus Christ is our Lord and King. Brothers and sisters, when we do this, we will be unable to climb any further than the boundaries we have placed between us and God.

If we are born again, we are already full-fledged citizens of heaven's kingdom. The only King we should be serving is Jesus Christ. May we ever seek to live our lives reflecting this marvelous truth. Those whose hearts are peacefully surrendered to God's sovereign purposes and all He allows to transpire in our daily lives – both the good and the bad – will be divinely empowered and inspired to ascend His greater elevations of faith. They will experience firsthand the strengthening, closer relationship with God which traveling those beautiful heights bring forth. Be assured, the blessings to be gathered along the steep and narrow path of Jesus are immeasurably abundant. His is a higher view, and be assured, the view is well worth the climb!



Ein Gedi, Israel

Mountaintop View of the Dead Sea (2019)

This Mountain I Must Climb

*I gaze ahead
The path is steep
A narrowing ascent*

*The rocky tread
Of dusty feet
Already feeling spent*

*The air is dry
I walk in faith
Water trickles near*

*Gaining height
I keep the pace
It is His voice I hear*

*The sun is hot
I look around
To see the higher view*

*A needed pause
To gain more ground
My spirit is renewed*

*I pick along
This stony course
Marking out the time*

*He beckons me
So further up
This mountain I must climb*

Chapter 2

Faith's Promises

“...Do not become sluggish, but imitate those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.”

(Hebrews 6:12)

Biblical faith is a spiritual treasure chest laden with the Lord's divine promises and faith's effects. Faith makes the human spirit alive and suddenly aware of its Creator and Savior. Faith inspires a proper fear of the Lord from deep within the soul. Faith transforms the deceitful heart into a God-seeking heart. Faith convicts and brings forth a desire to repent of our blind, godless ways and be saved out of them. Faith redeems condemned humanity from the curse of eternal damnation. Faith both develops and empowers sanctification in the life of a believer. Faith is a gracious gift of God given to those who seek Him and yearn for His righteousness. *“I love those who love me, and those who seek me diligently will find me.”* (Proverbs 8:17) *“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled.”* (Matthew 5:6) *“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) What are we to have faith in? Jesus tells us if we truly believe His Word, we will have everlasting life. *“Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into*

judgment, but has passed from death into life.” (John 5:24) What is the Word Jesus is referring to? In a nutshell, it is the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is the good news given to all mankind that God sent His Son, the promised Messiah, to earth. Why is this such great news? Through this long-prophesied event, God provided the only way for the human soul to be reconciled with Him in eternity. Jesus came in order to be miraculously incarnated in the flesh, live a sinless life, be spiritually led by the Father in heaven, be unjustly crucified for all human sin, and be resurrected on the third day after His burial. The truth of the resurrection shows the whole world Jesus Christ has defeated both sin and death for the entire human race. He has reconciled to the Father every soul who believes in Him and in His sin atoning work on the cross. *“Jesus said to her, ‘I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live.’”* (John 11:25) The apostle Paul summarizes the gospel this way: *“Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you—unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures...”* (1st Corinthians 15:1-4)

Christians love to talk about having faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ and this is with good reason; only faith in Jesus and what He has done can bring salvation to the human soul. But what exactly is faith? The answer to that question lies in how God defines faith. The Old Testament Hebrew word for faith is *אֱמוּנָה*, em-oo-naw; or *אֱמוּנָה*, ěmunâh. Literally, faith means firmness. Figuratively, it means security. Morally, it means fidelity. The faith God gives translates as ‘faithful’, ‘faithfully’, and ‘faithfulness’. In the

outline of biblical usage, faith is ‘firmness, fidelity, steadfastness, steadiness’. (Strong’s Definitions Legend). The New Testament Greek word for faith is described as the following from the Greek term ‘pistis’, meaning a firm persuasion or a conviction based upon hearing (akin to peitho, "to persuade"). In the New Testament, the rendering of the word faith is always pertaining to faith in God, faith in Christ, or faith in things spiritual according to what has been written in Scripture. Faith is “a pledge of fidelity, or plighted faith”. The main elements of faith according to its relation to our invisible God are especially brought out in the use of the noun and the corresponding verb, ‘pisteuo’. They are (1) a firm conviction producing a full acknowledgement of God’s revelation or truth; and (2) *a personal surrender to Him*. (Vine’s Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words).

Faith causes us to trust in and surrender to the teachings of God’s Word (the entire Bible). Faith believes Scripture is the only divinely-inspired compilation of God’s truths, precepts, prophecies and spiritual patterns of human behavior recorded throughout biblical history. It is the primary manner by which God has given mankind the ability to learn of Him and His higher nature as well as of themselves and their own fallen nature. Faith leads us to be fully assured the cross of Christ has achieved the one and only blood atonement fully qualified to divinely redeem humanity’s fallen state and restore the spiritual relationship between God and man which was destroyed in Eden. Faith forms in a seeking and repentant heart which has been convicted by the Holy Spirit to both desire and surrender to God’s righteousness. “...I will send Him [*the Helper; Holy Spirit*] to you. And when He has come, He will convict the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment.” (John 16:7,8) In examining what faith is and does according to the Bible, we naturally must approach the subject of repentance.

Biblical repentance is a critical aspect of biblical faith. Therefore, it should deeply concern us that so many Christians today do not seem to understand what it means to be a repentant person. Honestly, it took me years to start realizing the depths of true repentance which are bound up in the faith God gives. Among the Lord's flock there can exist an erroneous perception that only John the Baptist preached of repentance, as if that lessens its importance in the matter of having faith in Jesus Christ. But the Scriptures show us repentance has always been required by God and always will be required, for our eternal God in heaven does not change. *"For I am the LORD, I do not change..."* (Malachi 3:6)

Since Eden's fall, repentance has been the fundamental hinge upon which the door of humanity's faith in God and His promises must swing. Its obligation has rippled across the ages and will continue until the end of time itself just as a stone thrown into a pool spills rings across its surface until the shoreline is reached. The faith that saves souls is a faith rooted in heart-changing, life-transforming repentance. Such a faith results in a joyful, freeing surrender to the Lord Jesus Christ, who is also the very Word of God according to the Bible. *"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. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it."* (John 1:1-5) These passages directly speak of Jesus Christ. If we have surrendered to Him as Lord, we have actually surrendered our lives to the Word of God and its commands for the believer. The prophets all preached repentance. In fact, the call to repentance was their preeminent task, coupled with grave warnings of what would happen to Israel if

repentance did not take place. *“For thus the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel, has said, ‘...**In repentance and rest you will be saved.**’”* (Isaiah 30:15 NASB) *“...You have chastised me, and I was chastised, like an untrained calf; Bring me back that I may be restored, for You are the Lord my God. For after I turned back, I repented; And after I was instructed, I smote on my thigh; I was ashamed and also humiliated because I bore the reproach of my youth.”* (Jeremiah 31:18,19) The very few kings in the history of Israel and Judah whom God considered as ‘doing what is right’ all understood and practiced repentance. King David wrote and sang of repentance; *“**If a man does not repent, He [God] will sharpen His sword; He has bent His bow and made it ready.**”* (Psalm 7:12 NASB) John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness and preached of the need for mankind’s repentance, preparing the world for the ministry of Jesus Christ. *“In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, and saying, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!’”* (Matthew 3:1,2) Most importantly, Jesus preached repentance. *“...Jesus began to preach and to say, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.’”* (Matthew 4:17) The New Testament epistles additionally expound upon the crucial need for the believer’s repentance in great detail, teaching us exactly what it ought to look like in terms of practical, daily living.

Let it be understood once and for all that the proclamation of Jesus Christ and His gospel of salvation is first and foremost a firm and unchanging command for mankind to repent from his own ways and walk by faith in God instead. Repentance will lead us forward on a path aligned with God’s commands and precepts. Repentance is not the act of apologizing to God nor is it experiencing feelings of remorse when we are pricked by the Holy Spirit’s

convictions. These actions and emotions certainly go along with repentance, but they are not what godly repentance is or does. A summary of repentance taken from both Vines Dictionary and Strong's Concordance indicates that to repent means to "**change one's mind** for better", "**heartily amend with abhorrence of one's sins**", and most importantly, to "**turn away from sin**". True repentance results in the intentional, willful, and sustained changes we make with regard to worldly, fleshly, sinful, or godless mindsets and conduct in our lives. Godly repentance can only stem from a divinely changed heart – a heart transformed by the faith God gives. Christian author Oswald Chambers says this about repentance, "The bedrock of Christianity is repentance." (My Utmost for His Highest, by Oswald Chambers)

Listen, if we have a habit, vice, or lifestyle we find ourselves continually apologizing to God for time and again, it is clear by our actions that we have not actually repented. We are being convicted to be sure, but we have not repented or we would no longer be involved with the behavior that sits at the root of our apologies. Biblical repentance will inspire a person to start altering the trajectory of their daily existence from being someone who was walking on a road which led away from God to a person who is now walking *toward* Him and *with* Him by faith in His Son, the living Word of God. Repentance is the divinely-inspired impetus that causes us to transform our patterns of thinking, attitudes, speech, and conduct into actions that are directed, sifted, and influenced by God. We will cease to live in ways that do not acknowledge the Lord and begin doing whatever honors and delights Him. Repentance is absolutely inseparable from biblical faith. If we are holding to a form of faith that does not carry with it the marks of biblical repentance, we have

either been given only a partial gospel, or we have chosen not to acknowledge half the gospel message we did hear. *“But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, ‘LORD, who has believed our report?’ So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.”* (Romans 10:16,17) By hearing the word of God preached or taught, those who are seeking Him will have a disturbing realization there is an eternal judgment which God has already pronounced on all who choose to live without Him in this life. When the sacrificial atonement of Jesus Christ is revealed as the only way to be spiritually redeemed and reconciled to God, the convicted person must be brought to a turning point; a point where they believe these truths to be evident (faith) and as a result they accept the cross of Christ as their only hope and Jesus as their only Lord and Savior.

Through this paradigm shifting event, the new believer is led by the Spirit of God to leave the old life behind in order to follow Jesus by living in an entirely new way. They will be given a divinely changed heart that desires to submit to His will and His Word. This is what it means to be born again, or spiritually born from above by the will of God. *“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 1:12,13) The Christian’s first act in following Jesus (and thus, His commands) is to make a public proclamation of this faith by undergoing a water baptism – an outward confession portraying the baptism of the heart which has taken place inwardly. The believer is also commanded and empowered by the Lord to go forth in life carrying out the divine commission of Christ: *“Go therefore and **make disciples** of all the nations, **baptizing** them in the name of the Father and*

of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age. Amen.” (Matthew 28:19,20) The transformation of the soul through the gift of salvation wrought by faith begins in the spiritually softened, repentant heart. It then plays out in the lifestyle and mindset of every Christian over the rest of their days. A perfect example of the Holy Spirit piercing the hearts of men and women with His conviction of sin takes place on the day of Pentecost. Peter preached the gospel of Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit in Jerusalem. “...*God has made Him both Lord and Christ—this Jesus whom you crucified.*” Now when they heard this, they were **pierced to the heart**, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, ‘**Brethren, what shall we do?**’ Peter said to them, ‘**Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself.**’” (Acts 2:36-39 NASB) The Lord works tirelessly and by many different means to till the sin-hardened ground of the human heart, sometimes cutting deep furrows and turning all our own ways upside down as He prepares us to rightly receive the seeds of faith so we can bear much spiritual fruit. This is surely what He did with the apostle Paul (formerly Saul of Tarsus) when He knocked him quite literally off his high horse to put an end to his own misdirected plans and teach him about who the Messiah really was.

When the time is right, God swoops into our lives, knocks us off our own horses, and just as He did with Paul, He finds a way to show us how spiritually blind we have been. If we receive His divine revelation as truth (believing it by faith), He will wash the scales from our eyes and enable

us to see Jesus Christ is the world's only risen Lord and Savior. Jesus will show us He is the only One who can give us a life worth living, both now and in eternity. "... *'Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you came, has sent me that you may receive your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.'* Immediately there fell from his eyes something like scales, and he received his sight at once; and he arose and was baptized..." (Acts 9:17,18) The only part we play in God's salvation plan is our free-will response to the truths and convictions He reveals. We can either react with a humbled, heart-transforming faith which changes our lives; or we can remain willfully blind and untouched by His divine hand. We can reject the tenets of the faith God offers and go our merry way chasing after what will never satisfy, or we can embrace His gracious gift and be born again by His Spirit. "*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 1:12,13) "*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) The faith God gives not only provides our entrance into the kingdom of heaven but it also promises to refashion who we are and how we live as we begin abiding in His Word and learning how to prosper in His higher ways. "*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)

Are we experiencing faith's promises? Are we facing each day with a wonderful and distinctly different mindset than we did before the Lord entered our hearts? Do we listen for His voice to prompt us and allow His Word to lead us? Do we obey without question when we hear Him speak? Are

we wholly surrendered to the King of kings, Lord of lords, and God above every god? *"...For the LORD is the great God, and the great King above all gods."* (Psalm 95:3) *"He is Lord of lords and King of kings..."* (Revelation 17:14) It is the Lord's great aim to invade and conquer every believing heart, for that is the battleground which was lost in Eden and forfeited to the enemy of all humanity, Satan. By our faith in His Son and what He accomplished on the cross, God seeks to sovereignly rule over the lives of those who confess Jesus as their Lord and King. But there is a problem in the church today. Many professing Christians are not really walking with Jesus as 'Lord and King' for He has only been welcomed into the heart as 'Savior'. In doing so, they are missing out on a multitude of faith's promises.

It is as though we have allowed ourselves to be convinced that surrendering *everything* to the Lord is radical theology, and thus it must be unreasonable and unnecessary. Yet, what does Jesus tell us about salvation? *"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 is very clear. The way of faith which leads to eternal life is indeed both narrow and difficult. It is narrow because Jesus has carved out for us the *only* entrance into the kingdom of heaven. And it is difficult because God requires those who believe in Jesus to follow Him by dying to their own sin nature and obey Him instead, every single day. *"Even so consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its lusts, and do not go on presenting the members of your body to sin as instruments of unrighteousness; but present yourselves to God as those*

alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God. For sin shall not be master over you, for you are not under law but under grace. What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? May it never be!" (Romans 6:11-15 NASB) Truly, the life we have been given to live was never meant to be for our own carnal use, though the spiritual fall in Eden wires us to think otherwise.

Surrendering our lives to the rule of God and His commands is not radical Christianity. It is basic Christianity. When we become born again, we can no longer consider our lives as our own to do as we please. We ought to be delighted with this truth, since we tend to only bring harm to ourselves when left to our own devices! *"Do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's."* (1st Corinthians 6:19, 20) If by faith we have repented and believed on Jesus for our salvation, our bodies are now the dwelling place of God's Holy Spirit. We belong entirely to the Lord the moment we place our faith in Him. He is our true "Kinsman Redeemer". That term means He is the closest "blood relative" we have who has the right and ability to purchase back for us (redeem) what we have lost – our relationship with God and our inheritance in heaven. The magnitude of what Jesus has done for us as our Kinsman Redeemer is patterned and played out in the book of Ruth. Boaz was a righteous man who lovingly and mercifully redeemed both the inheritance and family of Elimelech from their debtors. *"...Blessed is Yahweh who has not left you without a [kinsman] redeemer today, and may his name be proclaimed in Israel. May he also be to you a restorer of your soul and a sustainer of your old*

age...’” (Ruth 4:14,15 NASB) Likewise, through the covenant made possible by the shedding of His own blood, Jesus has redeemed those of us who place our faith in Him. He has won for us an inheritance in heaven. By His redeeming act on the cross, He is now the ruling and reigning Lord of these perishable tents in which we dwell. *“I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.”* (Galatians 2:20) These wonderful precepts are the very foundation of faith’s amazing promises to the believer. Those who do not feel they are experiencing the full impact of God’s promises are likely not wholly presenting themselves to God as the living sacrifice He requires. Instead they are trying to follow Jesus while still pursuing some of their own flesh-driven ways at the same time. I admit that I used to be such a person. I was faithful and obedient to many of the Lord’s precepts but remained compromised on others.

This unfortunate discrepancy in my walk of faith occurred because I continued to accommodate certain personal desires and self-derived dictates rather than giving them all to God for His higher rule. To be blunt, I still lived far too much like the world in several aspects of my life. The freeing and maturing sanctification process which every Christian ought to be experiencing will always be stopped short by a stubborn self-will that hangs onto its own familiar ways. Those who nurture a divided heart toward God like I did are destined to be afflicted with a double-minded condition of faith. This dual focus increases the risk of spiritual strongholds, feelings of detachment from God, backsliding, and a powerless or discontented walk along the narrow road – a road not so narrow when such compromise sneaks in. Until we grasp the understanding that our greatest

joys on this earth can only be found in wholly living for God and not for ourselves, we will never really experience the full depth of His wonderful promises. A divided heart keeps us walking at a certain distance from God's holy presence, and yet it is only in His presence where our fullness of joy is found. *"You will show me the path of life; In Your presence is fullness of joy..."* (Psalm 16:11) The Lord created us with a deep-seated, spiritual need only He can fulfill. We will never really find the soul satisfaction we crave until we pursue the very heart and will of God for every aspect of our lives. But too often, we do not remain mindful of the wonders Jesus has accomplished, nor are we always attuned to what He desires to achieve in us and through us in this life. We so easily end up appointing ourselves as "leader" instead of serving the One we profess is our Lord. In doing so, we are rebelliously returning to carnal pursuits and comfortable bondages rather than striving after the higher ways of Christ with the faithfulness He instructs. *"They refused to obey, and they were not mindful of Your wonders that You did among them. But they hardened their necks, **and in their rebellion they appointed a leader to return to their bondage.** But You are God, ready to pardon, gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abundant in kindness, and did not forsake them."* (Nehemiah 9:17)

Thankfully, our loving God stands ready to pardon, gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abundant in kindness. He will not forsake the erring heart, but instead He seeks to correct and refine it for His own glory and our highest good. The only variable rests in whether we will open our ears to hear His voice when He convicts us. Are we willing to be corrected, transformed, and further refined by His loving hand and inerrant Word? The apostle Paul exhorts believers, *"Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ."* (1st

Corinthians 11:1) Biblical faith requires we not only learn about Jesus Christ but imitate Him as well. As believers, we are quite pointedly instructed to walk in His ways. This means Christians are to conduct themselves just like Jesus did when He walked this earth. We are also told to behave in a manner befitting those who have been separated by God and set apart from the worldly lifestyles that surround us. These commands are not about earning salvation but rather, they protect, mature, and glorify the salvation we have already received by faith in Jesus Christ. *“I beseech you...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 are either moving forward with the Lord or we are going backward. Life in Christ makes no provision for static stances. A walk of faith means just that – we are walking. There is no standstill. The Bible does not teach the idea that there is a level of spiritual relationship we reach with God where we just stop growing and maintain a status quo. He does not provide a scenic overlook on the narrow path where we can sit down and comfortably stay put until we meet Him in heaven. We do well to periodically examine ourselves and ask our own hearts probing questions to ascertain the condition of our relationship with Jesus. Which direction am I traveling on this narrow road? Am I pressing forward to know the Lord more intimately, understand His Word more deeply, worship Him more often, and pray more sincerely? Or am I distracted by worldliness and laziness; backsliding into carnality, disregarding His Word, or maybe even growing apathetic toward the things of God? Christian author Charles Spurgeon expounded on the subject quite well when he wrote the following: “But Christians, the last

word is for you. Are you praising God more and more? If you are not, I am afraid of one thing: that you are probably praising Him less and less. It is a certain truth that if we do not go forward in the Christian life, we go backward. You cannot stand still. There is a drift one way or the other. Now, he who praises God less than he did, and goes on to praise Him less tomorrow, and less the next day, and so on – where will he go, and what is he? Evidently, he is one of those who “*draw back unto perdition*” (Hebrews 10:39) and there are no persons on whom a more dreadful sentence is pronounced.” (On Prayer & Spiritual Warfare” by Charles Spurgeon). The difficult passage referenced by Spurgeon above is found in its entirety in Hebrews 10:26-39.

The point is, if we feel stalled out in our faith, we have either placed the obstacles of spiritual compromise and wayward mindsets in our path, or we have simply sat too long at a rest stop on the way and grown both sleepy and sluggish as a result. God calls us to “*...lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith...*” (Hebrews 12:1,2) He encourages the believer to keep pressing onward toward His higher calling on our lives and the blessings of His promises. “*Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me. 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. Therefore let us, as many as are mature, have this mind...*” (Philippians 3:12-15) The faith God gives the believer is a forward-reaching faith. By it He inspires us to persevere and continue growing

in His grace until the day we meet Him face to face. There is always another Jordan to cross and another mountain to climb. Jesus endlessly beckons us to walk further up and further in to His glorious presence until He finally brings us home. It is our blessed and God-honoring task to keep pace with His steady footsteps while having a firm clasp on His loving hand. He alone holds the lamp to light our way. May we have eyes to see it. If we have been lagging behind or resting at the roadside, it is not difficult to stand up and shake off our sluggishness so we can march forward with renewed vigor, focusing more mindfully on keeping the commands of God. But casting off personal pet sins or removing pesky obstacles rooted in spiritual compromise can be a bit more tricky because some of our biggest hinderances are the cherished, golden thrones sitting deep in the heart from which we still reign. My testimony on this issue is shared in a later chapter and it is surely the fountain from which this entire book poured forth. Yes, I have walked through my own season of ignorance in a very specific aspect of my life and by God's mercy was finally led to discover a hidden throne of selfish rule and the demonic stronghold which took root as a result of that throne. The Lord gave me an eye-opening revelation of the spiritual dilemma I was in and corrected me accordingly. Through His faithful work, I have since become so incredibly blessed with a newfound freedom, spiritual joy, peacefulness of heart, and revived closeness with God. It all came about through a much-needed and long-awaited surrender on my part to finally heed His still, small voice in my conscience at last.

The Bible shouts of faith's promises from every page. There is joy, freedom, peacefulness, contentedness, spiritual victory, and deeper experiences of His loving presence to be discovered. If we are not realizing these

blessings in our own walk, we have got to determine where the problem lies. Most of the time, the issue has to do with a lack of personal application of Scripture to our lives or a disobedience to the Holy Spirit's promptings when we hear Him speak into our hearts. Some of us chew daily on the "Bread of Life" but we never actually swallow it down, and thus, our faith remains malnourished. "...*And Jesus said to them, 'I am the bread of life. He who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst.'*" (John 6:35) The holy vessel of "Living Water" is always within the believer's reach to take of his fill, yet there are Christians who don't drink it in, leaving their souls still thirsting for God's Holy Spirit to flow more abundantly. "*Jesus answered and said to her, 'If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who says to you, 'Give Me a drink,' you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water.'*" (John 4:10) We cannot grow or flourish in our faith if we do not partake of the divine table Christ has set before us.

How do we consume the Lord's life-sustaining bread and how do we drink His living water in such a way as to be properly nourished and sated? We must ingest the meals we receive from His hand and make them a part of who we are. In other words, don't just read God's Word; live it out, pray it out, work it out. Make His teachings your living reality. Let your daily lives be worked on as if they were blank pages awaiting God-given homework; taking your lessons straight from His textbook. Listen for His voice and obey it when He speaks. God will make Himself heard if you humbly seek Him in Scripture, in prayer times, in fellowship with other Christians, in life's circumstances, or even in dreams. Until we start doing these things as a normal way of life, we are simply chewing on the Lord's Bread and sipping at His living water without taking either one of them into ourselves

to sustain our faith or grow it to maturity. The taste is there, the texture can be felt, but the nourishment is never truly experienced. Reading Scripture and not living it out is akin to putting food and drink to our lips for a hint of flavor and feel, and then spitting them both out onto the ground, wasted.

Maybe the faith you hold in your heart has not yet brought you to many of the high and mighty blessings God has promised to the faithful. Perhaps you were once drawn to the cross in authentic belief and repentance, but your zeal for the things of God seems cold or unimportant in the reality of each day's busy demands. May I exhort you to discover the disconnect. God provides all the wisdom we seek and gives all the correction we require in His Word and by His Spirit. We only need to ask for it in faith and receive the truths He gives in response. *"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."* (James 1:5,6) The Lord has led you to read these words for a reason. He is eager to show you what keeps you from personally knowing the steadying joy of His close presence. He is deeply aware of exactly what causes you to remain uninspired, unfulfilled, or possibly even unchanged by your faith. The first step in discovering this issue for yourselves is to allow Him to prepare your heart through prayer so you can be ready and eager to receive a clearer understanding of faith's walk as the Bible teaches it. I urge you to embrace the biblical reproofs you might need to press forward more seriously toward the Lord and gain a closer, more fruitful relationship with Him. Ask and keep asking. Seek and keep seeking. Knock and keep knocking. The Lord will be faithful to open the blocked channels you may have in your heart. It is His Spirit's desire to flow freely,

powerfully, and fruitfully in your life. *“So I say to you, 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.”* (Luke 11:9,10) Don’t allow faith’s love for Jesus to grow cold. Don’t let His refining fires burn out into nothing but ashes while spiritual zeal slips away unfought for and unfueled. Keep your commitment to Jesus from disappearing quietly into the shadows of a self-ruled, world-influenced life. Ask the Lord to stir His holy flame to a brighter, hotter blaze within you. Pray for Him to help you become truly set apart from the secularism and paganism of this fallen world. Entreat Him to teach you how to fear and honor Him in the manner He deserves. Let me assure you He will answer such prayers. He has answered mine and is still answering in mighty, amazing ways. One thing I have learned from my own trials is that God is always willing to do a great and mighty work in our lives. But He is often being kept at arm’s length, waiting on our consent. Be assured, it is His desire to purify and sanctify the faith you hold and the life you live. May you have ears to hear and eyes to see what the Spirit desires you to learn about yourself, your faith, and the many promises which are already yours in Christ, if indeed you are born again.



Sunrise over the Dead Sea, Israel 2006

Cold in Here

*Why should I go outside
When it's cold in here
What happened to faith's fire
I've no flame to draw near*

*What is this empty place
This desecrated ground
Though I seek Your face
It seems You can't be found*

*My journey compromised
Muddied springs once clear
Mixed the dark with light
I had no righteous fear*

*Careless feet can't cross
The vast and deep ravine
My own rebellion's cost
Is a gulf unseen*

*Lord, invade my heart
Conquer selfish reign
I have strayed too far
From Your narrow way*

*Rule this heart's high throne
I will bend my knee
Heat my love grown cold
And set this captive free*

*Let me feel Your light
Shining warm and pure
Fan my embers bright
Cuz it's been cold in here*

Chapter 3

Conquering the Tyranny of Self

“Do you not know that to whom you present yourselves slaves to obey, you are that one’s slaves whom you obey, whether of sin leading to death, or of obedience leading to righteousness?” (Romans 6:16)

We have faith in what Jesus did on the cross, but do we have faith in how He commands us to live? This question contains the whole meaning and intention of biblical faith. Every member of the human race was created to love the Lord just as a child loves his parent [God the Father], just as a bride loves her bridegroom [God the Son], and just as a friend loves his closest friend [God the Holy Spirit]. For those who have been saved by faith in Jesus Christ, a Spirit-led love for God and a thankfulness for His gift of salvation should stimulate a desire to revere and obey Him. Jesus came to set us free from both hell AND the mastery of our own sin nature – referred to throughout Scripture as the ‘flesh’, the ‘carnal nature’, or even the ‘old man’. But despite this wonderful promise of spiritual freedom from the sin nature, far too many of us remain in a state of bondage. The tyranny of our flesh-driven or carnal ‘self’ still enslaves us even though we are born again. Our hearts love Jesus and His Word, but they also love to serve the flesh and fit in with the rest of society. In this, we have chosen to serve two masters.

We want God *and* mammon, God *and* self, God *and* the world. But what does the Bible tell us? “*No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other...*” (Luke 16:13) The Lord wants more *for* us and more *from* us than our partial allegiance. Our flesh is a tyrant and a slave driver. Until we intentionally start choosing to serve God instead of our carnal natures, we will remain partially enslaved to our own tyranny and helplessly driven by our fleshly dictates in far too many instances. In doing so, we prove that we have not rightly understood what it really means to crucify the flesh. “*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.*” (Galatians 5:24,25) What takes a great deal of time, trouble, and failure is the painful revelation that the villain in our midst is not always the devil, but is in fact, the slave-master known as ‘self’.

Our flesh does not care one wit about eternity, nor does it have any interest in spiritual matters. Do you want to know why? The flesh is not going with us when we die. Let that statement sink in for a moment because it’s a simple truth of our existence which we tend to overlook. These temporary tents of flesh and blood which cover our eternal souls are not traveling into the timeless, spiritual lands of eternity when we pass from this world to the next. Our physical bodies will return to the ground from whence they came and it is for this reason the focus of our sin nature is never going to be on the spiritual life, but on the physical and the temporal. Another truth which is important for us to absorb is that Eden’s spiritual fall from grace made our triune nature begin operating in a divided, unhealthy, and fragmented manner. Because of sin’s curse, the body, soul, and spirit of man now strive through this life out of sync with

one another. We are born lacking the oneness, the unity, and the life of God flowing from within which was intended to perfectly harmonize our bodies, souls, and spirits before humanity's rebellion disrupted the Lord's purposes for us. The only remedy for the disharmony is given to the believer through the presence of the indwelling Holy Spirit. The Lord places Himself into our souls, giving us the wholeness of His divine nature when we become born again. From the moment we surrender to Jesus, He seeks to govern our triune nature. His Spirit begins to unite the human body, soul, and spirit so that it can operate harmoniously under His divine will. We truly are new creations in Christ. *"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new. Now all things are of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation,"* (2nd Corinthians 5:17,18) However, when we are not entirely submitted to the Lord's commanded ways, some of our thinking, conduct, attitudes, and pursuits will continue operating separately. This is the fragmentation which serving the sin nature causes.

As a result, we separate our spiritual health from our physical health, emotional health, and mental health. We treat these aspects of our existence as being unrelated to one another when in fact, God meant them to be closely linked and synchronized under His guidance. We fall into the error of viewing our careers, social lives, finances, daily troubles, parenting, and the like, as having nothing to do with our spirituality or walk of faith. It is as if the Lord is permitted to speak to modern Christians about church, faith issues, and prayer needs, but everything else in our lives continues to be dictated by worldly principles and the vain philosophies of our fallen nature. *"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 example, instead of going to the Bible and the Lord for prayerful direction and insight regarding our physical health, we turn to the world and do whatever we see the world doing. Instead of going to the Bible and the Lord for divine wisdom and counsel about our troubled mental health, we turn to the world and do whatever we see the world doing. Instead of seeking biblical wisdom and prayerful input from God regarding our emotional injuries and pain, we turn to the world and again, we do whatever we see the world doing. We read countless self-help books and ‘how-to’ books about everything under the sun, yet we don’t look to the holy Book and find out what God says we need to do. Brothers and sisters, we are meant to experience so much more of the Lord’s input and governance over our lives than this! God is Lord and Savior over ALL parts of our being, not just our spiritual or eternal concerns. We should be bringing to Him every need, every decision, and every aspect of life we encounter on a daily basis to get His sure direction before we turn to any other solutions. There is literally no part of our earthly existence that does not fall under His divine counsel, commands, and wisdom. But all too often we are keeping pieces of ourselves or parts of our lives totally separate from His reign and untouched by His hand. Those pieces are still functioning as slaves to the tyranny of self. *“Do you not know that to whom you present yourselves slaves to obey, you are that one’s slaves whom you obey, whether of sin leading to death, or of obedience leading to righteousness?”* (Romans 6:16)

Everybody serves somebody. If we are not wholly serving the Lord, we are by default, part-time slaves of self. Please understand, the flesh we so readily serve is not only a

tyrant but it is also a *liar*. The human sin nature is utterly distorted in focus and perception since the spiritual tragedy of Eden. Look at what happens to us. We read Scripture with hopeful intentions to align our lives with what God says, but as we learn of the higher, Spirit-led ways in which God desires us to conduct ourselves, our flesh whispers, *'that's too hard'*, *'that's impossible or not practical'*, *'that's no fun'*, *'that's legalistic'*, or *'that sounds like a tedious way to spend precious time'*. The tyrant within rears its ugly head and plaintively insists we are 'free in Christ' to do whatever we please because He has forgiven us for all sin, for all time. What a very twisted freedom we have wrought! It is the 'freedom' to helplessly serve the ungodly, temporary cravings of our sin-corrupted nature. Sowing to the flesh is not freedom at all. It is inner bondage and when we bow down before its altars we reap unwanted consequences. *"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) The flesh chains us to every hidden throne of self-rule we have not yet vacated. The more we are compelled to sow to it, the more we will reap doubt, a divided heart, a lack of peace, and a walk of faith that is so unstable it looks no different than the lifestyles of the godless. *"...He is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways."* (James 1:8)

What is the wonderful freedom in Christ of which the Bible testifies? It is freedom from our bondage to the flesh – our sin nature. Jesus offers every believer a very real freedom from his or her carnal enslavements. Look again at the context of what Jesus says. *"Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed Him, 'If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and **the***

*truth shall make you free.’ They answered Him, ‘We are Abraham’s descendants, and have never been in bondage to anyone. How can You say, ‘You will be made free’? Jesus answered them, ‘Most assuredly, I say to you, **whoever commits sin is a slave of sin.** And a slave does not abide in the house forever, but a son abides forever. **Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed.’**” (John 8:31-36) As believers, we must make the purposeful choice to intentionally turn our backs on and cast aside any godless demands which our sin nature might be clamoring for or pressuring us to fulfill. If we would just seek to truly imitate Jesus Christ and obey His clear instructions, we could be set free. But being free requires a willful and trusting choice on our part, and that, my friends, is what faith is all about, is it not? Through the simple actions of faithfulness (obedience) to God’s precepts, we can be divinely empowered by His Spirit to walk His higher ways with a wonderfully free, fully surrendered, and joyful heart. Only then will we bear the light and easy yoke of Christ and discover the amazing closeness to God our hearts so deeply desire.*

The primary reason why some of us wage such an intense battle between the demands of our flesh and the promptings of God is because we are the ones fighting. Whether we realize it or not, we have not yet given up many of our own stubborn ways. We simply cannot imagine being happy without them and so we kick against the divine transformation God is working to achieve in our lives. God doesn’t fight us. We fight Him. Our flesh fights Him. “...*Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh. For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish.*” (Galatians 5:16,17) The Lord is for us, He is with us, He is in us, and He wants our highest good. Yet, we can fall into such a

tendency to wrestle with the leading of His Holy Spirit and the teachings of His Word, just as Jacob wrestled with the Angel of the Lord in Genesis 32:22-32. Why do Christians wrestle with God? God desires to rule over us in all our ways, and our sin nature does not like that shift. But just like Jacob, when we wrestle with the Lord, we wrestle in the dark. We cannot properly see with Whom we are wrestling, for if we could, we would cease striving and be still! *“Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!”* (Psalm 46:10) It is a senseless struggle we instigate. We don’t seem to understand the only way the light of God’s peace and the deeper blessings of faith’s walk will break through and shine upon us is if we humble ourselves and stop wrestling against the One who stands so ready to show us His higher wisdom, mercy, and grace. It is the Lord’s desire to be exalted in a heart set free of its own tyranny. He alone is glorified by the God-honoring lives we can live as a result of that freedom.

Unfortunately, just as in Jacob’s case, there will be times when our loving Lord must humble us and force us to stop contending with Him because in our stubbornness, we refuse to give in. *“And Jacob was left alone. And a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he touched his hip socket, and Jacob’s hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then he said, ‘Let me go, for the day has broken.’ But Jacob said, ‘I will not let you go unless you bless me.’ ... So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel, saying, ‘For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been delivered.’ The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip.”* (Genesis 32:22-32) The longer we twist against God’s higher ways, the more He will allow the inner battle to cripple us until we have no choice but to surrender; broken and limping, but finally walking in His

will. The thing is, I don't want to fight with God! Why would I do that? And yet I have been guilty of being just like Jacob. When we fight with God on any aspect or when we hold at arm's length a certain part of our lives which He is seeking to correct or govern, we are never going to experience the full extent of what He has prepared for us. We are literally fighting against His promised spiritual blessings, freedoms, and peace!

Let me share a truth of faith of which I am ashamed it took me as long as it did to understand for myself. Maybe some of you reading this have already grasped it, but for those who have not, please take note. There was a season in my journey of faith when I was waiting and waiting for God to empower me to be more obedient to His commands. I truly believed and patiently expected the Holy Spirit would 'magically' change my more stubborn, selfish or carnal ways without me lifting a finger. One day, by His generous grace, it struck me. God was waiting and waiting for me to be obedient so He could bless and empower that willful choice. I had it backwards. I always believed I was not capable of obeying God – that's why Jesus died on the cross, right? So I was essentially tying my own hands behind my back and sitting on them while at the same time waiting for God *within me* to obey His commands *for me*. Unfortunately, my understanding was lacking on this issue and it became a half-truth which stumbled me for many years. Listen, our loving *God does not ever command us to do what we cannot do*, for that would be a cruel and unjust expectation. He is not cruel nor is He unjust. He commands obedience from His faithful ones. Therefore, we can know we are surely able to obey God's commands. We just have to be willing. Our faith in God will lead us to not only be willing but also able. "... *it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure.*" (Philippians 2:13)

Throughout Scripture we see that Israel was wholly expected to obey God. The church is also wholly expected to obey God. If this were not the case, the multitude of instructions and commands given to believers would not exist. The Bible clearly shows us that when His children faithfully obey His commands, the Lord graciously empowers and blesses them in their obedience. Conversely, whenever willful rebellion against God and His ways occurred in the lives of His chosen people, dire warnings, discipline, chastising, and judgment fell upon them. Yes, Jesus Christ died for us because mankind is not able to fulfill the commands of God *perfectly*. He also died for us because we are sometimes prone to disobey Him *rebelliously*. But regardless of whether we miss the mark by simple human failure or by outright rebellion, our inability to ‘perfectly’ obey the holy God we serve does not negate the fact that He has always required and still requires those who bear His Name to walk in purposeful obedience inasmuch as we are humanly capable of doing so. I will say this again because it bears repeating in today’s world. As children of the living God who have been saved by the shed blood of Jesus Christ, *we are absolutely expected to heed God’s commands* with reverent obedience and to live according to His higher ways to the best of our abilities. If we are not striving after such things, the question must be asked; What do we think serving God means if it does not entail our reverent, loving, faith-inspired obedience?

“Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me. 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.

Therefore let us, as many as are mature, have this mind; and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal even this to you. Nevertheless, to the degree that we have already attained, let us walk by the same rule, let us be of the same mind.” (Philippians 3:12-15) This passage is about striving, pressing forward, seeking to lay hold of God’s higher calling on our lives through faith in Jesus Christ. This is not a passive calling. We are not told to sit around on our hands as I was doing, being afraid of the ‘working for my salvation’ accusation while waiting for God to magically do all my obeying for me. Yes, the Holy Spirit of God does the willing and the working within us as He changes our hearts and renews our minds with His Word and through our prayer lives. But our free will choice to practically respond to, act on, and work out His commands and spiritual promptings is needed. The sooner we reach this understanding, the more rapidly we can grow in our faith relationship with the Lord. This truth is evident from Genesis through Revelation. God’s people are to practice faithful obedience to His commands. How else can we proclaim Him as our Lord? If we do not seek to serve Him by faithfully abiding in His commands and following His ways, He is not really our Lord, is He?

God seeks to tear down the crooked foundations of our self-will and build us back up to be in solid alignment with His own, soundly situated upon the Rock that is Jesus Christ. It is only when we intentionally obey Him that His Spirit can empower our choices. Obedience is the first step which must be taken, for it is the singular action that can demonstrate our faith. Abraham’s obedience in leaving his pagan home was his first step of faith. Once such a step is taken, God upholds, energizes, and sustains the faithful obedience. The more we submit to Him and not to our flesh, the freer in Christ we become and the more of His promised abundant life we will experience as Christians. But until we

start actively walking according to these precepts, our joy will be consistently overruled by the tyrant known as our flesh. Jesus wants more for us. *“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) In taking upon ourselves the easy yoke of Jesus Christ we will remove from our own shoulders the many burdens we have carried in our labors to serve the flesh. As bondservants of Christ, we will find He gives an abundant supply of rest and peace deep in the soul, for His burdens are light and His yoke is easy.

Christians really can walk away from the tyranny of self-rule. Don't ever let anyone tell you differently. It is the Lord's aim to set us completely free from our skewed, fallen natures – free from the earthbound desires and unredeemed hopes, wishes, and dreams of men. We might read such a statement and think how awful it would be to not pursue our own desires, hopes, and wishes. If we could only realize God's desires, hopes, and plans for us are far better and greater than our meager bucket lists. Therefore, it is to our highest benefit to let go and give Him rule over it all! *“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. Then you will call upon Me and go and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart.”* (Jeremiah 29:11-13) God will not and cannot obey for us. He cannot walk our Christian path for us. He cannot repent for us. We cannot ask Him to do what He says only we can do. The Lord comes down to us from on high and by His Holy Spirit He can convict us. He can make our dead spirits come alive and be born anew [i.e., He saves]. He can guide, empower, fill, and overflow us with His Holy Spirit. He can teach, reveal

truth, enlighten, and transform our hearts from within. But He is limited in all these things by what we do on our end and to what extent we do 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, by which have been given to us exceedingly great and precious promises, that through these you may be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust. But also, for this very reason, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness, to godliness, brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love. For if these things are yours and abound, you will be neither barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For he who lacks these things is shortsighted, even to blindness, and has forgotten that he was cleansed from his old sins.**” (2nd Peter 1:3-9) We have been given all things pertaining to life and godliness; and thus we are able to partake of God’s divine nature in how we live this life. Yet that gifting is intertwined with and dependent upon our own responses to His Word and leadings. The passage in 2nd Peter tells us we need to practice diligence in our relationship with God. What does diligence look like? It looks like obedience. It looks like surrender. It looks like faithfulness.

Why do some of us feel as though we are not really growing closer to the Lord, sensing His presence, or experiencing His amazing strength and power in our walk? Where is our joy? Where is our peace? Why do some Christians have a dynamic, deeply-rooted relationship with God that produces a great deal of fruit, while the rest of us seem to function at a constant standstill? It is because we are still serving certain demands of the tyrant within. Yes, we are born again, saved by faith, reading His Word, and by His

mercy and grace we are hopefully growing in spiritual knowledge, wisdom, and understanding. But we have somehow managed to retain our seat on a hidden throne – or maybe several – deep within the heart. When we hold parts of our lives away from God’s touch and influence, we put a gulf between ourselves and Him which prevents our relationship from growing any further than those boundaries. We may strive in our prayers and seek more of His presence but all our striving and seeking is to no avail. The Lord is unable to give us what we are asking for until we vacate our little kingdoms; the areas of our hearts we still rule according to our own personal preferences, familiar habits, selfish mindsets, worldly influences, and fleshly attitudes.

We come to the Lord as chipped, misused, earthen jars of clay. He is faithful to fill us relative to how much we are willing to be emptied of ourselves. The emptier we are, the more He can pour Himself into us. The only way we can empty ourselves is by learning to let go of our own tyranny. We must cleanse our hands of self-will and self-rule. *“Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded.”* (James 4:8) But if we continue to bow down to our flesh while the Holy Spirit of God dwells within our hearts, we will ever remain a double-minded person. We will find ourselves living two lives at the same time – our Christian life and our worldly, self-driven life. The Bible tells us the flesh is always going to be at war with His Spirit, so when we live a divided life like this, we cannot experience the whole peace of God or His spiritually-empowered, dynamic life of faith. Instead, a battle rages within us every single day. *“I say then: Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh. For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish.”*

(Galatians 5:16,17) The flesh wants what the flesh wants, and the Spirit desires what God wants. The more we empty ourselves of “me, me, me” and simply embrace “Him, Him, Him” the more peaceful and grounded we can become.

Jesus has ripped the veil between men and God, creating the only way for us to enter into His presence and be reconciled to Him. But the way He created must be walked with our own two feet. It is a narrow path called ‘faith’ and it requires a surrendered heart. Yes, it is the road less traveled. But the quiet road is always kinder to the soul. It is in the endless chasing after our own ways, living like the unsaved world, and anxiously serving our flesh, that we breed stress, strife, dissatisfaction, and worry in our lives. If you are thirsty for more of God, stop bowing down to the tyranny of self. Let His waters engulf every dry place of inner rebellion by surrendering yourself entirely to His loving reign. It is not your money He desires, but your whole heart. *“Ho! Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; And you who have no money, come, buy and eat. Yes, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend money for what is not bread, and your wages for what does not satisfy? Listen carefully to Me, and eat what is good, and let your soul delight itself in abundance.”* (Isaiah 55:1,2) The Lord delights to fill us to overflowing. His is the ‘living water’ to quench all spiritual thirst, and His is the ‘bread of life’ satisfying all spiritual hunger. Eat what is good and delight yourself with the Lord’s abundance. *“And He said to me, ‘It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. I will give of the fountain of the water of life freely to him who thirsts. He who overcomes shall inherit all things, and I will be his God, and he shall be My son.’”* (Revelation 21:6,7) It is high time we lay down the chains that are so stubbornly tethering us to the hidden thrones from which our inner tyrant loves to reign. Stand up

and refuse to partake any longer of the hard labors commanded by the sin nature. Jesus has overthrown the world, the flesh, and the devil. The way we share in His victory is to walk in His ways while rejecting our own. Draw near to the Lord with a pure heart fully devoted to the Shepherd of our souls, for He who promised is faithful. *“Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for **He who promised is faithful...**”* (Hebrews 10:22,23)



The Shepherds' Fields of Bethlehem, Israel 2006

Into Tyranny We're Sold

*The sheep still roam Sheol
With Death as their shepherd
Blindly they wander from the Lord's firm staff*

*The flock of God strolls
Flesh bears its scepter
Leading His lambs on dangerous paths*

*When the heart is not whole
In faith's full surrender
Just as Lot's wife, we look forward then back*

*Into tyranny we're sold
To horde fleeting treasures
The work of our hands creating worthless chaff*

*Lord, rescue my soul
From the chains of sin's pleasure
And the tyrant of self to which I'm attached*

*I will serve You alone
In freedom beyond measure
With undivided heart yielded at last*

Selah

Chapter 4

Is He Washing Your Feet?

“...Jesus answered him, ‘If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me.’ Simon Peter said to Him, ‘Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head!’ Jesus said to him, ‘He who is bathed needs only to wash his feet, but is completely clean; and you are clean...’”

(John 13:8-10)

The verse above portrays a vivid picture of salvation and its relationship to sanctification. When we become born again, from God’s perspective we are seen as bathed in the righteous blood of Jesus shed for us on the cross. By our repentant faith in who He is and what He has done, we are made completely, spiritually clean in the eyes of God. That is salvation. But those who are already bathed in such a manner must also allow Jesus to wash their feet – and wash them often. That is sanctification. As the passage above attests, if we do not let the Lord wash our feet, we can have no part with Him. Jesus tells us point blank there is no true fellowship with Him if we are not allowing Him to daily cleanse our ways, renew our minds, and refresh our spirits. Let’s explore this teaching further to understand the enormous importance of our ongoing sanctification from God’s elevated standpoint.

It was the last night of the Lord's season of personal, one-on-one, earthly ministry with His disciples before He was to be taken away for a series of unjust interrogations, trials, torment, and crucifixion. Jesus had just a few hours before the cup of His Father's wrath was slated to be put to His lips to drink. The Savior's demise was looming and He was fully aware of the panic, chaos, scattering, and confusion it would cause His beloved followers. It seems logical to think Jesus would have spent His precious, final moments sharing with those cherished disciples all that was of the utmost importance to their faith and which lay closest to His own heart for them. Just as a dying parent would seek to offer their most crucial counsel and greatest impartation of love to their soon-to-be grieving child, so too, did Jesus speak forth His most crucial lessons and loving counsel to His soon-to-be grieving friends. The scene unfolds as follows in the gospel of John:

“Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come from God and was going to God, rose from supper and laid aside His garments, took a towel and girded Himself. After that, He poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet, and to wipe them with the towel with which He was girded. Then He came to Simon Peter. And Peter said to Him, ‘Lord, are You washing my feet?’ Jesus answered and said to him, ‘What I am doing you do not understand now, but you will know after this.’ Peter said to Him, ‘You shall never wash my feet!’ Jesus answered him, ‘If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me.’ Simon Peter said to Him, ‘Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head!’ Jesus said to him, ‘He who is bathed needs only to wash his feet, but is completely clean; and you are clean, but not all of you.’ For He knew who would betray Him; therefore He said, ‘You are not all

clean.’ 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 13:5-17)

I have read the above passage for years and never fully realized what it taught until recently. Pastors and teachers often use this account to teach how our risen Lord came to lovingly serve us and show us how to serve others. Jesus lowered Himself to the basest task of the least-esteemed servant in any household; the washing of feet. He then tells His listeners they must have the heart and mindset to serve one another in the very same way. Other expositors form their commentary around the understanding that living in this fallen world makes us soiled, so it is important to read the Word of God often, to wash off our daily contact with what is godless, wicked, and lost. These are both extremely valid and important teaching points, but they are not the full message of this passage. If we backtrack all the way to the initial tabernacle instructions given to Moses about the washing of feet, one thing which becomes very evident is that those who would approach God must be cleansed and undefiled. *“Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying: ‘You shall also make a laver of bronze, with its base also of bronze, for washing. You shall put it between the tabernacle of meeting and the altar. And you shall put water in it, for Aaron and his sons shall wash their hands and their feet in water from it. When they go into the tabernacle of meeting,*

or when they come near the altar to minister, to burn an offering made by fire to the LORD, they shall wash with water, lest they die. So they shall wash their hands and their feet, lest they die. And it shall be a statute forever to them—to him and his descendants throughout their generations.’’

(Exodus 30:17-21) In the tabernacle system, the Lord provided for two kinds of cleansings; 1) the blood sacrifice of animals, and 2) the ceremonial washing of one’s own flesh in water. The first accomplished the *spiritual cleansing of the soul* by covering sin with a sacrificial blood atonement; and the second one involved a *cleansing of the flesh* by washing away any physical soiling or defilement of the body with clean water. These two cleansings are the very foundation of what faith is and what faith does for each one of us.

There is a necessary blood atonement which must be offered for human sin. The spiritual cleansing which God requires for fallen man to be reconciled to Him can only be achieved by sacrificial blood. This truth is taught from Genesis through Revelation. The Lord required a blood sacrifice of animals to produce the covering for Adam and Eve’s spiritual nakedness in Eden. It is easily ascertained that Adam’s descendants were taught a blood sacrifice was required by the Lord, which is why Cain’s offering (presumably from his prized crops) was not accepted and Abel’s blood offering from his bountiful herds was. Sacrificial blood was applied to the doorposts of every Israelite home in Egypt to save their firstborn children from a judgment which would destroy the firstborn in all homes not covered by blood. When the Lord led the Israelites out of their bondage in Egypt, He instituted the blood atonement of animal sacrifices in the tabernacle to cover the sins of His people as propitiation for sin if they were faithful to do it as

prescribed. Finally, when the prophesied time had fully come, God required the sacrificial, sin-atoning, divinely holy blood of His only begotten Son to be shed upon the cross – not just to cover sin but to fully cleanse the believing human soul of all sin, for all time. So, we know from Scripture, sacrificial blood is and always has been required by God to spiritually cleanse the soul and atone for our inherent nature of sinfulness and rebellion against His ways. Some may ask why this must be. Scripture gives us the answer. By one man choosing unrighteously, the curse of death and sin came to all mankind. Therefore, it is only by the death of one righteous Man that the curse of death and sin is overcome for all mankind. *“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. For as by one man’s disobedience many were made sinners, so also by one Man’s obedience many will be made righteous.”* (Romans 5:18,19)

Christians understand the fundamental truth that faith in God and His promise of salvation through blood atonement is what saves the soul, no matter what time period we live in. The Old Testament believers had a *forward looking faith* based on the sin-atoning, animal sacrifices which foreshadowed God’s promised Savior yet to come. Ever since the cross of Christ, we now *look backward in faith* to what our promised Savior has already accomplished for mankind by becoming the ultimate sacrifice for all human sin. Faith is the victory; faith in God, faith in His promises, and faith in the gift of salvation which was wrought by the blood sacrifice of His Son, Jesus Christ. Faith is the only basis by which one becomes born again, eternally saved, and spiritually reconciled to their Creator and Savior.

But what we often lose sight of in our understanding of faith is this important matter of washing or cleansing our feet, which is a physical picture of a spiritual truth – our need to be continually sanctified. Scripture loudly and repeatedly declares the Creator of this world is indescribably holy. This truth makes the matter of our own purity as His redeemed children a much bigger deal than most Christians recognize today. To understand better the biblical precept of sanctification, we must start in Genesis. The earth and all it contained was very good when God first created it. The world was pure and undefiled by the curse of humanity’s sin. *“Then God saw everything that He had made, and indeed it was very good...”* (Genesis 1:31) But from Genesis 3 and onward we know the earth and all who abide in it are now innately contaminated by the spiritual fall and its dire consequences. The world is no longer the untainted, clean, fruitful, and divinely prosperous place God initially created it to be. This planet is wholly afflicted with disorder, chaos, pestilence, wickedness, and corruption on every level of existence. Furthermore, fallen man no longer has a naturally pure heart toward God, nor are his ways physically, morally, mentally, emotionally, or spiritually clean, for he is inwardly defiled by his own sin nature.

As we move past the fall in Eden and begin studying the first five books of the Bible, we will notice physical or fleshly cleanliness played a significant part in the Lord’s prescribed remedies for every sort of disease, defilement, or ceremonial uncleanness which His people might encounter; be it death, sexual intercourse, childbirth, menstruation, boils, leprosy, or sickness. God instituted the formation of consecrated lavers and the infamous bronze basin in the tabernacle as well as His numerous instructions for ceremonial cleansings and ritual bathing for good reason. He

is holy and pure. Anyone who desires to approach Him must also be made holy and pure. In fact, the issue of holiness was so critical that God made it a life or death matter for the priests. *“Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying: ‘You shall also make a laver of bronze, with its base also of bronze, for washing. You shall put it between the tabernacle of meeting and the altar. And you shall put water in it, for Aaron and his sons shall wash their hands and their feet in water from it. When they go into the tabernacle of meeting, or when they come near the altar to minister, to burn an offering made by fire to the LORD, **they shall wash with water, lest they die. So they shall wash their hands and their feet, lest they die.** And it shall be a statute forever to them—to him and his descendants throughout their generations.’”* (Exodus 30:17-21) The priesthood was required to wash with water before they came near to the Lord to minister before Him with offerings and sacrifices, or else they would die. More specifically, they were to wash their hands and their feet.

If we fast forward to the New Testament, we can see this commanded procedure speaks directly to what Jesus did with His disciples when He washed their feet on His last night with them. He was preparing them to be His own ministers and part of a royal priesthood, able to boldly approach the Lord and serve in His Name. *“But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; who once were not a people but are now the people of God, who had not obtained mercy but now have obtained mercy.”* (1st Peter 2:9,10) In the Old Testament era, the blood of the animal sacrifices temporarily cleansed the inner man, while the water in the lavers temporarily cleansed the outer man. Both processes were needed for men to approach the

Lord in His temple. The animal sacrifices dealt with the *condition of the soul* as it stood before the Lord, while the bathing dealt with the *condition of the flesh* as it stood before the Lord. This foundational truth reflects the fundamental difference between salvation and sanctification in the life of any believer. It also makes stunningly clear the fact that these two precepts of faith are divinely woven together and utterly inseparable. As has been already noted, believers now have the Holy Spirit of God dwelling within from the moment of salvation. Every person who has been born again is a flesh and blood tabernacle or temple of the living God. The Lord requires us to keep ourselves undefiled for the simple fact that as we are now living temples of our holy God, we are *always* in His sacred presence. *“Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? If anyone defiles the temple of God, God will destroy him. For the temple of God is holy, which temple you are.”* (1st Corinthians 3:16,17) God sees our souls as being made completely righteous or cleansed through the atoning blood of His Son; saved from eternal condemnation and reconciled to Him spiritually. But the ongoing defilements of our minds, hearts, and bodies which can occur as a result of daily living in this fallen world must be attended to as well. This is where the lavers of water and the bodily cleansing rituals foreshadow our ongoing sanctification today.

Let’s revisit Jesus’ last night with His faithful disciples: *“Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come from God and was going to God, rose from supper and laid aside His garments, took a towel and girded Himself. **After that, He poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet, and to wipe them with the towel with which He was girded.** Then He came to Simon Peter. And Peter said to Him, ‘Lord, are You washing my feet?’ Jesus answered and said to*

him, *‘What I am doing you do not understand now, but you will know after this.’ Peter said to Him, ‘You shall never wash my feet!’ Jesus answered him, ‘If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me.’ Simon Peter said to Him, ‘Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head!’ Jesus said to him, ‘He who is bathed needs only to wash his feet, but is completely clean; and you are clean, but not all of you.’ For He knew who would betray Him; therefore He said, ‘You are not all clean.’ 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 13:5-17)*

There is so much to be unpacked from these verses. Who is doing the washing? It is Jesus and He is the Word of God manifested in the flesh. The Lord washes His own and He does so today through the cleansing ministry of His holy Word. *“Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth.”* (John 17:17) *“...Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, that **He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word,** that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish.”* (Ephesians 5:25-27) All the disciples were the recipients of the Lord’s washing endeavor that night, but the focus turns toward Peter specifically, in order to convey an important lesson. We are told Peter became offended by the very idea of Jesus washing his feet and thus, he tried to stop Him from doing so. *“Peter said to Him, ‘You shall never*

wash my feet!” (John 13:8) Take special note of what Jesus says to Peter in response to his outburst. “***Jesus answered him, ‘If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me.’***” (John 13:8) Do not disregard this statement as though it were nothing. It is an essential point about the walk of faith which Jesus is making; not only to His disciples but to those of us following Him today. If we do not allow Jesus to “wash our feet” i.e., if we do not allow the Lord to regularly cleanse us with His Word and its sanctifying instructions for our lives, Jesus declares we have no part with Him. Brothers and sisters, this is an incredibly serious truth which is addressed numerous times and in numerous ways throughout Scripture.

Notice it is the feet being washed. The Christian life is called a “walk of faith.” We walk the narrow path and we walk it with our feet. Jesus seeks to ‘wash our feet’ simply because it is His goal to cleanse the very ways in which we are walking through this life. This truth is entirely about our thoughts, words, and conduct being sanctified, transformed, and refined by His hand, His Word, and His Holy Spirit. It is the Lord’s desire for us to keep ourselves undefiled by the godless ways of this world. Like Peter, we must let Jesus wash us and not prevent Him from doing so – for that would equate to quenching or grieving His Spirit and breaking our fellowship with Him. It certainly is our free will choice to say to the Lord just as Peter did, “***You shall never wash my feet!***” (John 13:8) But if we do so, Jesus says we cannot have any part with Him. He came not just to save our souls but to transform the way we live our lives. He saves us in order to refine us and make us increasingly able to reflect His higher, holier nature which ultimately glorifies the Lord and magnifies His presence to those around us. “***Jesus said to him, ‘He who is bathed needs only to wash his feet, but is completely clean...’***” (John 13:10) He who is saved by faith

in the atoning blood of Jesus Christ is spiritually cleansed once and for all, having no need for the soul to be bathed again and again by the Lord's precious blood. But, as Jesus told Peter, those who are already bathed (saved) must still allow Him wash their feet. I will say it again. Salvation is already ours by faith in Jesus Christ. Those who are born again have already been made spiritually clean. In God's eyes, we are fully submersed (baptized) into His Son Jesus, washed in His blood, and covered with the holy garment of salvation. The divine cleansing of the soul occurs at the very moment we give ourselves to the Lord in repentant faith and become born again. But there is a further, ongoing cleansing God requires of us all as members of His household. This cleansing is accomplished by the washing of "our feet" with the water of His Word and by the purifying flow of His Holy Spirit in our hearts. *"Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the Word, that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish."* (Ephesians 5:25-27)

While we yet live this earthly life as followers of Jesus Christ, we must allow our feet to be washed by the Lord or we will have no part of Him. Both salvation and sanctification require the Lord's miraculous touch and refining hand. We must sit down and let Jesus wash our feet. He sanctifies us with His Word, His ways, His commands, and His promptings. If we do not obey this precept, we cannot experience His fulfilling fellowship in our lives. We will never be able to know the depth of love, intimate relationship, spiritual empowerment, trusting faith, inner contentment, and impactful ministry He desires us to have with Him. We cannot properly experience His holy presence

if we reject the ongoing sanctification He requires for us to draw near to Him or be righteous witnesses of Him. Most importantly, When we do not allow Jesus to sanctify us, the little faith we do have is subject to growing cold, withering away, and becoming no faith at all. Are you allowing the Lord to wash your feet? Do you sit with Him daily in humbled prayer and Bible study, laying yourself open to His corrections and ministering touch? Are you asking Him to show you how to imitate Him? Do You allow Jesus to refresh your mind and sanctify your conduct? Our Savior not only gave His lifeblood for our salvation, but He gives Himself to us day and night as a lowly Servant who faithfully washes our feet; cleansing the ways in which we walk, purifying the intentions of our hearts, and refreshing the soiled and weary mind with the holy, living water of His Word and Spirit. What a wonderful, loving, and merciful Savior we have in Jesus Christ! Let us rejoice in all He has done and all He continues to do for us so faithfully, tirelessly and lovingly. May we never choose to reject His cleansing ministrations. Let us instead strive to heed His instructions on the matter, for He desires to sanctify us daily from the living waters of His holy basin. *“Behold, You desire truth in the inward parts, and in the hidden part You will make me to know wisdom. Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.”* (Psalm 51:6,7)



Mediterranean Sea, Tel Aviv, Israel 2019

The Water and the Basin

*The door stands, painted and stricken
With His own blood, the Lord has quickened
My hard heart to divine compelling
And I have come, into His dwelling*

*My Savior beckons me to rest
On the floor, holy basin is set
His scarred and loving hands remove
My ragged and torn, travel-worn shoes*

*How can it be, He deigns to kneel
And wash these, my battered heels
The dust of many unclean roads
Clings to my feet and to my clothes*

*It is a quiet work, from high above
Cleansing me with His Word and love
By the water in His basin I'm washed
Sanctifying, is faith's narrow walk*

*If I protest that He let me be
He would honor my quenching plea
Softly withdrawing, His fire will dim
And I shall have no part with Him*

Selah

“Peter said to Him, ‘You shall never wash my feet!’ Jesus answered him, ‘If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me.’” (John 13:8)

Chapter 5

Abundant Life

“...I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly.” (John 10:10)

Have you ever come across a Christian brother or sister who just seems to be overflowing with the joy, love, and peace of the Lord? They are the kind of believer who can sweep into any room and practically light it up with their visible faith, generous love, and an almost palpable excitement of godly purpose. What we are witnessing in such people is the amazing freedom and spiritual power they have discovered in serving Jesus Christ without any lingering forms of doublemindedness crouching in their hearts. Maybe you are one of them, and this chapter will simply confirm what you already know. But for those who do not feel they've quite arrived at the prosperous place of an overflowing, abundant, and joyful faith on the roads they travel, let's discuss it more deeply to gain Scripture's insight and the Holy Spirit's inspiration moving forward.

What exactly is 'abundant life' according to the Bible? Scripture indicates it is the God-given ability in a believer to experience a depth of trust, joy, peace, hope, freedom from sin, and spiritual fruitfulness so powerful, so unswerving, that the Holy Spirit's heavenly presence simply pours outward from the heart like rivers of living water,

shining God's love and divine enlightenment upon others wherever they go. *"He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water. But this He spoke concerning the Spirit, whom those believing in Him would receive..."* (John 7:38,39) Abundant life is the kind of life we read about in the book of Acts. The believers of that era were living out a radically changed existence brought about by the power of the Holy Spirit. Dramatically and dynamically born again, they were inspired and strengthened by God to bring forth the gospel of Jesus Christ with steadfast joy in the midst of terrible persecution as they planted the very first churches throughout the known world. *"Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them. And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers. Then fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need. 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 2:41-47)

The believers of that time were so mightily stirred to embrace the divine promises of the gospel and the individual callings God placed upon their lives that they left every single aspect of their old lives and natures behind and began living in an entirely new way. They reverently worshiped and feared God by ecstatically acknowledging His authority over every nook and cranny of their earthly lives – including

the ways in which they spent their time. We are told they walked out their faith together with a spirit of unity and heartfelt gladness. They studied the Scriptures daily, ate meals together, exchanged teachings and discussed doctrine, praised and worshipped the Lord, shared the gospel to the lost, performed miracles as the Spirit willed, and worked out their newfound faith in Jesus Christ with God-given power, reverent fear, and heartfelt zeal, even to the point of martyrdom. Christians who have managed to grab hold of and continually wear such a blessed and zealous mantle of faith in today's world can seem to be few and far between. Thus, when the Lord causes our paths to intersect with such people, we should take notice and learn what causes them to be so different. We will quickly discover they have very little bondage to carnal or worldly desires. They do not chain themselves to the anxious plans of men nor do they march to the common beat of daily routines or set arrangements. Their Spirit-led feet tend to travel wherever God directs them to go, moment by moment and day by day. *"...How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the gospel of peace, who bring glad tidings of good things!"* (Romans 10:15)

These joyful believers are intensely serious about their Father's business, yet free in spirit at the same time – even amid struggles or hardships. It is made evident to all who know them that each day they are given is seen as a gift of God no matter what that day looks or feels like. They bring the Lord with them on every mundane task, every adventure, and every activity. These Christians are not perfect by any means, but what makes them stand out is the palpable sense of godly purpose they carry which moves them to give their all to the One they love; endlessly testifying of His mighty works, while serving Him in whatever capacity is required. Their spiritual ears and ready

hearts are alert and listening for the Lord's voice to guide and enlighten their paths, and it is the Holy Spirit's presence pouring out from their hearts which so effortlessly draws others to want to be near them and hear what they have to say. The world simply sees the divine light and love of Jesus when they look at the Christian who walks in such a manner.

In our modern culture, a believer of this caliber can seem to be a strange marvel, leading us to wonder how they are so uniquely alive in Christ. Our hearts crave what they have, but instead of striving to attain it, we assume we are not meant to experience such an anointed faith since we don't carry the same powerful zeal or impact. These dynamic Christians often appear to be an undependable sort of person, causing us to shy away from the idea of patterning our own walk after their example. They take unexpected or prolonged detours to speak with strangers about Jesus and pray for them, or become caught up in situations most of us would not allow ourselves to be pulled into – all for God's glory. Their focus is in building up fellow believers or leading lost souls to Christ. The Holy Spirit flowing so freely within their hearts gives them a divine awareness of spiritual opportunities which the rest of us do not notice, and God uses that special awareness to bless others in unique ways. It is as though when God gets ahold of these believers, they dive straight into His bottomless fountain of living water headfirst, with no deliberation and no questions asked. There is no holding back, no clinging to the old life, and no harboring of nagging desires for familiar or selfish pursuits. They are not easily hindered by the 'flesh versus Spirit' battle so many of us fight regularly. It is because they have already surrendered their entire lives to Jesus Christ, and unlike Lot's wife, they never looked back. *"But his wife looked back behind him, and she became a pillar of salt."*(Genesis 19:26)

Christians who truly seem to live out the abundant life Jesus came to give are those who have been entirely set free from the rule and ways of their former selves. Yes, they have quirks, hangups, kinks, and knots for God to work out or smooth over, for no one is perfect this side of heaven apart from Jesus. But the matter of abdicating the ruling throne of their lives was soundly settled the moment they became born again. Old habits, worldviews, and treasured ideals of self-preservation or self-focus were swept away by a faith so complete there was no room left in the heart for anything but Jesus Christ. Not only are such believers deeply blessed; they are a blessing to the rest of us. We can learn valuable lessons by observing the manner and spirit in which they walk. Personally speaking, I have not historically been the type of believer I've just described. As a result, I often felt I was missing something in all my spiritual strivings and prayerful attempts to know the Lord better. I just did not feel as close to God as I wanted to feel. Yes, I carried the inner peace of salvation since becoming born again, and the Lord has graciously showered upon me occasions of spiritual joy and the empowering of His Spirit in unique ways. But I always desired to be a woman of faith who overflowed with the same kind of joy, love, and carefree attitude so evident in the New Testament believers and in these seemingly 'super-Christians' who have crossed my path from time to time, and I could not figure out why I was not becoming that woman.

I now know my dilemma existed because I have been a hard nut to crack when it comes to embracing all the Lord has for me. I was also somewhat misled on the very serious matter of surrendering my own will entirely over to the Lord. These things worked to my own detriment and I unwittingly hindered the level of closeness I desired to have with God for a very long time. When God calls His children a 'stiff-necked' people, I surely have fit such a description time and

again without even realizing it. *“Now do not be stiff-necked, as your fathers were, but yield yourselves to the LORD; and enter His sanctuary, which He has sanctified forever, and serve the LORD your God, that the fierceness of His wrath may turn away from you.”* (2nd Chronicles 30:8) It has taken many years of walking with Jesus and studying His Word to finally understand what it means to yield myself and the workings of my entire life to God. I am still learning. Thankfully, God has patiently and tirelessly worked through countless seasons to slowly open my eyes and increase my awareness of the many hidden, self-ruled tendencies and pursuits to which I have been so prone to cling; areas of my life I have historically withheld from His pruning. It was as if God was patiently cultivating a beautiful flower in the garden of my own weeds – weeds I stubbornly insisted on tending and nurturing when I should have been pulling them out to throw in the rubbish heap of which Paul the apostle speaks. *“Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ.”* (Philippians 3:8)

Unlike the apostle Paul, I was not always willing to ‘suffer the loss of all things’ in order to gain Christ’s higher life flowing freely and more abundantly within me. I don’t think I even understood what Paul meant by such a statement. But I have come to learn that losing old patterns of thinking and living is the only way we will ever gain the abundant life of Christ flowing powerfully from within our hearts. If we could just realize upon the very first day of salvation that it is to our deepest benefit, greatest blessings, and fastest spiritual growth to root out every pesky weed of self-will and allow God to tend the entire garden of our souls. This is the transition which ought to happen from the very moment faith’s seeds are planted and received in good soil.

But alas, during much of my walk I sowed two kinds of seed and this resulted in a divided, defiled, and spiritually diminished harvest. *“You shall not sow your vineyard with two kinds of seed, or all the produce of the seed which you have sown, and the increase of the vineyard will become defiled.”* (Deuteronomy 22:9)

The level of abundant life any of us will experience in our walk of faith is entirely dependent upon the level of surrender we give to God and His precepts. We are told to draw closer to the Lord so He can draw closer to us. Well, how do we do that? We must start by abandoning any doublemindedness we may have nurtured in our walk so God can completely invade, conquer, and purify our hearts – for that is His goal. *“Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded.”* (James 4:8) The issue at hand is that of sanctification. Some of us struggle with bouts of apathy, spiritual sluggishness, or the feeling that our own faith is ultimately powerless and ineffectual against the trials and tribulations of life. This is because the Holy Spirit’s fire can so easily be quenched by our own spiritual carelessness or compromises. By such things we unknowingly douse the holy flame of God burning from within, just as a hose can douse a campfire. Faith increasingly falters and becomes a weak, smoldering reed rather than the crackling, brightly-lit blaze God wants for every single one of us. Be assured, the Lord can fan the smoking flax into a healthy, hot, refining fire – but only if we drop the hose, get out of the way, and allow Him to tend the flames. *“A bruised reed He will not break, and smoking flax He will not quench...”* (Isaiah 42:3) Through trials, discipline, chastening, and the teachings of His Word, our patient and persistent God is more than able to fan our low burning faith into a heated, fiery glow much better suited to refine and refashion us into images of Christ

who can more brilliantly reflect His nature. The Christian's responsibility of personal obedience to the Lord we claim to serve is not always a popular discourse to hold in today's churches. There is such an emphasis on the need for people to have faith *in Jesus* that we ignore God's requirements for our faithfulness *to Jesus*. The Bible is very clear; those who follow Jesus are also those who will 'listen' to Jesus, and it is incredibly important for us to note that in the manuscript language, the word used for 'listen' carries the meaning of 'listening in order to heed or obey'. "*While he was still speaking, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and behold, a voice out of the cloud said, 'This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased; listen to Him!'*" (Matthew 17:5) "*If you love Me, you will keep My commandments.*" (John 14:15 NASB) To put it very simply, a saving faith in Jesus is a faith that obeys Jesus.

But while modern day believers seem to be schooled strongly in the faith part of the Lord's salvation equation, the corresponding concept of faithfulness is mostly disregarded. As a result, the path of faith in Jesus Christ on which they travel is not very narrow at all in reality. Because this particular disparity was a sticking point in my own journey, it stumbled me for years and caused me to live in an often worldly and fleshly manner despite my sincere profession of faith. Now that I have been firmly corrected by the Lord via hard circumstances, much prayer, and a plain reading of His Word with fully opened eyes and a surrendered heart, I feel deeply compelled to share a more biblical understanding of the call God places on every Christian – the call to practice faithful, godly obedience to the commands of Christ, especially as it pertains to making a complete departure from living like the unbelieving world around us. Obedience is the action that opens the doors of our faith ever so much wider, beckoning us to enter into a vastly different, deeper, and

richer walk with our Savior. Once we walk through those doors, we will begin experiencing a freer heart and a more joyful spirit. Moreover, it is by faith's Spirit-led obedience that we can become a much more effective and influential witness to the world around us. I do not speak this truth as someone who read about it in a persuasive book or who has achieved a "perfect" surrender to God's instructions. No, I share it as someone who has lived a big part of the Christian journey without rightly understanding what it means to be "sold out to Jesus" or set distinctly apart from the ways of the world. I can tell you that upon taking the very intentional steps to live more carefully according to God's commands, I have begun to experience a vastly changed relationship with Him, and the difference can only be described as astonishing. It is what I was missing all along.

Jesus came to this earth not just to credit the believer's soul with His perfect righteousness, but He also came to teach us *how to live righteously*. Living righteously is what produces the abundant spiritual life Jesus came to give. "...*I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly.*" (John 10:10) Abundant life is what God desires for every person who bows the knee to His Son in faith. But it is only experienced by those who are willing to be actively ruled by His Holy Spirit rather than by their own stubborn, fleshly desires or worldly distractions. There is only one way in which the Holy Spirit abundantly and powerfully overflows our hearts like rivers of living water: We must become completely empty first. This was the crux of my former problem. I had not emptied myself of my own ways, comfortable habits, treasured pursuits, and so forth. Yes, I had received Jesus as my Lord and Savior. Yes, I was faithfully walking with Him and studying His Word. But I was also harboring a tendency to sit upon hidden thrones. I was still ruling over certain things which I was not

willing to give to God's more righteous reign. For a time, the Lord allows these places of error. He is gentle, merciful, and long suffering with our ignorance and self-deceptions. But one day we will find out what a high price we paid for something we ought not to have purchased at all.

I sincerely believe many others in the church today are caught up in sticking to their 'own way' on issues over which God is actively seeking to reign. This stumbling block is where the faith experience of multitudes contrasts greatly from those 'abundantly living' brothers and sisters who do not have such chains wrapped around their own hearts. What we are seeing in them is what God wants for everyone! It is His sole aim to release us from the shackles of flesh-driven pursuits and anxious desires so we can freely ride the powerful waves of His Holy Spirit and be carried along by His divine will. The Bible repeatedly tells us believers must leave behind the former ways and mindsets we had cultivated when we were unbelievers in order to follow His Son in faith. How do we do this? It starts with faith. It starts by trusting God's ways and purposes are far better than our own even when His commands seem foreign or challenging. By faith we begin abiding peaceably in His sovereign will and this includes the premise that we calmly accept whatever He ordains in our lives to unfold – both the good and bad. We not only walk according to His commands but we embrace the life He gives, no matter what that life looks like, and we choose to glorify Him in all of it. Christian author C.S. Lewis once taught a profound truth worth mentioning here. We must stop regarding the unpleasant developments or the inconvenient moments of our day as being annoying interruptions of our "own time" or our "real" life. This is a skewed perception. What we view as 'interruptions' or unwanted situations are precisely what our real life is – the life God is sending us minute by minute, hour by hour, and

day by day. God is sovereign. Nothing happens that has not been sifted through Him first. The life we personally intend to live is actually a phantom of our own fleshly imagination. Our real life is whatever God allows to transpire. Once we have this fact figured out, we can be freed from our inner expectations (which always cause disappointment) and learn to peacefully roll with the things God permits to take place in our present reality, viewing everything through His lens – the Bible.

The faith God gives is designed to free us from every form of bondage. *“Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed Him, ‘If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.’”* (John 8:31,32) *“Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed.”* (John 8:36) What is this freedom? It is freedom from enslavement to the endless demands of our fallen sin nature. There is an amazing release – a true spiritual freedom – which comes from not just studying the Word of God but actually living it out. We really can be unchained from the angsty burdens of our flesh-driven habits which so easily master or even ensnare us. But again, this liberty is experienced only if we willfully surrender ourselves to God by obeying His higher ways and commands for Christian living. The so-called ‘Super-Christians’ I described in the beginning of this chapter are really only different from the rest of us for one reason and one reason alone. They have already let go of everything they formerly treasured, and exchanged it all for the rich blessings that come from walking in unquestioning obedience to the One they have chosen to serve. Instead of serving self, they serve God. They do not just read Scripture, agree with what it instructs, and then go about their business as usual. They look for every opportunity to walk out what the Bible teaches. They have essentially allowed themselves

to be taught all over again how to live by following Scripture's explicit instructions. The closer we heed the counsel of God's Word and Spirit, the closer we grow to God Himself. This is entirely what it means to serve the Lord and worship the Lord. We serve and worship God by allowing Him to transform ways in which we think, speak, and live. "...*The hour is coming, and now is, when the **true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him.***" (John 4:23) "*The entirety of **Your word is truth...***" (Psalm 119:160) The way we worship God in spirit and in truth is by living in a Spirit-led, Bible-instructed manner that matches the faith we profess to have. Action makes our profession and our faith truthful and worthy of being called worship. There is a verse in Romans which spells this lesson out so clearly it cannot be ignored. The apostle Paul tells us we worship God by presenting ourselves as a living and holy sacrifice. Paul isn't teaching that we must perform some kind of ritual or present ourselves faithfully at Sunday church services. He is teaching that we offer up our entire lives to God by living according to His will instead of our own. The passage is shared below, using four different translations – the English Standard Version, the New American Standard Bible, the Amplified Version, and the New King James Version.

In this particular instance, the first three versions provide a far more accurate and meaningful reading of the original manuscript language than the New King James version. "*Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to **present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship.** And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.*" (Romans 12:1,2 NASB)

*“I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to **present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.**”* (Romans 12:1,2 ESV)

*“Therefore I urge you, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to **present your bodies [dedicating all of yourselves, set apart] as a living sacrifice, holy and well-pleasing to God, which is your rational (logical, intelligent) act of worship.** And do not be conformed to this world [any longer with its superficial values and customs], but be transformed and progressively changed [as you mature spiritually] by the renewing of your mind [focusing on godly values and ethical attitudes], so that you may prove [for yourselves] what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect [in His plan and purpose for you].”* (Romans 12:1,2 AMP)

*“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 NKJV)

As you can see, the New King James version (listed lastly) has removed the integral facet of ‘spiritual worship’ from the sentence by using the phrase ‘reasonable service’. This switch lessens the impactful, overall meaning of the command from what the original language declares. According to the Strong’s Concordance, the Greek rendering is specifically, ‘spiritual service of worship’, ‘spiritual

worship' or 'act of worship', is lat-ryoo'-o; from λάτρις látris (a hired menial); meaning to minister (to God), to render religious homage: to serve, do the service, to worship (worshipper); or λατρεία latreía, lat-ri'; service pertaining to administrations of God, i.e. worship: (divine) service. We can see from the Greek translation that our highest act of spiritual worship is to present ourselves [our very lives] as ongoing sacrifices to God. We are instructed to live according to His commands, His will, and His ways. This is what worshipping the Lord "*in spirit and truth*" means in the realities of daily life. Christians who are walking in the abundant life of Christ are those who realize the joy of worship was never intended to be focused only upon the singing of worship songs. True worship is and always has been about serving the Lord by living very differently than the rest of the unbelieving world. In doing so, we prove what is the good, acceptable, and perfect will of God. Furthermore, when we live according to God's dictates rather than our own, we will discover there is a wonderful joy, a refreshing sense of freedom, and a God-ordained purpose for each and every day we spend on this earth. Faith's believing obedience opens wide the floodgates of the Lord's divine power in our hearts, causing it to flow abundantly as rivers of living water. "*He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.*" (John 7:38)

I have been so blessed to personally know some very special people who are really living the abundant, spiritually empowered life which the Lord has promised. They have taught me many important truths about faith although they are probably not aware of it. One brother in particular comes to my mind as I write these words and to be honest, it took me years to fully realize what a gift it is to be in a close, bonded fellowship with him. Paul Clark is his name, and he

is an iconic Christian songwriter, singer, pianist, guitarist, and uniquely gifted musician who was deeply involved in spearheading the Christian music and ministry surrounding the Jesus Movement of the 1970's. Paul was born again fast and hard in the midst of a very crooked and perverse generation. Political unrest, alcohol, drugs, sex, and rock music reigned strongly in his life from early teens and into adulthood. He sang and played among fellow musicians and hippies who were all questioning the meaning of life and the existence of objective truth. One night the Lord wholly invaded Paul's heart and filled it with conviction, repentance, and life-changing faith. Paul immediately began serving God with such a contagious joy and spiritual love that he never looked back. Decades of intermittent tragedies and life-altering struggles only served to further refine and mature his faith. Paul's testimonies are many and abundant with the miraculous provisions of God's Almighty hand.

My husband and I met Paul in the early 2000's because he ministered at our church annually and was a longtime friend of our pastor. One year we traveled to Israel with him and his beautiful wife, Heidi, and we have been closely bonded to them in our mutual love of Jesus ever since. The Holy Spirit flowing so lavishly through brother Paul draws out the power and presence of the Holy Spirit in the believers around him. It is a marvelous thing to witness. His lighthearted yet passionate, godly attitude inspires, convicts, and encourages me to be less like the world and more like him, for truly, God calls us to imitate our spiritual mentors as they imitate Christ. "*Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ.*" (1st Corinthians 11:1) It has been a privilege to observe how Paul brings the Lord into every corner of his world. Whether he is repairing, building, buying, selling, cooking, cleaning, serving, practicing, singing, praying, or socializing, it does not make any difference the activity, one

can easily see God is present with this man in every facet of his day. The lesson to be taken from our beloved brother is an extremely important one. *Every* Christian is able to enjoy the abundant life Jesus offers. We just need to be willing. Abundant life isn't intended to be the experience of only a few, 'exceptionally anointed' believers. All the blessings of God are planted in the heart from the moment of belief no matter who we are or what we do in this life. As the seeds of faith are watered and tended by the Holy Spirit through the practical obedience of the believer, God's gifts become increasingly fruitful, flowing through the heart and outwardly onto others. The Lord's purpose is to bring forth a wonderful experience of spiritual freedom, joy, zeal, love, and maturing faith in us all. But He will only do so if He is not blocked or stifled by our self-will. Too often, we obstruct the powerful current of the Spirit's incoming and outgoing tides and because of this, we do not always find ourselves feeling the way He promises we will feel, nor can we mature in the spiritual fruits He so freely bestows. We quench the action of God's Spirit in many ways, but as has been mentioned, most commonly it is by some form of spiritual compromise or lingering worldliness – sure signs of a heart not fully surrendered to the ways of the Lord. Christians stanch the work God desires to accomplish in their own lives when they do not actively heed His Word or when they make careless choices which do not reflect a righteous fear of God or His commands.

When this happens, make no mistake, we will lack the abundant, freeing, joy-filled life Jesus came to give. Jesus Christ freely offers all of Himself to us every single day. He is both the atoning sacrifice for our sins and the indwelling source of abundant life from which we are invited to partake. But just as those who are thirsty must draw near to the well and work to bring up the life-giving waters

within, so too must every believer draw near to the Lord and work out their salvation with fear and trembling. *“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.”* (Philippians 2:12,13) Fear and trembling refer to an inward, heart attitude of reverence, love, and respect toward the glorious, all-powerful, holy Creator and Savior we profess to serve. It is a God-honoring fear which should motivate us to intentionally seek to live closely aligned with His will. Living for God and His higher purposes is the very best form of worship we can ever offer Him, and it is also the most fulfilling kind of life we could ever choose to live.

Just as His selfless death brought us eternal life, so too, our death to self brings forth His abundant life in us. The life of a believer is not to be common but rather, uncommon; no longer profane but holy and lifted up. I pray the Lord continually teaches us the difference, so we can rightly walk His uncommon path. *“...Teach My people the difference between the holy and the common [profane].”* (Ezekiel 44:23 AMP) Let us rise up from the common godlessness which surrounds us on every side in this fallen world, and begin to pursue the uncommon life God calls His faithful ones to live. Be willing to be different. Be inspired to strive after faith’s excellence, exceptionalism, and zealousness for the Lord. Jesus Christ came to give us life, and if we truly receive all of Him, it is abundant indeed.



Sea of Galilee Tiberias, Israel 2013

Life Uncommon

*The abundant life we seek
Evades us when we justify
A holiness so weak
Our common ways can't testify*

*The Lord's convictions pierce
Until we make a deeper change
His voice speaks in our ears
Revealing paths we have profaned*

*I shed the worldly cloak
My own shoulders sought to wear
For the Spirit's flow was choked
By the hidden darkness I did bear*

*My soul You have revived
And now I walk in liberty
Heart cut by heaven's knife
Its selfish chains have fallen free*

*In praise I lift my hands
Your mighty Name I glorify
On Your every Word I stand
My flesh is wholly crucified*

*And this has become mine
His precepts of bright promise
The Lord's abundance shines
Upon a life uncommon*

“Teach My people the difference between the holy and the common [profane].” (Ezekiel 44:23 AMP)

Chapter 6

A City Without Walls

“Whoever has no rule over his own spirit is like a city broken down, without walls.” (Proverbs 25:28)

In biblical times, a city without walls was a city unprotected; open to assault, invasion, capture, and defeat. An enemy’s victory is almost always assured when the city walls are breached, compromised, or torn down. Babylon laid siege to Jerusalem and broke through the city walls. *“Then the city wall was broken through, and all the men of war fled at night by way of the gate...”* (2nd Kings 25:4) The entire book of Nehemiah concerns the great importance of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem for its reestablishment and protection. *“...Then I [Nehemiah] said to them, ‘You see the distress that we are in, how Jerusalem lies waste, and its gates are burned with fire. Come and let us build the wall of Jerusalem, that we may no longer be a reproach.’”* (Nehemiah 2:17) And it was only after Jericho’s walls came tumbling down that Joshua was able to conquer the city by the Lord’s hand. *“So the people shouted when the priests blew the trumpets. And it happened when the people heard the sound of the trumpet, and the people shouted with a great shout that the wall fell down flat. Then the people went up into the city, every man straight before him, and they took the city.”* (Joshua 6:20)

The walls of ancient cities were topped by wide, walkable ramparts and well-placed watchtowers from which guards and watchmen could keep a constant patrol. From the heights they surveyed the land far out into the distance, sending forth alarms whenever a perceived threat or perilous-looking advance was being made toward the city. It was also from these fortifications that battles were waged and defensive maneuvers carried out, providing additional, protective measures for the occupants of the city within. We can imagine how necessary it was to build solid, towering, formidable, thick, stone walls as a surrounding feature of flourishing cities and settlements in ancient time periods. Protective walls were the only way for a colony of fruitful, prosperous people to ensure their chance of survival against the threat of enemy invaders who might covet what lies within.

It is from such a standpoint that the verse which heads this chapter is written. *“Whoever has no rule over his own spirit is like a city broken down, without walls.”* (Proverbs 25:28) The teaching found in this proverb gives us an excellent, physical picture of an important spiritual reality. In the discussion of ruling one’s spirit, the Bible has much to say about believers keeping themselves protected, armed for battle, alert and watchful, prepared for assault, and built upon the strongest of foundations; the Rock of Jesus Christ Himself. Those in this world who do not know the God of the Bible are already a city broken down, undefended by the hedges of God’s protection. Unbelievers are wholly invaded by the world, their own flesh, and the influences of the demonic realm. Christians understand this fact about the secular world we live in, and it is this knowledge which should cause us to have broken hearts for those who remain unsubmitted to God and His offer of salvation. We can see

all around us the spiritually desperate and vulnerable lives such people lead. They are enslaved by unchecked selfish desires, carnal lusts, various addictions, worldly influences, mental afflictions, godless mindsets, and even occultic pastimes. Without God, people are existentially purposeless. They desperately wrestle with, covet, and chase after what cannot satisfy the human soul. There is no comprehension that any pursuit without God at its center is a thirst never quenched and a hunger unabated. *“I have seen all the works which have been done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity, a futile grasping and chasing after the wind [without God].”* (Ecclesiastes 1:14) Without God, every wish fulfilled, every desire seized, and every goal achieved leaves the soul wanting more. There is no lasting satisfaction to be found, and that is because the world, the flesh, and the devil can never make us spiritually whole. Just as tiny drops of water falling on vast reaches of baked, desert sand have no ability to satiate the arid earth’s overall thirst, the races which people run in a life lived without God can never bring them to the finish line in victory. Instead, the walls of their souls are continually being laid bare to chronic, structural damage and destruction; entirely open to all sorts of spiritual invasion. They are cities broken down, without walls. Easily attacked, easily conquered, and easily yielded to the powers of every enemy are those who do not have the rule of God protecting them.

We are aware of these tragic truths about the unsaved world. But do we realize believers can also suffer from crumbling, broken down walls and give unwitting access to the enemy? When we first surrender our hearts and lives to the Lord in faith, He establishes us as His own protected people. With the Holy Spirit of God sealing us from within, we are like a walled city, fortified by heaven itself against all

that would come against us in this life. He who is in us is far greater than our enemies. *“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.”* (1st John 4:4) From what does the Lord seek to protect us? A bird’s eye view of the whole counsel of God shows us the three great sources of peril with which all people of faith must avoid becoming entangled – the world, the willful rule of our own flesh [sin nature], and the powers of hell which prowl the earth in the spiritual realm. These three enemies are described in numerous passages of Scripture such as the following: *“...Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God...?”* (James 4:4) *“For I delight in the law of God according to the inward man. But I see another law in my members [parts of the body], warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members.”* (Romans 7:22,23) *“Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. Resist him, steadfast in the faith...”* (1st Peter 5:8,9)

God’s children, be they Israel or the grafted-in church of Christian believers, are told to remain distinct and set apart from all that is not godly. If we do not keep our distance, the ways of the world will ensnare our flesh and lead us into unwittingly or even rebelliously practicing some of the same God-dishonoring lifestyles, mindsets, and habits of the unsaved. *“Do not be deceived: Evil company corrupts good habits. Awake to righteousness, and do not sin; for some do not have the knowledge of God..”* (1st Corinthians 15:33,34) *“Take heed to yourself, lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land where you are going, lest it be a snare in your midst.”* (Exodus 34:12) The simple truth being stated in these passages is that the secular world stands

as an ever-present, potential snare to the believer. The lifestyles of those who do not know Jesus Christ can appear very tempting and pull at the longings of our sin nature. If we are not cautious to remain carefully guided by the precepts of God, the influences of both the world and our fleshly responses to its ways will break down the walls of our divinely protected spirits. Even a heart ruled by the Lord can increasingly become waylaid and mastered by the corrupt demands of what Scripture calls our 'old man' (the sin nature) and the worldly values it lusts after if we do not keep our feet firmly planted upon the narrow path of Christ. *"...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 4:22-24) Once God's guidance and protective hedges along the path begin to crumble, the believer becomes vulnerable to assaults by the *"...prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience"* (Ephesians 2:2) which of course refers to the devil and his minions.

Broken down walls, compromised faith, a divided heart, and hidden spiritual bondage in the Christian walk do not happen overnight. It is an imperceptible, creeping process and consists of a secret siege waged against the mind, body, and spirit. The demonic realm can work to stake legal claims on our sinful ways and lay strongholds in our divided hearts the longer we allow the siege to occur. The unholy progression begins the moment we make a seemingly innocent choice to crack open the front door and let the enticing ways of the world trickle into our own lives, little by little. The assault becomes full-fledged when that front door invasion starts influencing our attitudes, behaviors, and

decisions in ways the undiscerning believer carelessly rationalizes and justifies, not recognizing a spiritual compromise has already begun. If we do not catch and correct ourselves, we become desensitized to certain lifestyle choices which do not glorify God. Over time, we grow increasingly prone to sow to the flesh rather than the Spirit. *“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)

Too many of us have not understood what it means to be “in the world, but not of the world” and it is on this issue we either stand victoriously or stumble miserably as believers. In praying to the Father while still on earth, Jesus says this: *“They [believers] are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth. As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world.”* (John 17:16-18) We are sent out by the Lord to be *in* the world as living witnesses of His truth, His light, His love, and His way to salvation. But we are never to be *of* the world’s ways, mindsets, values, or activities, because the world walks in continuous spiritual rebellion against the rule of God. The moment we allow modern society’s familiar stances or common practices to blur the lines of our biblically ordained calling to be separate and set apart, we become vulnerable. When we allow secular and pagan cultures to dull our senses and lull us into partaking of its seemingly ‘harmless’ and ‘normal’ lifestyles, the fortified walls of our spirits begin to break apart and crumble away. Again, I can write about these things because I have personally lived them. There have been areas of my life in which I was deeply influenced by the world via certain familiar habits and a desensitized blindness to God’s higher

will regarding those habits. It is a very difficult lesson to learn. As a result of my carelessness, I was forced to battle firsthand the stealthy invasion, spiritual bondage, and hidden strongholds which were sown into my walk of faith due to my somewhat willful ignorance. The testimony of this very plight will be shared more in depth in a later chapter.

Thankfully, the Lord is endlessly instructive, patient, and faithful toward those of us who seek Him despite our varying levels of unwitting disobedience. *“Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful.”* (Hebrews 10:23) Tragically, many of us must learn God’s lessons the hard way and I definitely chose a harder path with regard to certain aspects of my daily life. While I am incredibly grateful for the spiritual growth it finally brought to me, I feel an urgency to bring greater awareness, encouragement, and a stern warning to the body of Christ on the subject of keeping separate from the ways of the secular world in which we must live. *“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) This command is not just a beautifully worded platitude we can store in our hearts as an inactive truth of God. We must walk it out. The Lord means what He says and says what He means. Our protection, best interests, and well-being all very much lay on the line with every instruction He gives, and He says explicitly, *‘do not be conformed to this world...’*

We can make light of God’s serious warnings without even realizing we are doing so. We don’t always take the time to digest the real-life import of His instructions nor do we make diligent effort to fully understand the ominous implications of what can happen to our faith when we do not

strive to follow the Lord's commands in reverent, cautious, and practical ways. We overlook their spiritual connection to our daily lives, and because of this, we do not realize there are far-reaching, sobering consequences to any carelessness we may be prone to show toward them. When we see a command such as *'do not be conformed to this world'* we usually think of 'the world' in terms of very obvious immoral, pagan or heathen practices or mindsets which are clearly rebellious and set against God and the teachings of His Word. But we must learn this command encompasses a multitude of more subtle yet incredibly harmful worldly inputs and influences which we might view on the surface as being acceptable or relatively innocuous.

Make no mistake, this life is a spiritual battleground. Every single day we fight in a war that is not as hidden as we might believe it to be. We are either well-equipped and protected through faithful obedience to God's commands, or we are slowly becoming like a city broken down, without walls. Our victory (or lack thereof) rests upon whether or not we keep the walls of our soul intact, fully fortified, and covered by God's grace and Holy Spirit empowerment. No matter the battle, no matter the trial, no matter the assault, it is all the same war. We must remain alert if we are to keep the enemy from breaking through to stake a claim on any unprotected ground. *"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."* (1st John 2:15-17) Sadly, believers do not always avoid the things of this world in the vigilant manner of which God instructs throughout the Bible. There is not enough caution

exercised today toward the influences godless cultures can have on our spirits. I am not advocating we should be afraid of everyone and everything in society or hide like hermits in our houses. In fact, our purpose as a people called to share the gospel by being salt and light to those living in darkness stands contrary to such a position. God gives Christians a spirit of power, love, and a sound mind. In Christ, we can be overcomers of all that is in the world or of the devil. “...*God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind.*” (2nd Timothy 1:7) “*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.*” (1st John 4:4) Obviously, since we are to be witnesses of God’s wisdom, love, salvation plan, and higher ways of living, we have no biblical justification for removing ourselves from society altogether. What I *am* saying and will be continually saying throughout this chapter is that some of us have an overly casual, almost brazenly careless attitude toward the secularism and paganism which ebbs and flows all around us, and it is this mindset which can lead us to erroneously fling God’s cautions to the wind without even realizing we have done so.

We simply do not fear the Trojan horses we have allowed to stand so prominently inside the city of our souls. We graciously receive or welcome certain compromising treaties, tributes, and peace-offerings which this world incessantly loves to bring into our lives, not realizing there are cleverly disguised threats to our faith lurking within them. Moreover, we do not guard ourselves sufficiently against the devil and his ruses either. Hell’s treacheries are unceasing, powerful, numerous, and skillfully woven into the seams of this world’s alluring and colorful robes. Our lack of diligent awareness regarding the spiritual strategies

of the enemy taking place day and night on this planet pose an ever-present danger to the journey of faith. The more we are distracted from paying attention to that which is spiritual, the more we will unknowingly let the enemies of God into our midst. Neither the devil nor the world will ever walk through our gates with their wickedness and godlessness on full display. Satan does not show up with his horns sharpened, fangs dripping, and hell's pitchfork in hand. Such an obvious display of evil and intended harm would cause the Christian to be resolutely suited up in the full armor of God and prepared to fight at any given moment. This is, of course, the last thing the enemy of our soul wants to see. Likewise, the world does not bare its desolate and stricken condition for us to observe and reject outright either, because the fallen nature of humanity wishes we would join in and partake of its many miseries. Hence, the saying, 'misery loves company', for there is nothing more validating and empowering to the sinner than that others would join them in their sins. No, these two enemies of God are far more devious, making their appearances in friendlier, more familiar, engaging forms, causing us to naively invite them in and enjoy their antics. As a result, numerous believers have no real sense of the hidden menaces which stand in the middle of their own 'town square' ready to wreak havoc when defenses are down. Indeed, there are a variety of Trojan horses modern Christians have embraced as comfortable complements to their lives when they should instead be rejected as the dangerous compromises and godless distractions they really are.

Let's remember how God called Abraham out from the pagan culture of his time in order to be set apart and consecrated to Him by faith for a lifetime of service and obedience. This move was not just a physical relocation but

a spiritual shift as well. “*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. I will make you a great nation; I will bless you and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing.’*” (Genesis 12:1,2) The Lord created an entire nation through the separated, set-apart faithfulness of Abraham. They became a people who were taught to live differently; higher, holier, healthier lives which not only brought blessings to them but also became a sacred witness to the rest of the world, glorifying the one true Creator and Savior of heaven and earth. The first step taken to accomplish this entire feat was simple – get up, move away, and follow the Lord in faith. There was to be a definitive departing from the known world’s ungodliness and its influences. With the exception of his wife, his personal household, and his own nephew, Abraham left everything and everyone he knew in order to keep himself distant from and uninfluenced by every possible form of pagan stimuli and its resulting temptation to fall back into old habits, familiar mindsets, and commonly practiced idolatry. God did not want His chosen, special people of faith to have divided hearts toward Him. Separation was the manner in which He protected them from such a condition.

The children of God were wanderers then and we must continue to be wanderers now. The Lord’s people, be they God’s Old Testament faithful ones or the born again body of Jesus Christ, are destined to exist as strangers in strange lands; nomads and pilgrims just passing through this life as they forge ahead to the promised lands of heaven. We are directed to dwell in this world yet not participate in its ways. The writer of Hebrews says this about the faithful men and women of the Old Testament era; “*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. For those who say such things declare plainly that they seek a homeland. And truly if they had called to mind that country from which they had come out, they would have had the opportunity to return. But now they desire a better, that is, a heavenly country..." (Hebrews 11:13-16) Those persevering lovers of God knew this world was not their true home, but just a shadow or copy of a higher, better reality, and thus, they intentionally chose not identify with it on any level. They understood a divine and blessed homeland in eternity awaited them, even if they never experienced the physical reality of reaching the earthly 'promise land' in their own lifetimes.

The call God placed upon Abraham's life is no different than the call God puts in every believer's heart. Christians are repeatedly told to be distinct and set apart from their unbelieving families, friends, neighbors, coworkers, and acquaintances. We are commanded not to be like them in any way. *"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) The Lord intends our attitudes, conduct, and lifestyles to be reflections of His higher ways and His divine nature. But this exceedingly important truth can get lost in the busy shuffle of daily living, and therefore, the journey which many believers travel often takes the very same detours, wrong turns, and wayward paths as those who have no relationship with the Lord at all. How does such a thing happen? Most commonly it is through a lack of Scripture's application to real life. We read about being set apart from the world, not conforming to its secular ways, and living as God's bright and shining witnesses in a world

darkened by spiritual rebellion. We allow God's Word to convict and inspire us to want to obey these biblical precepts, but then we set our Bibles down on the desk and somehow go about the day spending the hours we've been given in almost the same ways everyone else on the planet does. We eat, drink, watch tv, listen to music, attend parties, go to a football game, shop, scroll social media, and socialize in the very same manners as the secular world. As a result, the people around us often do not have a clue we are any spiritually different than they are.

When we live just like the unsaved world, there is zero chance we are making any kind of impact as a Christian. Moreover, the Lord tells us if we remain unchanged and untransformed by His Word, it is as though we have observed the damning truth about ourselves in a mirror, were convicted by it, but then we walked away, forgetting what it was we saw that needed correction. *"But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror; for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was."* (James 1:22-24) We can so easily become guilty of being hearers of the Word and not doers, and this is our problem in a nutshell. Believers do not talk about this subject enough today. It feels too judgmental, invasive, constricting, or even legalistic to hold a discussion or sit under a teaching which focuses on the things we should be doing or not be doing as Christians. This is the fallout we suffer from presuming salvation by faith alone means our purposeful obedience to God is not important or applicable to us. But listen, if we think this way at all, we are kicking against God's Word on almost every page He wrote.

The issue we battle in much of Christendom today is that many are being led to believe the new covenant under Jesus Christ makes null and void God's commands because they are viewed as being of the 'Law' and not of 'Grace'. What does Jesus say about this? ***"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) ***"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."*** Judas (not Iscariot) said to Him, 'Lord, how is it that You will manifest Yourself to us, and not to the world?' Jesus answered and said to him, ***'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. He who does not love Me does not keep My words; and the word which you hear is not Mine but the Father's who sent Me.'*** (John 14:21-24)

Clearly, these passages indicate those of us who profess to love and believe in Jesus Christ will faithfully abide in His Word and obey His commandments. ***"Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments. He who says, 'I know Him,' and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But whoever keeps His word, truly the love of God is perfected in him. By this we know that we are in Him. He who says he abides in Him ought himself also to walk just as He walked. Brethren, I write no new commandment to you, but an old commandment which you have had from the beginning. The old commandment is the word which you heard from the beginning."*** (1st John 2:3-7) ***"For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome. For whatever is born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith. Who is he who overcomes***

the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?” (1st John 5:3-5) These are *New Testament* passages written for the *born-again church* of Jesus Christ, not the fulfilled Old Testament tabernacle laws which we no longer need to heed. Scripture tells us we overcome this fallen world by our faith in Jesus Christ and the evidence of our faith will be displayed by the ways in which we live. *“A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Therefore by their fruits you will know them.”* (Matthew 7:18-20) The shift which salvation causes in the heart must allow God to begin working a divine renovation of our thoughts, words, actions, and mindsets. Remember the verse in James; *“What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him?... Thus, also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. But someone will say, ‘You have faith, and I have works.’ Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe—and tremble! But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead?”* (James 2:14, 17-20) We are foolish to think we have a saving faith in Jesus if that faith does not cause us to begin living surrendered to Him as Lord. Even the demons believe in Jesus, but they are not saved. What is the difference between their belief and ours? They *refuse to obey* God’s commands or live under His rule. May we never be found guilty of doing the same.

When the Lord tells us to be set apart and different from the world, He is simply telling us to be holy because He is holy. In Hebrew, the word is “קֹדֶשׁ” or “ko'-desh” which means consecrated, dedicated, hallowed, set apart to God. In the Greek, it is “ἅγιος” or “hágios” and refers to that which is sacred, pure, morally blameless, uncommon. We may

protest this idea of having to be holy because we think being holy is impossible. Yet the Bible says all things are possible with God. “...*With God all things are possible...*” (Matthew 19:26) We are already made holy in spirit by our faith in the cleansing blood of Jesus Christ and the divine presence of God dwelling within us. But we have also been consecrated [set apart] by the blood of Christ for a lifetime of service to Him. What do we think serving the Lord means? A big part of it is simply striving after holiness in our everyday lives – our spiritually renewed deeds, thoughts, and actions. Holiness is conforming to the Lord’s will instead of catering to our flesh. Growing in holiness is how we grow closer in our relationship with God. “*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.’*” (1st Peter 1:13-16) Being holy is not a seemingly unachievable goal which only very spiritual church leaders or serious-minded Bible scholars might magically attain. It is a command for us all to obey by the power of the Lord’s Spirit and living Word.

Listen, our holy God loathes sin. It is a detestable, repugnant, wicked, and abominable thing to His divine nature. If we love God, we should be discovering a brand new truth about ourselves in that we now also loathe sin. The more we learn about it, study it in Scripture, and realize how much our own sin nature still tries to inflict its ugly demands upon us, the more we will find ourselves recognizing sin as the damaging wickedness it really is and keeping far from it. How do we separate ourselves from the world and its godless yet disturbingly comfortable and familiar ways? The answer is very simple. We strive to obey Scripture. And one of the

primary messages to be gleaned from the Lord's testimonies, histories, letters, and explanations, is the ongoing importance of avoiding all entanglements with the lifestyles of unsaved people. We are encouraged to be investing in the eternal, the spiritual, and the heavenly-minded things of God. Our time and energy ought to be focused on and swept up in matters pertaining to the kingdom of heaven and the valuable work the Lord calls us to do for Him in this life. *"Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."* (Matthew 6:19-21) Leisure hours should be swept up in seeking spiritual growth, encouraging and strengthening other believers, sharing God's truths with the lost, or pastimes which honor, celebrate, or glorify the Lord, rather than those which cater to the flesh. *"If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth. For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God."* (Colossians 3:1-3)

These are instructions and commands given directly to the church body. They are not the outdated, ceremonial laws of Old Testament Israel, but God-breathed directives for each and every believer to take seriously in their own walk of faith. The Lord God Almighty isn't in the business of having His commands and precepts written down over the ages just to be studied and then ignored. God doesn't speak to merely fill our minds with His beautiful or powerful words. He speaks because He desires us to listen to Him and obey Him. The Lord wants us to not only trust in His promises (faith) but to live according to His commands (faithfulness). Many of us have a problem in that we agree

with God's precepts but we keep them only as passive expressions of doctrine resting peaceably within the pages of Scripture. The Bible directs us to make them real by working them out into our own lives. *"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) Let us work out God's commands and teachings with reverence – with fear and trembling. It is only by being different from the sin-darkened, secular world that we can shine as God's light bearers in this crooked and perverse generation.

Most of us understand we can give no place to pursuits and interests which grieve the Holy Spirit or cause us to be a poor witness to those in our sphere of influence. Paul's letter to the church in Rome has a great deal to say about the ways believers are to conduct themselves. *"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) Every single one of these instructions requires us not to be mastered by our natural inclinations or the ways of the world. This is not always an easy thing to do. But we are told to intentionally rise above our innate, knee-jerk reactions to life and be led by the Spirit of God and the Word of God instead. We might say, "Yes, I want to be like that, but it seems impossible!" Listen, God makes the impossible possible.

Our obedience to the Lord's commands begets His power in our lives. Learn this truth. Repeat it often. Many of us have the mistaken perception it is the other way around. We helplessly live how we have always lived, praying for the Holy Spirit to give us the wherewithal to truly obey the Lord on a certain issue because we feel too weak or unable to do so on our own. But this is backwards thinking. **Deliberate obedience must come first; only then will the divine power of God flow.** If we settle it forever in our hearts to make a purposeful commitment to follow the Lord in all His ways, He will both enable and sustain our endeavors. Obedience opens the door for His divine power to flow through and lead us in ways we never thought we could follow. I am able to say this with full confidence because I have lived it and found it to be entirely true. It is so important for the Christian to understand that faith and faithfulness are the same word in the Hebrew and Greek. Faith [faithfulness] is the victory of every believer. "...*And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith.*" (1st John 5:4) As we study how not to love the world or be

like the world, it is important to notice that Scripture contains a multitude of commands which seem so basic, but they carry deeper ramifications when it comes to real-life application and practical action. Let's examine for example, the second part of Romans 12:9, "*Abhor what is evil.*" This is a very matter of fact, blanket statement with which any Christian is going to nod their heads in agreement and resolved intent. Of course, we must abhor what is evil and flee all forms of it. The Holy Spirit leads us to detest and be repulsed by such wicked acts as murder, rape, stealing, idolatry, sexual immorality, abuse, vulgar speech, lying, and the like. The problem we encounter today rests in the fact that we tend to identify only these obvious actions as being evil without realizing there are more insidious forms of those sins which seep into our existence through deceptively disguised packages. Remember the Trojan horses? Keep them mind as we tackle this issue. While I could use any example, I will pick on just one and by the time the point is made, we will understand the same principle applies to any of the blatant sins God forbids.

God tells us sexual immorality is wicked and harmful, forbidding us to participate in such acts throughout both Old and New Testaments. We know believers are not to involve themselves in any sexual activity outside of that which takes place within the blessed bonds of biblical marriage to one spouse of the opposite gender. Most Christians seek to adhere to this precept without question. Going deeper into the application of avoiding sexual immorality, we will find we are told to actually flee from it. "*Flee sexual immorality.*" (1st Corinthians 6:18) Think of Joseph, the favored son of Jacob who was forced to physically flee a very tempting situation when his Egyptian boss's wife demanded he have sex with her. The godly man spun out of her reach so fast he left his robe behind. "...*She*

caught him by his garment, saying, 'Lie with me.' But he left his garment in her hand and fled and ran outside." (Genesis 39:12) Joseph fled. His action is an excellent picture of the spiritual intent God has for any of us regarding the temptations of sin. What Joseph did physically in refusing to sin against the Lord and against his own body is the heart we are to have for all the commands of God. We are not to just avoid sin but to actively flee even the tiniest hint, invitation, or threat of it. We must try to distance ourselves from every form of wickedness as far as it is within our power to do so. The Lord makes it very clear by using the word 'flee' there needs to be a hastiness; a strong and immediate action taken to run swiftly in the opposite direction from anything forbidden.

Why do I hammer on this point? I do so because it is alarming how quickly a fleeting temptation can lead to sin and its destructive consequences. *"But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death."* (James 1:14,15) Again, most believers nod in agreement with such a precept. But what if I were to tell you there are places in many a Christian home where a sin like sexual immorality occurs daily? Sexual sin is an area where the ways of the world have casually snuck into our minds and hearts, causing corrupt and compromised conduct, attitudes, worldviews, and even language to become normalized or somewhat accepted in the lives of unsuspecting believers. We become desensitized and adversely affected by sexual immorality every time we allow our eyes to view it via mainstream movies, sitcoms, drama series, comedy shows, or even advertisements. Hollywood exercises zero moral restraint on this subject. Regardless of the maturity rating, the content being pushed at the world today familiarizes us to all manner of hedonism, depravity,

and selfishness. Those who engage in regular viewership of such things cannot help but begin to think what is played out on the screen is normal, comfortable, and expected, rather than obscene and unnatural.

The more we watch and enjoy the same material the world watches and enjoys, the more we will be like them. We will be increasingly influenced by lifestyles, attitudes, and behaviors which do not glorify the Lord. As we allow our hearts and minds to get caught up in the sensual experiences of actors and actresses, God's protective walls around our spirits start to weaken and crumble. May we instead seek to have the heart of David when he says, "*I will behave wisely in a perfect way. Oh, when will You come to me? I will walk within my house with a perfect heart. I will set nothing wicked before my eyes; I hate the work of those who fall away; It shall not cling to me. A perverse heart shall depart from me; I will not know wickedness.*" (Psalm 101:2-4) Let us set nothing wicked before our eyes, nor let the work of those who do not love God cling to us and teach us how to live. For some people, it is not the television screen which offers the daily stumbling block, but the music being played on the radio or the video reels on a social media application. Moral corruption can be found on the bookshelves as well. The plot might be brilliant, but the characters and settings are secular or pagan, portraying sinful, spiritually destructive scenarios throughout the storyline.

It is so important that we retain a constant awareness God is dwelling in our midst. He abides in every believing heart. His holy nature rests where we rest, watches what we watch, reads what we read, and hears what we hear. Are we watching, reading, or enjoying the very things He abhors? Look at the following passage closely. "*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) What this verse is stating very clearly is that although we may not personally be practicing the behaviors we are watching, listening to, or reading about, when we let our minds absorb such activities on a screen or in a book page for our own entertainment, we are actually approving of those who do such things and just as guilty as if we were participating in them. This is a serious indictment for us all. Television, computers, video games, radio, books, smartphones, and social media – if we are not careful, these are places where we can open the door and let far too much of the world into our lives, inadvertently compromising our walk of faith while weakening the walls around our spirits.

Believers have been set apart – not for isolation but for impact. The Christian cannot always go where the world goes, do what the world does, say what the world says, watch what the world watches, or listen to what the world is listening to. Whatever we let in will always have an effect – good or bad, depending on content. If we let garbage in, garbage is what will come out. Scripture tells us God gave Solomon the gift of divine wisdom, making him the wisest man who ever lived apart from Jesus Christ. Observe Solomon’s instruction in the following proverb: *“The way of the wicked is like darkness; They do not know what makes them stumble. My son, give attention to my words; Incline*

your ear to my sayings. Do not let them depart from your eyes; Keep them in the midst of your heart; For they are life to those who find them, and health to all their flesh. Keep your heart with all diligence, for out of it spring the issues of life. Put away from you a deceitful mouth, and put perverse lips far from you. Let your eyes look straight ahead, and your eyelids look right before you. Ponder the path of your feet, and let all your ways be established. Do not turn to the right or the left; Remove your foot from evil.” (Proverbs 4:19-27)

It is the wise and wary Christian who avoids having much interaction with popular, secular pastimes and events. The more we involve ourselves in those environments, the greater the chances we will have of embracing hedonistic, humanistic, or materialistic mindsets as being normal, familiar, and expected. This is not a new problem. The Israelites were continually tempted and ensnared by the carnal lifestyles of their pagan neighbors. *“You shall make no covenant with them [other nations], nor with their gods. They shall not dwell in your land, lest they make you sin against Me. For if you serve their gods, it will surely be a snare to you.” (Exodus 23:32,33)* *“Take heed to yourself, lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land where you are going, lest it be a snare in your midst. But you shall destroy their altars, break their sacred pillars, and cut down their wooden images (for you shall worship no other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God), lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land, and they play the harlot with their gods and make sacrifice to their gods, and one of them invites you and you eat of his sacrifice, and you take of his daughters for your sons, and his daughters play the harlot with their gods and make your sons play the harlot with their gods.” (Exodus 34:12-16)* God uses the Israelites’ failings as our warning. He desires to protect His children from all forms of spiritual

compromise, idolatry, and corruption, because these conditions lead to divided hearts and dual alliances.

I have been entirely guilty of falling prey to the very things God warns us about in Scripture. Because I grew up in a mostly secular family amongst secular friends, I saw premarital sex, alcohol use and abuse, foul language, secular music, and ‘adult-rated’ programs as being completely normal facets of everyday life. I had no convictions about participating in these common practices nor did I have any understanding the Creator of this world sees them as wicked and rebellious. I did not know Jesus or His Word at that time, and therefore, I unwittingly lived my life as His enemy by pursuing self-driven ways and carnal desires from moment to moment. Once the Lord grabbed my attention, changed my heart, and saved my soul, I immediately understood the bigger picture of what sin was and began to avoid it. However, for a very long time I did not realize there were sneakier snares to be wary of, so I ignorantly continued to allow certain familiar aspects of secular living to freely flow into my life. Much of what the world offers or is involved in can appear harmless, but let me assure you, there are far-reaching effects to be had on our walk of faith if we don’t root out and recognize the damaging potential of its influences. The world system is God’s enemy, no matter how inane or innocent some of its functions and activities may appear. Yes, the Lord is not willing that any should perish, and He desires to save every soul who will bend the knee to His rule in faith. But the godless are His enemy while they remain godless and they continually violate His standards. Moreover, their values and lifestyles carry the incessant power to stumble and ensnare believers. “...*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. Or do you think that the Scripture says in*

vain, *“The Spirit who dwells in us yearns jealously?”* (James 4:4, 5) The Lord loves us deeply and He is a jealous God. He is protectively jealous of our hearts and is grieved by our compromised focuses. His is a righteous jealousy flowing from His great love and merciful desire to keep us from veering off on any wayward paths which lead away from Him or take our focus off of Him. The divine jealousy of God is a protective, sacrificial, life-saving aspect of His loving and holy character which seeks to keep His children whole, safe, and uncorrupted. He knows how easily we can be led astray, prone to wander, inclined to deceit, and quickly captured by the world, the flesh, and the devil. *“The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; Who can know it?”* (Jeremiah 17:9)

The reality of this life is that Christians must dwell in the midst of a spiritually barren wilderness void of God’s divine life, counsel, and provision. If we deepen our understanding of how easily spiritual compromise happens in the lives of the faithful, we will be better prepared to fulfill the great commission God has given us without risking the integrity of our own relationship with Him. *“And He said to them, ‘Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation.’”* (Mark 16:15) Yes, we must go into all the world, but we cannot allow ourselves to become part of that world. We preach the gospel not just in words but by our lifestyles – the way we live and move and have our being in Christ. *“For in Him we live and move and have our being...”* (Acts 17:28) We certainly cannot rightly preach the soul-saving, life-changing gospel of Jesus Christ if we walk our roads in the same manners and directions the unsaved world walks. Our witness carries no weight if our lives do not match the faith we profess to have in our hearts. Let us keep to the narrow path, hedged in by God’s protection, light, and love. Do not casually wander into the darkened ditches of godless

humanity nor partake of their deeds. Nothing good will come of it. Keep to the narrow path and never lose the salt and light of God. *“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. 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 5:13-16)

Salvation is our first layer of protection. When we are born again, the Holy Spirit of God begins dwelling within our hearts and marks us as holy ground; saved and belonging to God. We are God’s claimed territory and the hordes of hell will know and recognize this fact. God then builds up the foundation walls of our faith and rules the city of our soul through His guiding Word and our God-fearing, faithful obedience to Him. The primary way in which the enemy can find a breach is by watching and waiting for us to practice careless disobedience, willful rebellion, spiritual apathy, or sleepiness of faith. May we carefully consider this picture and take it to heart. Any disregard for or disobedience to God is like a crack in the wall of an ancient city. If left unrepaired and unattended, it will only widen, and the stones will begin to crumble. We may think all is well for a time as we go about our business as usual. But through such an opening the enemy is making inroads right under our noses. Let us be watchmen at our towers, tending to the soundness of our fortifications and remaining alert and aware of our surroundings. God is our impenetrable city wall if we are trusting in Him and standing firmly upon His higher truths, ways, and precepts.

“The LORD is my rock, my fortress, and the One who rescues me; My God, my rock and strength in whom I trust and take refuge; My shield, and the horn of my salvation, my high tower—my stronghold.” (Psalm 18:2)



Old City Walls, Eastern Gate
Jerusalem, Israel 2019

City Without Walls

*I have made you this day a fortified city
As an iron pillar
Bronze walls against the land*

*The enemy prowls, every lock he is picking
Relentless soul killer
He awaits weakened hands*

*Don't open your gates in carnality's pity
Trading hallowed for silver
It is hell's contraband*

*The world encamps with banners so pretty
Deceit is its filter
Summoning our glance*

*The Lord Himself guards holier living
He is able to deliver
Those who honor His commands*

*Rule over your spirit without any drifting
Nor let its walls splinter
For a city broken down cannot stand*

“I have made you this day a fortified city and an iron pillar, and bronze walls against the whole land.” (Jeremiah 1:18)

“Whoever has no rule over his own spirit is like a city broken down, without walls.” (Proverbs 25:28)

Chapter 7

Strongholds

“...By whom a person is overcome, by him also he is brought into bondage. (2nd Peter 2:19)

In the beginning, God sovereignly ruled as Creator, Lord, and King over His very first children, Adam and Eve. They worshipped, trusted, and adored Him. The all-powerful and all-knowing eternal One, the great ‘I AM’, walked in an intimate relationship with the couple, teaching them all about the world around them and the part they were to play in it. Their purpose every morning, noon, and night, was to seek the Lord’s wisdom, enjoy His divine presence, and fulfill His every command. They had unconditional faith that whatever He willed for them to do was to their utmost benefit, and so, they were fully submitted to His holy governance. His was the only throne and He was their only Lord and King. Under His divine and loving care, Adam and Eve flourished in the garden. But one day they were deceptively led to lose all faith in God’s intentions toward them. Eve fell prey to the seductive, questioning words of the devil and the prideful temptations of her own flesh. She willfully disobeyed the Lord and caused her husband to disobey right along with her. In a single act of rebellion, the proverbial throne in the heart of mankind was instantly vacated by God and became solely occupied by self.

Every person on earth is now born with a self-worship and self-rule problem. What makes our situation even worse is that we don't realize we even have a problem. This is the curse of Eden's fall in the human heart. It is the foundational reason why no one can redeem themselves or earn their own way back into a reconciled relationship with the Creator of this world. The eyes of all humanity are naturally turned inward instead of upward when it comes to choosing whom we serve. We have inherited a sin-cursed lineage of self-proclaimed royalty; mighty little kings ruling over fleeting, earthly existences. Natural-born idolaters from God's perspective, mankind endlessly bows down before the altar of his own flesh in a perpetual endeavor to appease its incessant demands. Instead of doing what is right according to our Creator, everyone does 'what is right in his own eyes.' *"In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes."* (Judges 17:6)

Thankfully, when a person becomes born again by faith in Jesus Christ, God is miraculously enabled to reign once again as Lord and King over the regenerated heart, making us spiritually alive and attuned to His unseen yet powerful, burning, and holy presence. It is only by faith that the curse of the Lord's absence in the human soul can be reversed. Faith allows God to recapture us as His own people and causes our hearts to become His spiritually reclaimed territory. He sets His flame within us and raises it high; a banner of His victorious love proclaiming that another soul has been won back from the enemy. *"You have given a banner to those who fear You, that it may be displayed because of the truth."* (Psalm 60:4) *"...And his banner over me was love."* (Song of Solomon 2:4) As we grow in our knowledge of Scripture and progress in gaining spiritual wisdom and understanding, we will find ourselves being led

to increasingly cast off flesh-ruled attitudes, habits, behaviors, and lifestyles in order to become better aligned with the Lord's commands and purposes. A great passage which describes what this process looks like is as follows: "*...I say, therefore, and testify in the Lord, that you should no longer walk as the rest of the Gentiles [unbelieving people] 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) Putting off the old nature and putting on the Spirit-led nature of God is a key part of the Christian walk of faith. If we are Bible readers as Jesus commanded us to be, we will come to know there are many things we formerly practiced which we must now put off or repent of (turn away from and stop doing). We give all such things over to the Lord so He can cleanse us and free us from their damaging temptations and effects. But if we refuse to do this with regard to certain habits or lifestyles which we do not really want to let go of, there will come a time when we are forced to battle against a spiritual stronghold in that area.

What is a stronghold? A stronghold begins as a small place of disobedience in the heart. It could be something we have not yet recognized is actually a distracting or damaging issue between us and the Lord. It could also be an open or

blatant sin which we have managed to rationalize or justify as being acceptable to God even though it is not. Whatever the case, if we have an area of our walk in which God has not really been permitted to cleanse us or even govern us according to His Word, it will become like a spiritual callous; a hardening place in the heart which grows increasingly resistant to God's refining touch. This place of disobedience creates a breach in our faith and by it we are made spiritually vulnerable. Whatever we withhold from God's rightful authority is unprotected by Him as well, and if not rectified, it will eventually become an open playing field for various powers and principalities in the demonic realm to conduct business of their own.

Not all strongholds are visible. The average Christian can carry within the heart several places which are not yet surrendered to the Lord. We may think we gave Him our all when we were first born again, but it can take years of walking by faith to truly learn how to submit to God on every issue – every fleshly habit, ungodly tendency, or seemingly gray area of the Christian life with which we might find ourselves wrestling. So, just like the prodigal son spoken of in Luke 15:11-24, many believers receive the wonderful gifts of grace, faith, forgiveness, and mercy that our generous Father offers us, but we proceed to live under our own prodigal rule in various areas of our lives. “...*Father, give me the portion of goods that falls to me.*’ So, he divided to them his livelihood. And not many days after, the younger son gathered all together, journeyed to a far country, and there wasted his possessions with prodigal living.” (Luke 15:12,13) We are wired to think we know what's best for us even when it tests or conflicts with God's instructions or spiritual promptings. While our patient Father gives us the free will to pursue our own way, in the end we will find out

we would have been far better off submitting to His authority in the first place. Strongholds do not always present themselves as an evil or wicked thing in and of themselves. The matter is always about our attitude. We might be involved with something that is actually healthy or worthwhile at the outset. But if we reach a point where it owns too much of our passion, energy, and focus, we have a spiritual problem. An innocent gym habit or exercise routine can morph into an unholy obsession distracting us from our spiritual focuses and time with the Lord, His Word, and the ministries He has made ready for us. Or we may have a stronghold related to certain family members or loved ones in the sense that we excessively dote on them, fret over them, solve all their problems, or spend all our time consumed with concerns and anxieties over their wellbeing until we utterly lack the peace of the Lord when it comes to this area of our lives. It does not matter what the claim on our hearts is, if it keeps us from a trusting, freeing surrender to God and His Word, or from a right focus on His purposes in our lives, the devil can sweep in and exploit that area of self-governance.

The red flag to look for is a very easy one to spot. If we find that we are consistently not willing to directly obey the Lord's expressly written instructions, or if we continually fail to heed God's Spirit-led promptings regarding a tendency, vice, relationship, pursuit, or habit we know we ought to walk away from, it is going to become a stronghold and an obstacle standing between us and the Lord's work in our lives and hearts. If we are always having to inwardly justify or rationalize a choice or behavior because we know it does not align with God's Word or highest will for us, does not honor Him, does not draw us closer to Him, does not benefit our walk or serve His purposes, we undoubtedly have a stronghold. The Bible tells us our freedom in Christ must

not lead us to think we can engage in anything which has an unhealthy power or mastery over us. *“All things are lawful for me, but all things are not helpful. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any.”* (1st Corinthians 6:12) We are taught throughout the New Testament our old ways must be nailed to the cross. *“And those who are Christ’s have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.”* (Galatians 5:24) Jesus died not only to offer us eternal life but to also give us spiritual freedom and the very life of Almighty God dwelling within us. He came to set us free from our anxiety-stricken self-rule, our insatiable carnal pursuits, our chronic dissatisfactions, and our enslavement to the things which are bound to destroy us. How does He accomplish this freedom for us? He places the redeemed soul into His own service. Faith must lead us to switch masters, for this is what repentance is and does. When we become the Lord’s redeemed possession, we no longer need to be desperate slaves of our own sin nature. We have completely changed our master by changing whom we serve. Christians have been given the heavenly power to reject and overcome not only the flesh but the ongoing assaults of the world and the devil as well. *“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.”* (1st John 4:4)

We really are able to be free in Christ. We are not free to sin our faces off, rather, we are free to dismount from the thrones of self-rule to which we have been chained. Most Christians know these underlying truths of faith and mostly, they put away from themselves everything listed as sin in the Bible. Certainly, that is what I felt I had done upon coming to faith in Jesus over 25 years ago. Filthy and corrupt language immediately departed from the habit of my thoughts and speech when I became born again. Music and

movies of the same ilk were also quickly cast aside as I became increasingly offended by or spiritually sensitive to anything which did not glorify the Lord or provide an appropriate witness to His nature. I understood drunkenness, sexual immorality, lying, hating, thievery, murder, and the like, were things I could not and would not be involved with. It all seemed pretty black and white at the time. But I would learn much later on that the matter of defeating or casting off my more inward, personal rebellions was not as simple as I had once thought.

There is a list given to us in the Bible about specific behaviors which must no longer be practiced by those who are born again. *“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.”* (1st Corinthians 6:9-11) Clearly, those who practice these unrighteous activities as a routine pattern of life are not going to inherit His kingdom. This is a straightforward and serious statement of fact. If we are routinely engaging in sexual experiences outside the bonds of biblical marriage, we are in spiritual peril. If we are regularly making underhanded business deals which extort or deceive people or even the government, we are in spiritual peril. If we live in a constant state of discontent and covetousness, always complaining about or desiring what others have, we are in spiritual peril. If we are often indulging in casual revelry to the point of becoming inebriated or progressively mastered by a habitual desire for mind-altering substances, we are in spiritual peril. Those

who are born again have a whole new life to live, and therefore, our former godless ways must be put off and cast aside. If we do not see ourselves doing this, we have some serious self-examination to do. *“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.”* (2nd Corinthians 13:5) There is a much deeper caution given than many of us realize regarding our lifestyles and routine choices as Christians. The Lord does not simply command believers to refrain from adultery, getting drunk, stealing, etc.. He instructs us to pursue a wiser path in life which does not even go anywhere near such temptations. But Western culture has so strongly influenced American believers that some of us are far too prone to testing how close we can walk along the edges of God’s high standards without falling over the cliff of compromise. We tread the narrow path of Christ but rather than keeping to the safest, middle part of the road, we skirt its outer borders, continually drawn to peek over the precipice in order to ‘lightly’ experience the things of the world which we think we might be missing out on. We fail to consider how great a fall it would be if we were to unintentionally step too far!

Maybe we do not commit adultery, but we dress immodestly and covet the flattery, flirtatious conversation, and admiring attention of acquaintances or coworkers of the opposite sex. Perhaps we don’t seek to get drunk, but we like to drink socially and partake a little too much and a little too often. We don’t commit murder, but we are addicted to watching graphic violence played out on television or in movies or video games. Maybe we don’t lie or steal, yet we cheat on our taxes and use the company credit card for personal expenses. The list of examples could go on and on. The holy integrity and character of God is not found in any

attitude which skirts the edges of what is right and flirts with the farthest sides of Christ's narrow path. These are places where we have allowed ourselves to foster a divided heart, secretly tempting ourselves with hints of what is forbidden rather than being zealously sold out to God and a purposeful obedience to His commands. We rationalize, justify, and approve of what we are doing because in our own eyes we don't feel we are really causing any harm or actively committing an outright sin. But friends, this is no different than what the Lord tells us about Israel in the Old Testament when they had no ruler, no true king, other than the desires of their own hearts. *"In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes."* (Judges 17:6) When we allow compromise and compulsion to creep into our walk of faith on any issue, we are no longer being ruled by God on that issue. We have chosen instead to sit on a private throne and reign according to our own understanding. This choice puts a distance between us and the Lord, and causes damage to the walls of faith surrounding the city of our soul.

"There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death...the backslider in heart will be filled with his own ways, but a good man will be satisfied from above." (Proverbs 14:12-14) As the Proverbs verse declares, we are not to be filled with our own ways but satisfied by the ways of God in heaven above. When we make compromises with the world or with our flesh, we start the tiniest of steps toward the edge of that dreadful, forbidden cliff. Many will stumble and fall, backsliding down the steep terrain into a valley of spiritual darkness and inevitable sin. Brothers and sisters, may we prayerfully seek to stay in the middle of our narrow paths, keeping ourselves settled in the love of God. *"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. And on some have compassion, making a distinction; but others save with fear, pulling them out of the fire, hating even the garment defiled by the flesh.” (Jude 1:20-23) Please, avoid the edges. The view may be tempting but the consequences of walking too closely are worse than you might think. And as the verse above advises, when we see any brother or sister in Christ walking much too near the edges of God’s high and narrow path, let’s strive to pull them back, for fear of them falling into the fires below, defiling their salvation garments.

We are free in Christ to do “all things” (obviously, this does not include what God calls sin) but not all things are beneficial to us. Moreover, we must be very cautious about not allowing anything to master us. *“All things are lawful for me, but all things are not helpful. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any.”* (NKJV) *“All things are permitted for me, but not all things are of benefit. All things are permitted for me, but I will not be mastered by anything.”* (NASB) This verse is found in 1st Corinthians 6:12. I included two translations because both of them cover the same idea in equally accurate terms. Too many of us unknowingly stunt our spiritual growth with God by hanging on to familiar pleasures or carnal pastimes which are far more important to us than we realize. We have given them places of preeminence in various, unlit throne rooms of our hearts. May we purposefully strip away from our lives anything we are being increasingly mastered by, cannot imagine giving up for the Lord, or which holds a place of precedence over loving and serving God alone. *“No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will*

be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon.” (Luke 16:13) (Matthew 6:24)

Some of us have a spiritual stronghold rooted in financial security and materialism. Listen, money or wealth itself is amoral. It has no morality of its own. It is only in how we view it or treat it that we can stumble into immorality or create a stronghold in our hearts. *“But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and harmful lusts which drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness and pierced themselves through with many sorrows.”*(1st Timothy 6:9,10) The Bible tells us if we love or trust in our worldly provisions more than we love and lean on the One who provides us with them, we are idolatrous and in spiritual rebellion. Let us instead give God the rule of our finances – how we use them and in what our attitude is toward them. May we cultivate a prayer life that credits the Lord with all we have been given, and may we maintain the commitment to trust Him and love Him whether we remain financially blessed or fall into financial ruin. Abraham was a wealthy man of God, as was Job. David became both wealthy and powerful as Israel’s favored king. Joseph of Arimathea was a wealthy believer. All such men were used by God to accomplish heaven’s purposes, so we know wealth is not evil. But we are instructed to be good stewards of what the Lord has provided us in this life and we are directed to use His blessings wisely. The snare is found in how tightly we hold onto or depend upon our wealth or material goods, or in the pitfalls of attributing riches and status to our own skills, talents, and giftedness rather than being thankful to God for His lavish provision. We must hold the finer things of this world very loosely and with deep humility, or they will begin to hold us in their slavish grip and become a spiritual

stronghold standing between us and the Lord we claim to serve. Do we own ‘our stuff’ or does ‘our stuff’ own us?

Another stronghold which is often ignored in Christian circles is the enslaving, soul-crushing, flesh-driven addiction we can have to food. People need food to survive, so there is no command given which tells us we cannot or should not eat meals with regularity or enjoy food with thanksgiving. But some of us live with a terrible bondage to food and dysfunctional eating habits. The Lord approaches the matter of gluttony in several passages such as this one: *“Hear, my son, and be wise; and guide your heart in the way. Do not mix with winebibbers, Or with gluttonous eaters of meat; for the drunkard and the glutton will come to poverty, and drowsiness will clothe a man with rags.”* (Proverbs 23:19-21) A person is stumbled by food when the temporal satisfaction of eating has become more important to them than God, health, appearance, reputation, spouse, and family. An unwholesome, fleshly preoccupation is at the heart of the issue and it is a bondage which is very difficult to escape. Gluttony leads to an untimely death by the damage it inflicts on the body, the soul, and the spirit – not to mention the detrimental effects it can have on one’s marital, familial, or social life the deeper the affliction grows. *“Set a guard, O LORD, over my mouth; Keep watch over the door of my lips. Do not incline my heart to any evil thing, to practice wicked works with men who work iniquity; and do not let me eat of their delicacies.”* (Psalm 141:3,4) Esau placed his fleshly craving for food on a higher level of importance than his spiritual blessings and birthright from God. In doing so, God did not favor him. *“And Esau said to Jacob, ‘Please feed me with that same red stew, for I am weary.’ Therefore his name was called Edom. But Jacob said, ‘Sell me your birthright as of this day.’ And Esau said, ‘Look, I am about to die; so what is this birthright to me?’ Then Jacob said, ‘Swear to me as*

of this day.’ So he swore to him and sold his birthright to Jacob. And Jacob gave Esau bread and stew of lentils; then he ate and drank, arose, and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright.” (Genesis 25:30-34) Some of us might not be overeaters, yet we focus a great deal of time, money, and energy enjoying rich, gourmet delicacies and chasing after all the pleasures of fine dining experiences. Food becomes an idol when an unbalanced, flesh-driven lust for it evolves into such a fascination we have made it a primary focus of daily living.

Those of us who follow Jesus Christ simply cannot allow ourselves to fall in with this world’s craven appetites. *“When you sit down to eat with a ruler, consider carefully what is before you; and put a knife to your throat if you are a man given to appetite. Do not desire his delicacies, for they are deceptive food.” (Proverbs 23:1-3) The lesson being taught in this passage is about placing our spiritual needs above the temporal desires of the flesh. This premise is why fasting is such a valuable and godly practice when done with the right mindset. Fasting puts our focus on that which is spiritual while it puts to death the demands of the flesh at the same time. We are warned against becoming those whose ‘god is their belly’. “For many walk, of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping, that they are the enemies of the cross of Christ: whose end is destruction, whose god is their belly, and whose glory is in their shame—who set their mind on earthly things.” (Philippians 3:18,19) Furthermore, the Bible tells us to make no provision for the flesh. “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 13:13,14) Food is to be consumed, but may the taste for it never consume us. It is better to be like Daniel and his friends while captive in*

Babylon, refusing to be enamored with the king's delicacies. *"But Daniel purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself with the portion of the king's delicacies, nor with the wine which he drank; therefore he requested of the chief of the eunuchs that he might not defile himself... 'Please test your servants for ten days, and let them give us vegetables to eat and water to drink. Then let our appearance be examined before you, and the appearance of the young men who eat the portion of the king's delicacies; and as you see fit, so deal with your servants.' (Daniel 1:8, 13-16) We must eat to live, not live to eat. There is nothing wrong with enjoying our God-given provisions with thanksgiving; but may we never be enslaved by a lust for those provisions.*

Finally, since we are discussing common spiritual strongholds, let's talk about one of the most pervasive, socially approved areas of bondage people can have today; the misuse of alcohol. Just like food and money, alcohol is a morally neutral substance. Sin is only found in how we deal with it. Certainly, wine is shown throughout Scripture as being an element of blessing and an evidence of prosperity. Yet it is also often warned about because overindulgence can easily cause us to travel down a slippery slope of physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual damage. We are not sinning if we partake of alcohol mindfully when occasion warrants. However, let us remember the statement given to the Corinthian church by the apostle Paul. *"All things are permitted for me, but not all things are of benefit. All things are permitted for me, but I will not be mastered by anything."*

(1st Corinthians 6:12 NASB) Alcohol is permitted. It is not necessarily beneficial. More importantly, we are not to be mastered by it, whether by intoxication or by addiction. So when drinking becomes too routine, too expected, too needed, or the only way we know how to relax and have fun; we tread dangerous waters. Its mood enhancing pleasures can covertly ensnare us. It is difficult to say at what point the rule of the spirit is given over to the power of a substance that alters the state of our mind and emotions because people are affected differently depending on what was eaten that day, the state of their emotions, and the overall condition of health. Caution is advised in any case. It is sufficient for the believer to know if we overindulge in alcohol by frequency or by amount, we are giving the rule of our spirits over to powers not of God.

The demonic realm gains access to anyone whose senses are dulled or altered from a sober and alert state of mind. A breach in the walls of our soul is created when we are compromised in such a way. *“Whoever has no rule over his own spirit, is like a city broken down, without walls.”* (Proverbs 25:28) We become a city broken down any time we allow our normal mental, spiritual, physical, or emotional capacities to be overridden by a foreign substance. I find it interesting that the old-fashioned term for alcohol is ‘spirits’. Liquor stores and aging neighborhood bars across this nation still display a flickering neon sign proclaiming, “Spirits Sold Here”. Why was this archaic term used for alcohol? Former generations viewed alcohol as being a substance which caused a completely unnatural or different spirit to take over one’s thoughts, emotions, behavior, and speech. Truly, when we are intoxicated or impaired by any mind and mood altering substance, our spirit is no longer in control and neither is the Holy Spirit. The toxins flowing through our system spiritually incapacitate us, allowing the presence of

any lurking entity to sweep in and influence, torment, oppress, or even control us. Make no mistake, once such a spirit has visited us in such a way it will stick around and entice us to allow it to happen again and again. When entertained too often, the demons we draw forth become a constant fixture of our existence, unseen by the naked eye but highly active in the spiritual realm. They mess with our thoughts, urges, emotions, attitude, conduct, and even sleep.

Some Christians do not believe the demonic realm is as influential or active today as it was in biblical times. But our willful disregard of such things is dangerous and we would do well to increase our knowledge and understanding of the issue in order to avoid the hazards of so-called 'blissful ignorance'. Of course demons are active today, no less than they were in biblical eras. Never forget, they function in a dimension outside of time itself, so for us to think they no longer afflict people in the powerful manners portrayed on the pages of Scripture is nonsense. Time does not matter to them and neither do eras. Demons are also very legally observant creatures and they fully understand their place and rights within the parameters of the spiritual laws God has established. **They know they cannot claim what has not been openly given away.** The deed to earth did not find its way into Satan's hands until Adam and Eve handed it over in their rebellious choice to disobey the Lord. In the same way, the demonic realm cannot claim any stronghold in the life of a Christian unless that person has chosen to disobey God. I will say it again, every place in the heart where we have not yet climbed down and given God His rightful place of authority, we have a potential exposure to a demonic stronghold. From hell's perspective, anything not submitted to the Lord's rule is a vacant or unsupervised piece of property onto which they can freely trespass. They cannot possess the Christian, but they can certainly torment,

oppress, and wreak havoc through his or her disobedience. Friends, there are only two camps – heaven’s army and hell’s hordes. We play dangerous games when we dabble in the devil’s tents concerning any questionable vice or habit we can’t imagine giving up for His glory and His righteous governance. Anything God is not ruling in our lives the devil surely is and that is where many kinds of spiritual attacks and oppression come into play in the life of a believer.

May we assess ourselves carefully and commit all our ways to the Lord in faith. *“Search me, O God, and know my heart; Try me, and know my anxieties; And see if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting”*. (Psalm 139:23,24) Every enslaving habit, every wandering tendency, and every periodic desire to look longingly back at our old lives or delve into the familiar or comfortable ways of the unbelieving world like Lot’s wife did is a perilous snare. May we give these things to God for cleansing and transformation before they bring our journey of faith to a standstill, causing us to become a veritable pillar of salt, unable to move forward. *“So He [God] overthrew those cities, all the plain, all the inhabitants of the cities, and what grew on the ground. But his wife looked back behind him, and she became a pillar of salt.”* (Genesis 19:25,26) Let us present ourselves gratefully to God as those He has made alive from the dead to be instruments of righteousness in wholehearted service to Him and Him alone. Our old ways must die on the cross of Christ so we can live with Him, in Him, and for Him. In this is true freedom – freedom from the world, freedom from the flesh, and freedom from the strongholds of the devil and all his wiles.



Iron Bars on the Mount of Olives
Jerusalem, Israel 2013

Stronghold

*The flesh holds strong
And its holding you wrong
Any holding but God's is a snare*

*In dividing the heart
It tears you apart
From the One whose Name you now bear*

*Let the Lord set you free
He says, "Surrender to Me"
Just yield to His holier ways*

*Every stronghold will fold
Every claim on your soul
Will by your obedience fade*

*We cannot proclaim
All His glorious praise
If rebellion is flying its flag*

*Get rid of resistance
And carnal insistence
So hell cannot lay its own claim*

*The only Stronghold to keep
Is with the Shepherd of sheep
In His pastures so green let's remain*

Chapter 8

It is Good for Me that I was Afflicted

It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I may learn your statutes. (Psalm 119 :71)

I have my own story of a spiritual stronghold and it is the event from which this entire book was born. It occurred over a long and difficult season that increasingly worsened until I finally got clarity and understanding from the Lord about a problem He had been working to correct in my walk for an extended period of time. I literally had to be torn down in order to be built back up stronger in faith and more in line with His ways. Ecclesiastes contains a passage that brings me much comfort and perspective regarding what I underwent. It tells us we have a sovereign Lord who has ordained a time and a season for every purpose of His under heaven – be they times of bounty, peace, and joy; or pain, battle, and sorrow. *“To everything there is a season, a time for every purpose under heaven. A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck what is planted; a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones; A time to embrace,*

and a time to refrain from embracing; a time to gain, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to throw away; a time to tear, and a time to sew; A time to keep silence, and a time to speak; a time to love, and a time to hate; a time of war, and a time of peace.” (Ecclesiastes 3:1-8) When we recognize God uses all seasons of life for our good and for His higher purposes, we can learn to hold our peace with the darker times as they come and go, setting ourselves to simply be aligned with His will and rest in His goodness during whatever He allows to transpire. The sooner we can accept each season of our lives as being divinely appointed by God, the more the Lord can do with us and for us at every stage of our earthly journeys. Kicking against our circumstances never achieves the results God desires to grow within us, and quarreling with Him about where we are at in life accomplishes nothing worthwhile. So, we must set our minds and hearts to trust in the Lord no matter what comes our way and seek to learn what He is teaching us through every situation.

This mindset is reflected over and over in Scripture. It is the underlying truth found in the Psalms as God tells us to *“Be still, and know that I AM God...”* (Psalm 46:10). The command to ‘be still’ translates as ‘cease striving’ in the original manuscript language. We are told to cease striving against our circumstances because when we do, we become guilty of striving against God’s own sovereign hand. I am slowly but surely learning to appreciate and be more accepting of the challenges and often confusing trials of life which in the past I would naturally run from, kick against, or abhor with every ounce of my being. The aforementioned Ecclesiastes verse declares there is a God-given necessity and a divinely-ordained value to be found even in the dreaded, terrible times we experience; times during which

God has determined we must be torn down for a while instead of being built up. He has a higher and blessed purpose for our seasons of casting aside instead of gathering, losing instead of gaining, and throwing away what we would prefer to hold on to so tightly. When we find ourselves stripped of certain earthly pleasures, comforts, routines, and dependable assets to which we are accustomed, can we still stand strong in the Lord and patiently endure His plans for us? For this is the whole truth of faith; the answer of persevering love and trust from a heart knit to God no matter what kind of burdens, trials, or losses He allows in our lives.

There was a season in my life during which a deceptive and sinister invasion was occurring and I was completely unaware of it. Today, I am able to attest the Lord has used every single moment of those confusing, dark, and spiritually painful times for His purposes and my greater good. While I am deeply saddened by how blind I was to the reasons why spiritual assaults had become a deeply engrained part of my life, I am forever grateful for God's faithfulness and the enlightening revelations He has given to me through it all. It is terribly humbling to realize I had a world-influenced, flesh-driven, stubbornly-held throne of self-rule which led to a hidden spiritual battle being waged far longer than it should have in my soul. I did not have any intentions of writing these personal events down for anyone to read. However, I woke up one night with my mind penning the words of this testimony without knowing why or what put it on my heart. As the morning light began shining through the bedroom window, my thoughts became more coherent and it was then I remembered the Lord often speaks to me at night in this very manner. It is from such nocturnal experiences several of my poems and books have been born. Authenticity is an incredibly important facet of

the Christian walk if we are hoping to have any kind influence upon others or be of value to those in our personal circles. Therefore, when God put it on my heart to share this unflattering trial in order to benefit and help others, I knew I needed to obey Him. And so, my story begins.

As previous chapters have discussed in great detail, there are many troubles which spring from unwittingly living too much like the world and not fully surrendering all of ourselves to the rule of our Creator and Savior. Always, we will discover there is a cost. These seemingly insignificant thrones on which we sit might look like a ‘normal’ lifestyle or a ‘harmless routine’, but underneath, they are creating doorways to spiritual bondage because they are rooted in inner rebellion and a thinly disguised disobedience to God’s promptings or even the clear instructions of His Word. We might think we are serving the Lord faithfully, but the reality is some of our pursuits and focuses do not glorify God at all. The longer we hold on to them and justify our need of them, the more they desensitize us, captivate us, and open us up to the risk of a demonic stronghold. This is exactly what the process I am about to share looked like for me. The battlefield on which I found myself fighting concerned a habit which was such an established part of my day I rarely gave it a moment’s thought, and it was simply that I enjoyed a nightly cocktail hour as a precursor to dinner. I am not an alcoholic and I did not practice drunkenness. The spiritual quandary in which I found myself was not so much about alcohol as it was about a prolonged disobedience toward God with regard to a flesh-driven lifestyle I was practicing. The simple fact is that He was moving me to make a change with regard to my alcohol habit and because it was inconvenient to me, I rejected that change for a long time. From hindsight’s perspective I now know the Lord was

patiently directing me to cast aside something He no longer wanted me involved with, and it was for His glory and for my own higher good. But because I was more comfortable in continuing to do things the way I had always done them, I ended up having to learning a very costly lesson about personal surrender and the need for swift and faithful obedience to the One I profess to serve. Thankfully, God finally succeeded in making it crystal clear He has called me to walk very differently than others do with regard to this particular facet of life. But for a time, I remained unwilling to obey His convictions and sought instead to lean on my own understanding. This terrible error led to a series of events which He used to break me down and completely redirect my path according to His will.

So let's talk about what happened. We all know an evening adult beverage or two before or during dinner is a very typical activity in many a household today, both secular and Christian. I have always appreciated the taste of alcohol and felt benefited by its relaxing effects, both before I was born again as well as afterward. I knew I was not sinning in my casual indulgence according to the Bible's instructions regarding drunkenness, so I had no worries about partaking of it as a Christian. However, unbeknownst to me, as the years rolled on and began folding into decades, this regular aspect of my day was wrapping its insidious fingers around my heart and dividing me spiritually in ways I had not understood could happen. I am infinitely thankful to the Lord for showing me the perilous situation I was in, and I remain amazed at the way He worked to reveal and remove from me something He knew was slowly damaging my health, hindering my witness, compromising my walk, and stunting my relationship with Him. I can now look at the whole situation in the rear-view mirror as a wiser, stronger, and

more equipped Christian. Yes, I am even deeply grateful for the extremely difficult seasons He had to allow, because He used them to direct my path aright, drawing me closer to Him than ever before.

The Lord had to show me there are certain things others may be allowed to do, but for His own reasons, He has decreed that I cannot. I don't have any explanation for why. All I know is He has spoken and I must obey. As you will find out on the next several pages, the Holy Spirit was leading me to walk differently with regard to this issue for a very long time, and unfortunately, it took me several years to finally heed His voice. While many aspects of biblical faith are common to all, there are individual journeys. Some people may travel in a specific way with the Lord's blessings while others are forbidden from taking those same roads. I cannot and will not judge anyone for enjoying something God has had to remove from me. We are all created differently and God has placed unique callings on each of our lives. The Lord continually works His will *in* us and *through* us according to His timing, His ways, and His purposes. Trials such as what I am about to describe are unique to the individual, and therefore, I cannot lump all people into some kind of broadly sweeping category of 'mandatory abstinence' simply because my case fits it with regard to alcohol. The only thing I can do is share the uncomfortable tale of how I unknowingly let far too much of the world's ways into my life, and make known the consequences I suffered as a result of not heeding the Lord's promptings as swiftly as I should have. I will leave it between the reader and the Lord as to how my testimony is received.

As a backdrop, it is necessary to point out that I grew up not knowing the Lord personally and having never opened a Bible. I was raised mostly as a dairy farmer's daughter living in the country thirty minutes from the nearest town. The primary exposure to God I had as a child was in learning how to say grace before a meal or in reciting a bedtime prayer at night. My mom taught us about the nativity at Christmas and brought us to a vacation Bible school a few different summers when she was able. But these few things were all I really knew about Christianity growing up, aside from a couple of rare church service attendances as a teenager when my father became friends with a presbyterian pastor for a season. As a teen who did not personally know the Lord, I became involved with the usual godless and secular activities any teenager and young adult would be during the 1980s, with a strong focus on partying, dating, and casual sex. The idea that alcohol was a great way to relax became very embedded into my mindset.

After I graduated college, I ventured into a secular marriage, had two beautiful children, and due to a series of circumstances unrelated to this story, I ended up a divorced, single mother of a toddler and an infant by the age of twenty-nine. It was at this time that I really began seeking God. When I started dating Todd – the man who would become my second husband – by God's strong hand and loving grace we both felt led to begin attending a small church outside of town where we learned to read the Bible together. In suffering through the destructive failures of our first marriages, the Lord was really moving us to seek truth, meaning, purpose, and a deeper understanding of life. Eventually, the Holy Spirit convicted our hearts and brought us to a soul-saving faith in Jesus and the cross as being the only atonement for our sins. We immediately repented from many of the sinful ways in which we had been living and

became zealous followers of Jesus Christ, walking with Him as Lord and Savior from that point forward. We also got married, forming a large, blended family with my two daughters and his son and daughter. Todd and I very quickly became strong advocates of Bible study, prayer, worship, church, and just generally walking out an active life of biblical faith while enjoying fellowship within the body of Christ. We grew to love hosting out-of-state pastors, worship leaders, and believers in our home during annual Bible conferences held at our church. Conversely, we often drove or flew to other Christian conferences across the country which were held by those same teachers and pastors with whom we grew especially close to while hosting them. Calvary Satellite Radio was our favorite Bible teaching radio station, and we devoted much of our time absorbing the endless stream of wonderful Bible studies conducted on it every half hour, every single day, by a wide variety of pastors throughout the nation.

Our faith, knowledge, and understanding of Scripture flourished as we soaked up each teaching and attended every God-honoring event we feasibly could. We really had it all; a wonderful, faith-filled, purposeful life, four beautiful children between the two of us, and a comfortable lifestyle thanks to God's gracious and generous provision through my husband's boiler sales company. We were softball parents, soccer parents, and honor roll parents. My husband was often a coach for our children's sports teams. Meanwhile, I began feeling led to write down a variety of my own Bible teachings to share with others as the need would arise. Despite the busyness and chaos of our large family, we were somehow always able to pull off both romantic getaways and fun-filled family vacations every year. We were truly so incredibly blessed, both materially and spiritually, to say the least. And so, life rolled along in this way for many seasons.

About ten years into our marriage and corresponding journeys of faith, I began experiencing a strange, occasional affliction which grew into a proverbial ‘thorn in the flesh’ with no solution in sight. I had always been a vivid nighttime dreamer, but frightening, demonic nightmares began to overwhelm my sleep with disturbing regularity and repetitiveness. These invasive dreams resulted in me awakening abruptly with terrible, throbbing headaches and tachycardia (an intensely high heart rate). Some nights I would be tormented in this manner up to five or six separate times, disrupting any chance of quality sleep. I had weeks where the nightmarish disturbances were almost constant and other weeks when it would occur only a few times. The dreams were demonic in the sense that there was always an intensely wicked, neck-prickling, evil presence manifesting itself in various forms, be it as a shadow on a window ledge, a hellish-looking creature skulking about the room, or a deceptive being which would at first appear to be someone I knew but suddenly exhibited ghoulish features as it grinned mockingly and allowed me to see it for what it really was. In the dreams I was tormented both physically and mentally by these devils, yet somehow retained an awareness I was dreaming, so I knew the only solution was to wake up. My heat-of-the-moment strategy during these assaults involved attempts to command the demons to “depart from me in Jesus’ Name” while I was still in the dream, or else I would pray to God to help me wake up. If I could successfully awaken, I would get out of bed and make my way to the bathroom in order to speak out loud in prayer without waking up my husband, to audibly command the devils to leave my dreams, my bedroom, and my home, all in the “Name and Authority of Jesus Christ”, before making my way back to bed.

Sometimes these methods seemed to work. Other times they did not. The diabolical entities would often take away my ability to speak in the dreams, so when I tried to proclaim the Lord's name nothing came out. Or they would cause me to be unable to awaken. I would be fooled into thinking I woke up, only to roll over and realize one of them was lying next to me pretending to be my husband. I had to repeatedly pray in my mind for God to help me wake up for real. Always, a feeling of overwhelming evil pervaded these dreams, distinguishing them from any other type of bad dream I ever had. The wicked spirits' objective seemed centered on taunting me with implications concerning my eternal status. They acted and spoke as though they had some kind of claim on my soul even though I repetitively insisted Jesus Christ was my Savior – when I was allowed to actually speak.

The nighttime afflictions plagued me regularly enough and long enough that I began feeling unwell due to lack of sleep, so I finally went in for a medical consultation and had both CT and MRI testing done to make sure I was not suffering some sort of brain malady or tumor onset. The only aspect noted by the radiologist and neurologist was calcification along my vertebra at the neck due to arthritis. The headaches were determined to be either caused by the arthritis, a positionally-induced migraine, or perhaps a hormonal problem, since I was entering an early onset state of perimenopause. No medical observations were offered with regard to the nightmares and no solutions were given for the severe nighttime headaches. We purchased a different mattress to help with my sleeping postures, and a few years down the road, I even had my teeth corrected with braces because a dentist informed me I was clenching my teeth in my sleep, likely due to a shift in my bite, so we thought perhaps that was causing the headaches. While these

physical adjustments seemed to decrease the frequency and severity of the nighttime afflictions for a time, I remained prone to the occasional demonic nightmares as well as the racing heart and headaches they brought forth. In the end, I just learned to live with it and moved on with life, adopting the attitude that the Lord's grace was sufficient for me.

It is important to note I was writing more and more when these nightmares began appearing. We had also been running small group Bible studies every weekend in our home for well over a decade by that time, and even found ourselves periodically counseling other believers about marital issues, having studied the subject from a biblical perspective in great depth for ourselves and fully walking out God's precepts in our own marriage with much joy and victory. Additionally, we were in the habit of traveling to Israel almost annually to enjoy Bible study tours with our pastor and fellow church members. Anything that had to do with the Lord, His Word, and the needs of fellow believers; we were pursuing it. I continued to have a burden on my heart to share everything about faith and the Bible I possibly could with people, and since I am an introvert by nature, the manner in which I was led to do this was by writing books. I finally got up the courage to begin publishing, starting with a very basic Christian marriage counseling book geared toward women, called "True Love," and immediately following it with a larger collection of teachings on biblical Christianity called "The Beginning of Wisdom" as well as a book detailing the adventures of our very first Bible study trip to Israel titled, "Sojourn in the Land of My King". More books followed as the Lord inspired them. Meanwhile, I still contended with the nighttime demonic assaults and waking headaches. For me, it had become an expected, routine affliction, especially when releasing a new book or being involved in a particularly important conference or gathering

of Christians. It was during those times we noticed the most significant attacks. We figured I was experiencing spiritual warfare in light of both the writing and our activities in ministry, and thus, we just accepted it as a fact of Christian life. Cocktail hour still held a regular place in our lives. Of course, we never sought to become inebriated, but simply enjoyed alcohol as a calming way to finish the day or as a pleasant complement to good food. Life continued in this manner for many years. So did the demonic dreams.

As yet another decade threatened to flip it's pages, the Lord mysteriously began to draw me to seek Him more deeply. His hand was truly heavy on my heart as I began desiring a closer, more fulfilling relationship with Him. Then, on the heels of a tragic family development that had me shaken to the core; praying intensely and more often than I had ever done before, I was abruptly awakened during the waning hours of the night with a sad, haunting song streaming through my consciousness. There was a distinct melody and detailed words to match, pouring outward from my heart and almost plaintively, toward God. This was a song I had never heard before and it was in the form of a querying prayer; a prayer of heartbreak, sorrow, and yet hope – a prayer that expected an answer and yet, I already knew the answer. I was so struck by the words and melody, I felt I ought to arise and write it down before I forgot it – my memory is deplorable. However, I was also very drowsy in my befuddled state and dawn had not yet broken. So, I returned to the more inviting task of sleeping, telling myself if the song was really an important thing, God would cause me to remember it in the morning. Sure enough, I woke at a more reasonable hour with the sun beaming down through the trees in the backyard, and as I tentatively searched my thoughts, it became apparent I still knew the song – both the words and melody. I then honored what was happening and

shuffled to the office downstairs in order get this unexpected song written into a file on my computer. “Lord, Do You Weep?” was this very first work and it signaled the advent of a creative mass exodus which flowed from my soul, spirit, and fingertips, and continues to this day. Soon after the first song came “Clay to the Potter” which would become the inspiration for the title of the entire collection of poetry I was so mysteriously moved to compile. The process was totally organic. I would only write when a song or poem came to me, but when one did, I feverishly worked it out until it was finished. At times, I would be relaxing or watching the television, and a meaningful word or phrase would pop into my head. I always knew immediately that the word or phrase was the foundation of another poem or song. If the hour was late, I texted the word or phrase to myself so I would not forget it, and then wrote out the poem in the morning. Not all pieces came to me in the same manner. One day, my mother told me of a dream she had in which one statement crystalized in her mind: “Satan seeks to dim the brilliance of God.” From this, a song was quickly birthed. Some of the poetry was fostered by unfortunate events of which I was either an eye witness to or heavily involved in that year. But then there were poems like “Garden of Guilt” which came from a disturbing dream of my own. Whatever the impetus, the results continued to be steadily forthcoming for the duration of what became one of the most amazing, prayerful, spiritual phases of my life. To date, the Lord continues to inspire biblical poetry in my heart. I am beyond grateful for the worshipful state of mind it brings to me.

As God continued to move in this astounding way, He was also leading me to seek His wisdom, discernment, and guidance with a seriousness I had never felt before. I had an intense yearning to really experience His presence more

strongly in my life and this led me to commit myself to more serious prayer routines. I also started to critically ponder all my lifestyle habits, thinking some of them looked an awful lot like the worldly behaviors I should be seeking to avoid. I became more sensitive to certain shows on television which I had previously been able to handle, but we had to stop watching some of them because they were upsetting me. I found myself increasingly avoiding secular gatherings and disliking the presence of carousing tourists whenever we took a vacation. These environments steadily grew more offensive to my spirit even though in the past such things had never bothered me. The most significant shift to note is that I was growing convicted by the evening alcohol routine I had adopted into my lifestyle so long ago. The more I reflected on it, the more it seemed a little too engrained and a little too important to me. Let's be honest, cocktail hour is never just an hour and this convicted me as well. It bothered me to think that I had reached a point where I couldn't imagine eating steak, Italian food, or any kind of nice dinner without a quality glass of red wine to complete the experience. Serving appetizers without adult beverages to accompany them wasn't a thought that ever crossed my mind anymore. I certainly couldn't fathom eating Mexican food without margaritas.

These uncomfortable thoughts slowly and quietly began to chip away at my heart. I felt confused because I knew I was not practicing outright 'revelry' or the intentional drunkenness warned about in Scripture. But what I simply did not understand at the time was that I was hearing God's voice calling me to obey Him and walk differently, regardless of how 'innocent' I perceived my habits and choices to be. The one thing I did do correctly was to bring my concerns before the Lord. I began asking Him to remove

the habit from me if He truly did not want me to be involved with it. The issue became my own private, inner battle. Over and over in my mind I would wage the arguments. On the one hand, enjoying wine or alcohol is not forbidden by God, only drunkenness is, so in this sense, I did not feel I was in open sin. On the other hand, it was also becoming clearer to me that what I called a 'routine' or 'normal' lifestyle habit might actually have become a fleshly bondage, and if so, I wanted to put a stop to it. Flesh-driven enslavements are not something the Lord wants for any of His children and I knew that. Yet, I was also very concerned about practicing a legalistic, 'pharisaical' type of Christianity by committing myself to some kind of unbiblical set of self-prescribed laws and rules – after all, I was 'free in Christ' right? At the same time, I knew I was not to allow anyone or anything to have power over me other than the Lord Himself.

The questions raged back and forth within my mind on a regular basis. Did my habit have power over me? If I was feeling convicted, why didn't I just walk away from it altogether? But wait, maybe the devil was just trying to accuse me and belittle my faith. One can imagine the endless, circling quandary with which my thoughts were wrestling. It felt like I was balanced on the edge of a coin and I truly had no idea on which side to land. Telling no one about my increasing uneasiness, I kept the issue before God in prayer yet continued living according to the familiar habit as I waited for the Lord to make a change in my heart if He willed it. At the time, I did not feel He had given me a clearcut leading because a big part of me felt like I was simply being accused by the enemy with feelings of guilt and condemnation which were not justified. Regardless, I sensed there would be no lasting self-discipline to do anything differently on my own if I wasn't wholly convinced I was

doing anything overtly wrong. And so, I made no intentional changes and determined that God would transform my ways if that was His desire.

Despite this inner battle, I remained passionate and deeply inspired to labor over Christian books which taught on a plethora of other biblical subjects God led me to write about, and biblical poetry continued to flow endlessly from my heart. I was involved with weekly online Bible studies, doing my best to fellowship with other Christian women, and I grew more involved with church and our annual women's Bible conferences. But then a season abruptly arrived in which I began to experience a drastic increase in the demonic nightmare arena. The assaults started happening every single night and they were more intrusive, more violent, and more disturbing than ever before. It was as if the demons had gained power and assertiveness. In my dreams they mockingly insisted I was their property as they imprisoned me in the hellish dreamworld they seemed to own and run. My prayers were weak and ineffective against them, and the resulting loss of sleep took a toll on my health and well-being once again. I endured a particularly harrowing couple of nights when my husband and I were on an out-of-town excursion, and at one point I woke up crying with tears of frustration and weariness. I prayerfully sought the Lord, asking Him what I should do because the attacks were so bad. I was truly at my wits end, but received no answers as I knelt in that hotel room with no relief in sight. When we arrived home, I intently searched my crowded bookcases, looking for anything I could find which taught about spiritual warfare and how to defeat the attacks of the enemy. I came across a thick, promising volume written by Charles Spurgeon, one of my favorite Christian authors, called "Prayer and Spiritual Warfare." Sitting down in a living

room chair, I read with serious and focused intention, committed to learning all I could how to better fight this spiritual battle in which I had found myself. Spurgeon writes a great book. It doesn't seem to matter what aspect of the Christian life he teaches about; he has an amazing grasp of the Word of God. It is clear much of the wisdom and understanding he shares is drawn directly from his own relationship with the Lord and his personal experiences of faith. I have learned so much from his writings as well as from his various counterparts of that era I don't think I would be where I am in my walk without their old-school, sound biblical wisdom and disciplined, experienced, spiritual input.

My biggest takeaway from Spurgeon's book was this: The battle is the Lord's, and only the Lord can victoriously fight it *for me*. When *I* tried to command those evil spirits in my dreams, I failed. When I prayed to God to give *me* victory over the demons, I continued to fail. It wasn't until I learned to give the entire battle to the Lord – for it was His to wage and His assured victory I could pray for, not my own – that I began to experience some relief and calmer nights. I began to pray, “Lord please fight this battle, for I am unable”. I committed myself to God's protection by trusting in His promises and putting the reins of every night into the hands of the One to whom the night actually belongs. *“The day is Yours; the night also is Yours; You have prepared the light and the sun.”* (Psalm 74:16) I also began to understand the Lord Himself was allowing these dreams, so instead of trying to fight and kick and pray against the episodes, I started to ask God for His will to be accomplished through them, for His purposes to unfold in them, and for His hand to bring me through each night safely, regardless of whether it was a night of assaults or a night of peace. I prayed for Him to give me wisdom and understanding as to why such things were happening to me, and I asked for a

solution to be revealed. *“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.”* (James 1:5) I began intentionally walking these biblical truths out with complete faith and trust in God, because I literally had nowhere else to turn.

The first thing I learned from this changed mindset was that God was steadily calling me into a closer and more spiritually aware relationship with Him. It was like He was waking me up from a spiritual slumber and a lack of alertness in my faith. I began to rely on Him more and more for everything; seeking Him in every circumstance and occasion, as well as every single threatening night I faced. I stopped wrestling with fear and started resting in His promises, purposes, and love for me. I would crawl into bed and in my mind, I'd put myself in His arms to fall sleep, refusing to be concerned whether I would have an attack or a night of peaceful rest. I believed whichever it was that He would use it for my best interests, and He'd bring me through it to the light of morning. I was discovering how to embrace the 'peace that surpasses understanding' of which Scripture speaks. *“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) I knew God was refining and purifying my faith somehow. All I had to do was trust the process and have complete faith in the One who was orchestrating it. Months passed and I continued on with life despite the relatively routine nightmares – once again, they had somewhat decreased but were not gone. But as I pressed forward, a new twist on an old thought began crossing my mind. I started to wonder if the reason I was experiencing such chronic demonic oppression had something to do with the alcohol habit I had been questioning for so long. Yet I

still just couldn't connect those dots or really believe that was the case. Then one day I found myself hit with another round of the infamous Covid virus. I very suddenly felt absolutely terrible and was forced to cancel some prearranged dinner plans we had made. By the next morning I tested positive for the virus and was forced to lay low for well over a week, treating myself with a round of Ivermectin and the usual supplements which I knew would help get me through the worst of it. Sure enough, I slowly began to feel mostly symptom-free, although very tired, and there came a point where I was not contagious any longer. There is always such a lingering, heavy fatigue which Covid tends to bring on and I had not yet shaken it. A day came when our neighbor invited us to join him for a dinner out. While I wasn't thrilled about expending the energy, we figured I was well enough to try and get back to 'normal' activities so my husband and I agreed to meet him for a nice meal. What we did not realize at the time was that I was not well enough to do anything of the sort.

We met up with our friend as planned, and once we arrived at the restaurant we each ordered the usual glass of wine as we awaited our meals. Dinner was served and with it a second glass of wine, as was our routine. Everything tasted relatively normal to me even though I was not overly appetized due to the effect Covid always has on my stomach. But I knew I needed to eat and I really wanted to get back into the swing of things, so I ate as much as I could. Eventually, the bill was paid, and we were invited over to our friend's house for a nightcap – again, not an unusual occurrence by any means. Though I was tired, we agreed to stop by and continue socializing for a bit. And now we come to the terrible part of the narrative which sickens my heart to this day. I have no further memory of the rest of the evening. This in and of itself is shocking enough, but I am told I also

acted very much out of character. How could this have happened? A third glass of wine should not have affected me in such a strange manner, especially since the drinks had been well-spaced out over several, chatty hours and combined with a full dinner. But my body must have been very weak – much more debilitated than we had thought at least. I clearly wasn't healthy enough to have gone out for dinner, let alone partake of alcohol. As a result, my mental state became altered in a very severe way and I now had to deal with the consequences; both physically and spiritually. Such consequences there were.

As I laid in bed the next morning discussing the bizarre evening with my husband and apologizing to him for how things played out, my soul became so unbearably heavy. I felt utterly crushed with shame; grief-stricken before God, and the sorrow I felt at having allowed such a thing to happen to me almost swallowed me whole. While I wrestled with my inner grieving I also began to wrestle with physical fallout. About an hour after awakening, my stomach went completely rogue and I began violently vomiting and contending with terrible, painful bowel cramps and raging diarrhea all at the same time. These afflictions continued over and over, and did not begin to ease until twelve long, painful, desperate hours had passed. We became concerned I would end up in the ER if things did not calm down. By this time my urinary tract and kidneys were involved, afflicted with painful irritation and a pulsing, burning flare-up that could not be assuaged. It appeared that on top of incapacitating myself with alcohol in my weakened state, I had either re-triggered or perhaps even contracted a second round of the Covid virus which did not loosen its grip from my body for a very long time. I would not eat normally for almost a year. I began to suffer from chronic IBS and diarrhea – conditions I had never before experienced in my life. The lining of my entire

digestive tract was so inflamed the only kind of foods I could tolerate were lighter fare and consisted of very small portions, such as half of a sandwich, a small cup of soup, or a yogurt. The smell of any kind of alcohol physically repulsed me and the very idea of it spiritually sickened me, so you can bet I was keeping far, far away from it. In fact, the deep shame over having essentially ‘blacked-out’ combined with the severe, far-reaching effects which the experience had wrought on my body and soul brought me to a point of such humiliated, stricken prayer with the Lord, that I asked Him on the very first morning after that pivotal night to make me disciplined enough to go on a complete fast from alcohol for however long He determined was appropriate – even if it was forever. I was so violated by what the mixture of Covid and alcohol had done to my health, my spirit, and my Christian witness, I was finally reduced to surrendering one hundred percent to the Lord for His will on the issue.

At last, I climbed off my private, hidden throne of self-rule and personal choice on the matter of alcohol. The very night that I prayed for God to help me go on a complete fast from alcohol even if it meant I could not have ever it again for the rest of my life (i.e. ‘forever’) I found myself in a new kind of dream. In the dream, I was standing in a room and a demon was skulking around, climbing along a nearby wall. But suddenly I was somehow standing very tall and towering over it and in a loud, firm voice I commanded the demon, “*Leave Forever!*” I specifically recall yelling, “*Forever!*” several times. I also remember feeling rather amazed that I could speak so clearly and so loudly in the dream, with no one stopping me from using my voice like they usually did. Then, the creature I yelled at began slinking away, took one last look back at me, then climbed out a window and was gone. **Really gone.** I woke up with a start and laid quietly in the silent, dark bedroom. I wondered if

the evil spirit really did go away from me ‘forever’. If so, was it because I had just vowed to the Lord I would abstain from all alcohol forever, if need be? Only time would tell.

A routine pattern of life began to unfold as I slowly strove to heal and become more able to participate in the daily and weekly commitments we usually kept. It was a long, tedious road and I honestly did not feel healthy for a very long time as I continued to suffer from a plethora of physical aftereffects. I lost a total of 20 pounds over a period of 6 months and to this day, my appetite for food remains completely changed from what it was. As we began to lightly socialize again, most people seemed to accept my sudden abstinence from alcohol without too much comment, knowing I had been feeling under the weather for a long time. However, as the weeks and months passed, and I continued to refrain, friends and family seemed to grow a bit more puzzled with me. I did not freely offer any additional explanations beyond the usual “my stomach just isn’t up for it” response as I ordered water or club soda in lieu of my formerly usual fare. Now, we must come to the primary reason why I am sharing this uncomfortable testimony. Since the terrible incident and the pivotal dream, there has indeed been a brand new development. The first month of my abstinence came and went, and with its passing, I experienced zero demonic nightmares for the first time in over a decade. Zero. One month turned into two, then three, then four, then five, then six, then twelve. And so it remains to this day. I have not had a single spiritual attack via a tormenting, oppressive, demonic dream since the night I committed to God a complete abstinence from alcohol. Todd and I now believe the years of fiendish assaults must have begun when the *seemingly normal* alcohol habit grew so embedded in my life it became a spiritual stronghold which kept me from obeying God’s inner promptings to let it go. I had been in

bondage in the sense that I had not been willing to simply walk away from the habit when I first felt convicted by it. The more I rationalized and argued the issue within myself, the stronger the attacks were able to grow. The issue caused a chink in the armor of my faith, allowing the demonic realm to increasingly inflict their spiritual assaults and claim my dreams for their own nefarious entertainment. Their endless oppression was made possible by my lack of surrender to God's higher will for me. In a nutshell, I had been disobedient to the Holy Spirit's convictions on the matter and thus, the demonic realm was able to lay a siege on the area of my consciousness which was not being governed by God. What a long, difficult, humbling lesson to undergo, but praise the Lord, He brought me out on the other side with spiritual victory and growth.

King Saul experienced a demonic affliction very similar to mine by way of his own disobedience to God. He rebelled against a direct command of the Lord, taking spoil from a battle when he had been instructed not to do so and justifying it by offering a sacrifice from the endeavor. The result was life-changing for Saul. The message he received from the prophet Samuel is as follows. "*...Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams. For **rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry.** Because you have rejected the word of the LORD, He also has rejected you from being king.*" (1st Samuel 15:22,23) We can see from this pronouncement that willful rebellion carries with it a demonic correlation. The Lord compares disobedience to the sin of witchcraft. Reading further in the book of 1st Samuel we find out one of the consequences Saul had to deal with apart from losing his position as king was in fact, a spiritual affliction. "*But the*

Spirit of the LORD departed from Saul, and a distressing spirit from the LORD troubled him. And Saul's servants said to him, 'Surely, a distressing spirit from God is troubling you.' (1st Samuel 16:14-15) There is a lot to unpack regarding the subject of disobedience and its deeper spiritual consequences. The gravity of the whole matter is portrayed throughout Scripture in varying ways. Notice it was the Lord who allowed the distressing spirit to afflict Saul. When we rebel, God will always seek to utilize the negative consequences of our disobedience as a way to draw us back to Him in repentance. He chastises us from a place of love, for He is faithful even when we are not. How we respond to His chastising determines the trajectory of our relationship with Him. We can either be humbled and corrected, or we can reject the Lord's discipline and attempt to seek other solutions and other sources of wisdom or comfort.

Unfortunately, in his rebelliousness, Saul turned to divination and witchcraft to solve his problems and it did not end well. *"Saul said to his servants, 'Find me a woman who is a medium, that I may go to her and inquire of her.'* And his servants said to him, *'In fact, there is a woman who is a medium at En Dor.'* So Saul disguised himself and put on other clothes, and he went, and two men with him; and they came to the woman by night. And he said, *'Please conduct a seance for me, and bring up for me the one I shall name to you.'* ...And the woman said to Saul, *'I saw a spirit ascending out of the earth.'* So he said to her, *'What is his form?'* And she said, *'An old man is coming up, and he is covered with a mantle.'* And Saul perceived that it was Samuel, and he stooped with his face to the ground and bowed down. Now [the spirit of] Samuel said to Saul, *'Why have you disturbed me by bringing me up?'* And Saul answered, *'I am deeply distressed; for the Philistines make war against me, and God has departed from me and does not answer me anymore,*

neither by prophets nor by dreams. Therefore I have called you, that you may reveal to me what I should do.’ Then Samuel said: ‘So why do you ask me, seeing the LORD has departed from you and has become your enemy? And the LORD has done for Himself as He spoke by me. For the LORD has torn the kingdom out of your hand and given it to your neighbor, David. Because you did not obey the voice of the LORD nor execute His fierce wrath upon Amalek, therefore the LORD has done this thing to you this day. Moreover the LORD will also deliver Israel with you into the hand of the Philistines. And tomorrow you and your sons will be with me... ’” (1st Samuel 28:7-8, 13-19)

May we heed the lesson God has given us through the life of Saul. Prolonged disobedience to the Lord we claim to serve will surely lead us down a terrible path. Until this book, I have mostly held my tongue with regard to revealing my testimony outside the confines of my immediate family. The reasons for my silence are numerous. It’s a difficult decision to share such a personal story. There are a lot of people who will not be ready to receive what I have to say on the subject because we all have places in our lives where we have let far too much of the world into our front doors despite God’s warnings about such compromise. Secondly, I was not certain how to disclose the true extent of what I have wrestled with over the past decade, for I had concerns about what sharing such a testimony would do to my credibility as a Christian author, teacher, and counselor. Thirdly, I needed an adequate amount of time to prove out the correlation between the abstinence from alcohol and the disappearance of the demonic assaults. Finally, an extended period of downtime and headspace was essential for me to process what happened and prayerfully draw biblical conclusions by intently studying Scripture. A season of silence was simply necessary as I waited on the Lord and His guiding hand. He

has been infinitely faithful to me in all of this and as time unfolded, He began revealing a deeper understanding of all He had allowed to transpire.

From this whole experience, God has shown me not only where I took a wrong turn, but also the step-by-step process by which things came to a head for me personally. Just as the title of this book attests, the process concerns the issue of harboring hidden thrones in the heart – areas of self-rule from which some of us still sit as we refuse to let God to take His rightful place and direct us according to His higher ways. Furthermore, I learned that as Christians, we all tread a perilous path when we continually invite the common habits and pastimes of the unsaved world into our homes and personal activities. The more we are desensitized by the world's ceaseless input, the further we are unwittingly drawn into lifestyles which the Lord does not want to see practiced in His flock. He knows far better than we do of the widespread harm some of them can bring into our lives and our faith. The worldly things we are prone to embrace will always appeal to our flesh, not our spirit, and this is where we veer off the narrow path. We so easily begin sowing to the flesh rather than to the Spirit of God on any issue. When we ignore His quiet cautions, His patient promptings, His persistent convictions, and the clear instructions of His Word in any facet of our lives, there will come a point where we are actively withholding a piece of ourselves from His governance. In doing so, we reign from a hidden throne, which is inner rebellion and leads to a form of spiritual disobedience driven by the sin nature. The area of self-will or self-rule becomes a chink in our spiritual armor and a breach in our walls. The devil can then swoop in and work tirelessly at the opening we have made, widening it and increasing his access.

Anything not given to God for His rule is fair game for the demonic realm to stake a claim upon and establish a spiritual stronghold. The inwardly conflicted believer becomes vulnerable to all manner and form of spiritual attacks, torment, and oppression of varying degrees. Christians cannot be possessed by demons, but they can certainly be easy targets or make themselves susceptible to the works of darkness by any willful, ongoing spiritual disobedience or a tightly-held reign over an aspect of life they have not yet surrendered to the Lord. I believe this is what happened to me. I let the ways of the world prosper in my home with regard to a very common, familiar lifestyle which was not open sin by any means, but which slowly gained power over my will the longer I participated in it. My flesh nursed that lifestyle into a deeply rooted habit, and for me, the habit eventually became a spiritual stronghold. This is the pattern of all three enemies of our soul – the world, the flesh, and the devil. The world brings forth the temptation, the flesh rises up and desires to partake of it, and through them both, the devil gains access. It is a very hard lesson to learn. *“But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death.”* (James 1:14,15)

Again, please understand my intention in this testimony has nothing to do with proclaiming an indictment against Christians partaking of alcohol. It is not my place to do so and there is not a single command in Scripture which forbids the average person from enjoying wine or alcohol in an appropriate fashion. God speaks of lush vineyards and the wine they produce as being evidence of prosperity and a blessing in the lives of the faithful. Isaac asked the Lord to give his son wine as part of his fatherly blessing, *“Therefore may God give you of the dew of heaven, of the fatness of the*

earth, and plenty of grain and wine.” (Genesis 27: 28) Psalm 104 praises the Lord for His amazing and bountiful creation and provision, including wine, “He causes the grass to grow for the cattle, and vegetation for the service of man, that he may bring forth food from the earth, and wine that makes glad the heart of man, oil to make his face shine, and bread which strengthens man’s heart.” (Psalm 104:14,15) Solomon advises wine should be given to those who are terminally ill or severely struggling, “Give strong drink to him who is perishing, let him drink and forget his poverty, and remember his misery no more” (Proverbs 31:6,7) Jesus turned water into wine for His first miracle at the wedding in Cana. “Jesus said to them, ‘Fill the waterpots with water.’ And they filled them up to the brim. And He said to them, ‘Draw some out now, and take it to the master of the feast.’ And they took it. When the master of the feast had tasted the water that was made wine, and did not know where it came from (but the servants who had drawn the water knew), the master of the feast called the bridegroom. And he said to him, ‘Every man at the beginning sets out the good wine, and when the guests have well drunk, then the inferior. You have kept the good wine until now!’” (John 2:7-10) The apostle Paul advised young Timothy to drink wine as a tonic for his stomach troubles. “No longer drink only water but use a little wine for your stomach’s sake and your frequent infirmities.” (1st Timothy 5:23)

All that to say, alcohol is not the root issue at hand – it just happens to be the hidden throne from which I had chosen to reign for far too long. The message I am here to convey is a very simple one. We cannot serve two masters. In doing so, we are walking with a divided heart toward God. The most crucial quandary we will ever have as Christians is always going to be one of the heart. What is the true state of our hearts before God? Are we fully surrendered to the fact

that Jesus is not just our Savior but our Lord and King? Are we fully aware that we are not our own to live as we please? We have been “...*bought at a price...*” (1st Corinthians 6:20) and thus we have been both redeemed and consecrated by the blood of Christ into the holy service of the “...*Son of the God Most High...*” (Luke 8:28). In light of this, are we living each day as those who really serve Jesus Christ? Or are we living as a people whose hearts are still set on serving ourselves in as many ways as we can without outright committing sin? Do we acknowledge that as Lord, Jesus Christ has plans for you and I that are often quite different than our own? Are we listening and obeying His voice when He speaks to us? Are we allowing Him to lead us in an unexpected direction when we feel His guiding hand on our shoulders, saying, “...*This is the way, walk in it...*” (Isaiah 30:21) The answers to these questions are where I fell short in my own walk of faith. I had a divided heart. I wanted to serve the Lord but I was also set in serving myself and my own preferred, familiar ways at the same time. I was hearing God’s voice for years but rather than heeding Him I attributed His gentle promptings and quiet warnings to other sources; not understanding it was the Lord Himself trying to reign me in and tell me He has a better, different path for me to walk. Ultimately, I had to be forcibly unseated from my hidden throne and it wasn’t pretty. But I will say this, I am deeply thankful for all of it – the years of torment, the consequences of harboring a hidden sin of disobedience, and the recovery achieved by God’s faithful guidance – these things all taught me in a way nothing else could about the reality of not only my own places of inner rebellion but of the demonic realm’s unceasing activities in the lives of mankind, including Christians.

But I praise the Lord, for I am now wonderfully free of something I did not even know I was imprisoned by! I have been given a whole new level of joy, zeal, and love for

the Lord through this awful trial. God decisively broke the chains of inner tyranny which were fastening me to self-driven ways and causing a divided heart and a compromised walk of faith. He has brought me to an amazing state of spiritual surrender and I now feel closer to Him than I have ever felt before. I really cannot explain in words the freedom in Christ that I now feel. It is the freedom of full surrender. There is no more inward struggling against walking in the Lord's higher ways; just a simple, intentional submission and faithful obedience to Him that feels astonishingly limitless and empowering. Yes, Jesus has set me free and the truth has made me free indeed. *"If you continue in My word, then you are truly My disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." They answered Him, 'We are Abraham's descendants and have never been enslaved to anyone; how is it that You say, 'You will become free'? Jesus answered them, 'Truly, truly I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave of sin. Now the slave does not remain in the house forever; the son does remain forever. So if the Son sets you free, you really will be free.'"* (John 8:31-36 NASB) God dismantled a demonic stronghold I did not even know I had allowed to become established. He is now able to open wide the flow of His Holy Spirit and enable me to walk very differently than I had been previously walking. I am beyond grateful and I can honestly say I thank Jesus for His faithfulness to me every single day! I pray my testimony will be an encouragement and a teaching of biblical wisdom to all who read it. Scripture tells us to examine ourselves as to whether we are really walking in the faith and living fully in the power and will of God, knowing He is within us and ought to be ruling our souls in all things. May I encourage you to ask God to show you any areas you have not yet surrendered to Him, for they will surely one day become a snare and a peril to your faith if you do not hand them over

now. *“Though He was crucified in weakness, yet He lives by the power of God. For we also are weak in Him, but we shall live with Him by the power of God toward you. **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.”* (2nd Corinthians 13:4,5) Whether it is a habit, an addiction, a worldly pastime, a wrong relationship, an ungodly attitude, or a self-driven pursuit that has gained far too much of our time and attention, the things we knowingly or unknowingly cling to and refuse to submit to God are what will eventually stumble us, stunt our spiritual growth, invite temptation and sin into our walk, block the power of His Spirit, divide our hearts, and even open the doors to demonic torment and assault. I have personally experienced this truth and I hope to never do so again.

But to God be all the glory, for He has released me from years of self-caused spiritual assault and demonic warfare. He has graciously unveiled my eyes to see the stark reality of its source and brought me to a much needed repentance. My Lord and Savior has marvelously and miraculously healed the chink in my spiritual armor and closed the breach in my city walls so I can press forward and fight the good fight without compromise or weakness! All I want to do now is endlessly sing His praises from my heart as I give Him the glory He so rightly deserves for the long, strange journey He charted for me; a journey which was entirely focused upon setting me free from my own worthless chains! Thank You, Jesus. Amen.

Liar

*A shadow spoke to me, from a window ledge
Dark and threatening, this is what he said
Your alias, I know, and it is Shame
I'll own your house, I have a claim*

*But I told him he's a liar
And he's slated for the fire
For this house of mine is owned
By God and God alone
A new name I've been given
In heaven He has it written
On a small white stone*

*The night wind seemed to breathe, soft accusation
Speaking in a dream, challenging my salvation
Whispering of my guilt, saying I have holes
Only hell can fill, if I just give up my soul*

*But I say that wind's a liar
And it's slated for the fire
For this soul of mine is owned
By God and God alone
And my guilt has been forgiven
In heaven He has me written
On a small white stone*

*The wicked have one game, just one playing card
The hand is dealt the same, on the table of every heart
Joker points out sin, the jack ever mocks
The evil king lays blame, as chains they try to lock*

*But I know that they are liars
And they're slated for the fire
For this hand of mine is played
By the God Whose Son forgave
And my guilt has been forgiven
In heaven He has me written
On a small white stone*



White stones atop Mount Arbel, Israel 2013



Solitude on the Sea of Galilee

Chapter 9

Taking Back the Ground

“Now no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but painful; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it. Therefore strengthen the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be dislocated, but rather be healed. Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord.”

(Hebrews 12:11-14)

Sometimes we let the enemy own pieces of our soul we didn't even know we had given away. How do we move forward in our faith relationship with God and with practical, daily living once He shows us the tragic error of our ways? Obviously, the first step is repentance. We must completely turn away from the attitude, behavior, relationship, lifestyle, or habit for which the Lord has rebuked and corrected us. When we do this with sincere and honest purpose, trusting God will empower our obedience even if we cannot imagine how, He will surely make a way to enable us and keep us standing firm in our choice. We take back the areas of our lives which have been stealthily claimed by anything or anyone other than the Lord Almighty by drawing near to God with a humble and contrite heart that is ready and entirely

willing to finally obey Him in all things. *“The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and a contrite heart, O God, You will not despise.”* (Psalm 51:17) Be thoroughly cleansed by His Word and by a renewed, steadfast commitment to unquestioning, unhindered obedience to Him. We must be brought to the very low place of the heart where we mourn over what we have allowed and bring it to the foot of God’s throne so He can raise us up out of the trouble we’ve caused ourselves. ***“Therefore submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands you sinners; and purify your hearts you double-minded. Lament and mourn and weep! Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up.”*** (James 4:7-10) May we forever remember ***the only way to resist the devil is to submit to God first.*** There is no victorious resisting of the devil and his antics if we have not first surrendered our hearts and all our ways completely to God and His rule. He will only lift us up when we humble ourselves in His sight, giving Him our all to do with as He sees fit. Every facet of our being must be placed under His rule; every hidden throne, every vice, every ungodly relationship or pastime, every rebellious habit and worldly compromise. *“Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up.”* (James 4:10) May we set the Lord’s banner over our hearts and live before Him in proper fear, awe, and reverence for His love and His truths. *“You have given a banner to those who fear You, that it may be displayed because of the truth.”* (Psalm 60:4)

Oh, Christian, you do well to mark yourself as holy ground; a sacred territory which has been fully consecrated to the Lord for a special service and a higher manner of living. Be sold out to Jesus Christ and refuse to be the victim

of a divided heart on any issue in this very brief life we have been given. Receive the Lord's chastening and corrections with grateful thanksgiving, for His discipline yields the peaceable fruit of His righteousness being worked out into our character. "*No chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but painful; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.*" (Hebrews 12:11) We must have a very clear self-awareness of the disobedience and rebellion we were practicing and make intentional resolution to be completely repentant; settling it forever in our hearts that we will no longer pursue that which the Lord has had to correct us on or take away from us. It is as simple as acknowledging we were in error and then turning away from our sin completely, asking God to train us up in His higher, better, freeing ways. We can lay all expectations upon His holy Spirit's power to block the incessant petitions of our sin nature and keep us from faltering, for we can rightly trust He will respond to our *intentional obedience* in mighty ways. For me, God has simply wiped alcohol off my agenda completely. It does not exist as a choice or option for me to even consider or wrestle with in any capacity. The desire for it is entirely blocked and overwhelmed by my desire to obey God. I have zero interest in inviting back into my life the horrific, demonic dreams which plagued me for so long. I simply do not struggle with any temptations to break my commitment to God on the matter. To be honest, I rarely think about it. The Lord swiftly and incontestably took the whole issue off the table for me the moment I willingly forsook it and gave it to Him to dispose of however He desires.

The Bible tells us in the title verse of this chapter to "*Strengthen the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees...*" (Hebrews 12:12) This admonition gives us a

descriptive picture of our weakened strength and walk of faith resulting from the spiritual compromises that creep into our lives. How do we strengthen those heavy hands, those feeble knees? Just as if we fell down while running a race, we get up, brush ourselves off, cast aside whatever burden tripped us, breathe in deeply the cleansing and renewing power of God's Holy Spirit and Word, and keep on running the race of faith. "... *Let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us,*" (Hebrews 12:1) Stand firm in the heavenly strength of the Lord's corrections. Hold His lessons tightly to your heart. Place your faith in His guidance and press forward with the Lord in the peace of His eternal forgiveness. Leave behind the pain of every failure and throw away the guilt as well, for heartfelt repentance allows God to set our sins completely away from us, as far as the east is to the west. "*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. As a father pities his children, so the LORD pities those who fear Him.*" (Psalm 103:11-13) God has pity on His children when they stumble – if they repent and seek forgiveness.

Faith in Christ is a forward-looking faith. We must press onward toward the prize of the upward call of God. May we never waste precious time and energy looking back or wallowing in misery over what lies behind us. We cannot change the mistakes we have already made, but we can certainly change the direction of our walk moving forward. Let us learn from our blunders and allow the Lord's reproofs to make us wiser, stronger, and more mature than we were yesterday. Cultivate the same attitude which the apostle Paul had as he proclaimed, "*Not that I have already attained, or*

am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me. 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 3:12-14) The verse at the beginning of this chapter instructs us to “...*make straight paths for our feet...*” (Hebrews 12:13) How do we make straight paths? We get ourselves back on the narrow path of Jesus Christ, for it is the only straight path. It is the path which begins at our own two feet and goes directly to God’s holy throne. It is a path which travels in careful alignment with His Word, hedged in by His protective guidance. In every darkness, God’s Word will light the way for us. “*Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.*” (Psalm 119:105) “*I will bring the blind by a way they did not know; I will lead them in paths they have not known. I will make darkness light before them, and crooked places straight. These things I will do for them, And not forsake them.*” (Isaiah 42:16)

Be willing to be different. Don’t allow yourself to be conned into feeding deceptive, worldly, fleshly appetites. Do you know that if we starved them instead, they would disappear? If we desire to grow, learn, change, and walk in peace with Jesus we have got to feed our spirits more than we feed the flesh, being very careful not to let the pervasive ideals of this fallen world enter our homes, our phones, our relationships, our conversations, and our lifestyles, for they will deceptively influence us, desensitize our spirits, and steer us wrongly. Be separate, set apart, and special to God. Never allow yourself to conform to the ways of the godless – even on what seems to be the tiniest, most insignificant

aspect. You will find any compromise somehow finds a way to invade and overwhelm every other part of life. *“...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) Most compromises don't seem like a big deal on the surface, but anything godless is always toxic to our faith and will spread throughout our spiritual character just as a little bit of yeast spreads through an entire batch of dough to make the bread rise. *“A little leaven [yeast] leavens the whole lump.”* (Galatians 5:9) So let us walk through this world taking care not to let even a little bit of godlessness permeate the protective walls of our faith. Pursue the Lord's close presence and His sure direction rather than chasing after the wind for it will only produce a whirlwind of destruction. *“I have seen all the works which have been done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity, a futile grasping and chasing after the wind.”* (Ecclesiastes 1:14 AMP) *“They sow to the wind and reap the whirlwind...”* (Hosea 8:7)

God encourages us to be holy so we can rightly commune with Him, because He is holy. *“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.’”* (1st Peter 1:15,16) How does a human being in today's world live in such a manner as to be 'holy unto the Lord'? It's a loaded question with many answers. The one thing I can tell you straight away is it has nothing to do with wearing priestly garments, convent robes, or religious scarves and hoods. Being holy unto the Lord is entirely about the state of our heart and its attitude toward God. If our heart is right with Him, our walk of faith will be right. How is the heart made

right? A heart made right is a circumcised heart; circumcised by faith, repentance, and the divine work of God. *“Therefore circumcise the foreskin of your heart and be stiff-necked no longer.”* (Deuteronomy 10:16) *“...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.”* (Deuteronomy 30:6) *“...Circumcision is that of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter; whose praise is not from men but from God.”* (Romans 2:29) *“In Him you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, buried with Him in baptism, in which you also were raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead.”* (Colossians 2:11,12)

We can see in these verses there is both a command to circumcise our hearts as well as a proclamation that God is the one who circumcises the heart. Well, which is it? The answer is both. The Lord’s part always comes first. The Holy Spirit of God prepares our hearts via life and circumstance to be soft enough and open enough to receive His truths and live them out. He convicts the heart of its own sin, and He further sanctifies the heart via Scripture, prayer, fellowship of the saints, and the hidden work which He performs throughout the rest of our lives as believers. What is our part? We respond in the right ways to each of these divine interferences or the heart will not become truly circumcised. It is up to us whether our hearts grow increasingly hardened and embittered by life and circumstance, or whether they grow softer and more deeply desiring to seek God and His ways. It is within our own control to be open and receptive toward God’s Word and His commands or closed off in selfish rationalization and willful rejection. The Holy Spirit’s

convictions will either cut us to the heart (a picture of spiritual circumcision) or they will prick the conscience into a reaction of fury and denial resulting in an even harder heart rather than a circumcised one. There are two opposing examples of this truth in the book of Acts. The first shows receptiveness to God upon being cut to the heart with the truth, and the second shows rejection. *“Now when they heard this, 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, ‘Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.’”* (Acts 2:37,38) This reaction is a Holy Spirit-led conviction which leads to salvation as men and women react in humility and a heartfelt query as to how to solve their desperate spiritual plight. Conversely, let’s look at a completely different reaction in the following passage: *“When they heard these things they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed at him with their teeth.”* (Acts 7:54) This reaction is clearly the response of those in whom the Holy Spirit’s conviction causes only an angry rejection as a result of offended pride or stubborn, sin-calloused hearts. We either respond to the truths and promptings of the Lord by being cut to the heart with conviction and repentance, or we react with an unreasoning, inexplicable sense of offense and rejection.

Believers are absolutely free to pursue a life of increasing faith and obedience to Jesus, being transformed from glory to glory as we walk with Him. *“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.”* (2nd Corinthians 3:18) But we are also absolutely free to fall victim to a divided heart as well, with only parts of it being softened and

ruled by the Lord, while other parts grow hardened as they are held in the stubborn grip of self-rule. This is the double-mindedness which the Lord speaks of in James' letter. It is evidence of a lingering, personal doubt toward God's holier ways combined with a rebellious desire to walk in our own ways. A divided heart causes an unstable faith vulnerable to every passing storm. *"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)

Too many of us today are walking around with partially circumcised hearts. We have given some or even most of our lives to the Lord yet we keep unseen places under our own control and ruled by our own dictates. We are reigning over these rebel lands and wondering why we don't have the fullness of joy God promised. We are walking in idolatry when we do this and there is no lasting joy or peace to be had in such a role. Many are the times Israel walked before God with a divided heart. They served the laws of Moses while adopting the idolatry of heathen cultures surrounding them as well. They put up pagan altars in high places and gave offerings and made prayers to gods like Ashtoreth, Baal, and Molech, and offered animal sacrifices in the temple of God at the same time. They deceived themselves into thinking because they still served God in the prescribed manners, they were not guilty of sin or rebellion. God repeatedly told them otherwise. The prophet Hosea pronounces a formal accusation over their divided hearts in the following verse. *"Israel empties his vine; he brings forth fruit for himself. According to the multitude of his fruit he*

*has increased the altars; according to the bounty of his land they have embellished his sacred pillars. **Their heart is divided; now they are held guilty.** He will break down their altars; He will ruin their sacred pillars. For now they say, 'We have no king, because we did not fear the LORD...'*" (Hosea 10:1-3) Israel had increased their altars to include other gods. They built up and embellished sacred pillars not commanded by God to even erect. They did these things because their generation had lost the fear of the Lord.

The solution for the condition of a divided heart is simple. Learn to fear God in the manner He commands. As a result of righteous fear and holy reverence, we will begin desiring to abdicate all our hidden thrones and turn them over to His sovereign rule – no more double-minded ways, no more divided focuses, no more compromises with our flesh or the world. Instead of walking with one foot in the world and one foot on the narrow path, a true fear of the Lord will inspire us to walk joyfully surrendered to His commands in every facet of our lives. Mixed loyalties will no longer exist in our hearts. There is freedom to be found in giving up those thrones and abundant joy to be experienced in His presence as He closes the gap we had constructed with our divided focuses and double-minded ways. *"Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded."* (James 4:8) Let us cleanse the work of our hands and our lives. Wash away the works of the world, the flesh, and the devil. Serve God and God alone. When we commit to this mindset, joy in our relationship with the Lord will no longer be overruled. God will properly depose our tyrannical reign with the golden scepter of His superior will, and we can finally be spiritually at peace, prospering in all His ways.

Spiritual vigilance is integral to a victorious walk. Faith and Christian living are too often presented as being something very casual and easy today and I believe this smoothed-over mindset has caused many of us to lose sight the battle being waged ceaselessly against our souls. The Bible makes a big deal of us striving to be sober-minded, watchful, vigilant, alert, awake, and ready – ready for what? This is another loaded question having more than one answer. We are to be watchful and spiritually alert because we are always at war. The enemy is never far away. We face spiritual opposition every single day. Are we walking out this life with an alert spiritual consciousness? We are soldiers bearing God’s armor. Godly living and obedience are an enormous part of the Lord’s divine protection. We simply cannot allow ourselves to become spiritually lazy or let our guard down. The world and its ways are incessant, tempting, and demanding. Worse, our flesh has a chronic tendency to rear its ugly head in its continual insistence to be satisfied. The devil waits patiently, crouching around every corner, ever ready to pounce the moment we fall into temptation and disobey God.

Our best defense on every front is to keep the Lord ever before us and remain surrendered to His commands. When we walk our paths seeking to be aligned with His will rather than our own, He will establish us, strengthen us, and settle us throughout every trial or time of testing. If we remain sober, vigilant, and trustingly at the Lord’s side, we are spiritually prepared for anything life throws at us. *“Therefore, humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time, casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you. **Be sober, be vigilant;** because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. Resist him, steadfast in*

the faith, knowing that the same sufferings are experienced by your brotherhood in the world. But may the God of all grace, who called us to His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after you have suffered a while, perfect, establish, strengthen, and settle you.” (1st Peter 5:6-10) But know this, it is very difficult to have a spiritually vigilant state of mind when we are tinkering with worldly pastimes, props, and vices. May we be cautious about who we spend time with, where we allow ourselves to go, and what we choose to partake of in this world. “Do not be deceived: ‘Evil company corrupts good habits.’ Awaken to righteousness, and do not sin; for some do not have the knowledge of God. I speak this to your shame.” (1st Corinthians 15:33,34)

The devil stands ready to stick his foot in the slightest opening of any wrongly opened door. An innocent football game can turn into a drunken revelry of which we have somehow become a part. Too much time spent with unbelieving coworkers and secular acquaintances can develop ungodly romances or unequally yoked friendships which influence our faith negatively. Inappropriate movies and graphic social media clips quickly lead to pornographic licentiousness, immorality, and sexual addictions. The list goes on and on. Listen, we can’t defeat the demons we enjoy playing with, so stop playing their games! *“Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness? And what accord has Christ with Belial? Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever? And what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For you are the temple of the living God. As God has said: ‘I will dwell in them and walk among them. I will be their God, and they shall be My people. Therefore ‘Come out from among them and be separate’, says the Lord. ‘Do not*

touch what is unclean, and I will receive you.’” (2nd Corinthians 6:14-17) How terrible would it be to find ourselves somewhere God wouldn’t want us to be, doing something He wouldn’t want us to be doing, at the very moment He returns to rapture the church or meet Him in a sudden, unexpected death. Who among us would want to be prostrate before our holy God in the midst of falling prey to temptation, sin, or rebellion? I cringe at the thought – and yet I have placed myself in such predicaments.

As believers we are no longer ignorant of what displeases the Lord, so let’s pull up our bootstraps and commit ourselves to walking in ways that please Him. Let us rest our hope fully upon His grace to lead us in those ways. *“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.’”* (1st Peter 1:13-16) God tells us we are not children of the night but children of the day. *“You are all sons of light and sons of the day. We are not of the night nor of darkness. Therefore let us not sleep, as others do, but let us watch and be sober. For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk are drunk at night. But let us who are of the day be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet the hope of salvation.”* (1st Thessalonians 5:5-8) May we live as children of the day, watching for potential dangers and compromises, alert to not only our daily circumstances but to the fact that we know Jesus is coming soon, as promised.

Keep an abiding awareness of our Savior's holy presence dwelling deep within our hearts. There is no place we can go and He is not there. There is nothing we can do that does not involve Him coming along. It only makes sense we cannot involve ourselves in anything He wouldn't want to be involved in. Walk circumspectly, redeeming the time because the days in which we live are evil. *"Have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather expose them. For it is shameful even to speak of those things which are done by them in secret. But all things that are exposed are made manifest by the light, for whatever makes manifest is light. Therefore He says: 'Awake, you who sleep, arise from the dead, and Christ will give you light.' See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be unwise but understand what the will of the Lord is. And do not be drunk with wine, in which is dissipation; but be filled with the Spirit."* (Ephesians 5:11-18)

Some of us are walking the narrow path half-asleep. I am speaking to myself as much as I am to anyone else. We are not always awake to the ways and instructions of God as they relate to our own lives. We read them in Scripture and agree with them as we turn each page, but then we turn around and forget what we just read as we walk out the door. The Lord is imploring us to wake up, look around, and figure out whether we are walking according to His ways or not. Yes, it is in Christ alone our hope is found. Yes, it is faith alone that saves the soul. But what is the proof of our faith? The answer lies in the condition of our hearts and the conduct of our lives which should flow out from a spiritually regenerated and redeemed soul. Time is running out. Will there be oil in our lamps as we go out to meet Him? Are we really filled with the Holy Spirit and walking with His light?

“Then the kingdom of heaven shall be likened to ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. Now five of them were wise, and five were foolish. Those who were foolish took their lamps and took no oil with them, but the wise took oil in their vessels with their lamps. But while the bridegroom was delayed, they all slumbered and slept. And at midnight a cry was heard: ‘Behold, the bridegroom is coming; go out to meet him!’ Then all those virgins arose and trimmed their lamps. And the foolish said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’ But the wise answered, saying, ‘No, lest there should not be enough for us and you; but go rather to those who sell, and buy for yourselves.’ And while they went to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the wedding; and the door was shut. Afterward the other virgins came also, saying, ‘Lord, Lord, open to us!’ But he answered and said, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, I do not know you.’ Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour in which the Son of Man is coming.” (Matthew 25:1-13)

This is the most sobering and frightening parable in all of Scripture. God put it there for a reason. He knows some of us need to make changes in the ways we are living while we await His return. We can find ourselves carrying a low-burning flame which is about to flicker out. Worse, we have failed to keep our vessels filled with oil because we are continually quenching the Holy Spirit’s work in our lives. Time is also running out with regard to how much longer we have to make a difference in the lives of the unsaved. The Lord breathes a certain sense of urgency into His passages about wakefulness and alertness. May we have His urgency pulsing in our own hearts. *“Knowing the time, that now **it is high time to awake out of sleep; for now our salvation is***

*nearer than when we first believed. The night is far spent, the day is at hand. 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 13:11-14)*

Make no provision for the flesh. Disobedience is not something we can carelessly toss under the cross of Christ and expect all is well with our soul. Please, stand fast in His rule, His reign, His love. Be vigilant in prayer, keep a heart of thanksgiving and steadfastness. The Lord Himself will make us strong, brave, and well-armed for every battle. *“Watch, stand fast in the faith, be brave, be strong.”* (1st Corinthians 16:13) *“Continue earnestly in prayer, being vigilant in it with thanksgiving.”* (Colossians 4:2) Faithfulness to the promptings of the Holy Spirit centers on the idea of exercising self-control and self-discipline when it comes to carnal proclivities. Self-control is a fruit of the Holy Spirit. The Lord gives us the ability to say no to what does not glorify Him. He also gives us the ability to say yes to that which serves Him and magnifies Him. Self-control is a key manifestation of His Holy Spirit’s work. *“But also for this very reason, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, to knowledge **self-control**, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness, to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love. For if these things are yours and abound, you will be neither barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For he who lacks these things is shortsighted, even to blindness, and has forgotten that he was cleansed from his old sins.”* (2nd Peter 1:5-9)

I have said it before and I will say it again. Be willing to be different. Be willing to let God change you even when it causes social awkwardness or a disruption of comfortable habits. Be willing to pick up your cross daily and walk where Jesus walked. It is only in doing such things that we can have any kind of significant impact on others. We are to be a shining light of God and it is solely by His holy fire burning brightly within us that we can overcome the darkness of this fallen world. Far too many of us are not really shining His light. We have surrendered to the darkness around us by partaking in its activities. May we examine ourselves. If we have been giving away what God has already claimed, let us take back that ground and place it at the throne of heaven for the Lord to cleanse, correct, rule, and make holy once again.



Temple Mount in Jerusalem, Israel 2013

Holy Ground

*The Lord says to my soul
Be careful how you stroll
For everywhere you go
You stand on holy ground*

*I ask how this can be
When all my sight does see
Is godless futility
And deception all around*

*He opened up my eyes
Led my heart to realize
My life is sacrificed
Consecrated by faith's crown*

*Thus every place I stand
Like His temple in the sand
Is made sacred by His hand
And I walk holy ground*

*As a sandal thus removed
Ungodly habits we must lose
His Presence in us proves
We stand on holy ground*

*Shekinah glory shines
Within this soul of mine
Broken vessel now divine
My will has been laid down*

*Though I look the same
My heart is His domain
And I cannot profane
What He calls holy ground*

“Take your sandals off your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground.” (Exodus 3:5)

Chapter 10

The Fear We Need

“Holy and awesome is His name. The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; a good understanding have all those who do His commandments...” (Psalm 111:9,10)

As believers, we can become so captivated by the love and grace of God that we forget we are to fear Him as well. Christians often discuss the merits of the passage, *“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom”*, nodding in full agreement with the precept, for it is a truth written numerous times and in a variety of ways throughout Scripture. But let us not think ‘fear of the Lord’ is simply another way of saying ‘faith in the Lord’. It is not. In making faith synonymous with fear, we are removing the idea of fear altogether. Brothers and sisters, it is absolutely imperative for us to have a righteous, healthy, God-honoring fear of the Lord. A holy reverence for our Creator and Savior ought to rest at the very foundations of our faith in Jesus Christ, for if we did not fear God, we would not understand our need for a Savior. We can see an example of this truth with the thief on the cross who became gripped with holy conviction and fear as he faced his own looming death. A righteous, godly fear led him to believe in one eternity-altering moment that Jesus truly was his Lord and Savior. As a result, the humbled and repentant thief made his confession to Jesus and was

given entrance into heaven upon his demise. What inspired the thief's last-minute faith? It began with a spiritually convicting fear of God as he hung on his own cross and was confronted at last with the eternal condemnation he knew he deserved. It was a fear which recognized the truth of his damning situation and led to the spark of faith in his soul, causing him to believe the innocent One who hung sacrificially beside him was indeed his Lord and Savior. *"Then one of the criminals who were hanged blasphemed Him, saying, 'If You are the Christ, save Yourself and us' But the other, answering, rebuked him, saying, 'Do you not even fear God, seeing you are under the same condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds; but this Man has done nothing wrong.'* Then he said to Jesus, *'Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom.'* And Jesus said to him, *'Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise.'*" (Luke 23:39-43) Every single one of us must be brought to the realization of our own eternally-damned status were we to die before placing our faith in the world's only Savior.

Once we are born again, it is a Spirit-led fear of the Lord's grieved displeasure over humanity's godless ways which inspires our repentance from the godless attitudes, behaviors, and lifestyles we practiced. It is a righteous and God-honoring fear that causes us to seek His corrections and prepares the heart to embrace His commands as we strive to work them out in our own practical reality. And it is a respectful, loving fear of the Lord which motivates our obedience to be prompt, worshipful, thankful, and ongoing. Fear of the Lord must sit at the very root of authentic, biblical faith. It courses through the veins of those who seek to walk in His love while keeping their lives clean of the world's filth

and sin's dark stains. *"The fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever..."* (Psalm 19:9) Faith in God and the fear of God are not synonymous. However, they are partners. These two positions of the heart must go hand-in-hand with one another and should never be separated. If we have faith in the Lord, we must also have a proper fear of the Lord. But far too many believers across this nation are happily exercising faith in the loving gift of salvation God has provided, without really fearing Him in the manner He commands. Let me tell you something, I used to be one of them. A lack of godly fear and holy awe lies at the heart of all Christian waywardness and naive spiritual rebellion. When we do not rightly fear God, we will carry a propensity to live as though there are no real consequences to our actions. We overemphasize the grace of God and downplay the fear of God to the point where we have no impetus to strive after holy living, be set apart from ways of the world, or fully abide in His instructions and commands. Just as lack of obedience reveals a divided heart, so too, does a lack of fearing the Lord.

Let's look at what Scripture says about the subject. *"And if you call on the Father, who without partiality judges according to each one's work, **conduct yourselves throughout the time of your stay here in fear...**"* (1st Peter 1:17) Believers are to conduct themselves in a holy, loving, reverently fearful manner. *"Honor all people. Love the brotherhood. **Fear God. Honor the king.**"* (1st Peter 2:17) *"**His mercy is on those who fear Him from generation to generation.**"* (Luke 1:50) *"So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria enjoyed peace, being built up; and **going on in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it continued to increase.**"*(Acts 9:31 NASB) *"Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us*

cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.” (2nd Corinthians 7:1) “...*Be subject to one another in the fear of Christ.*” (Ephesians 5:21 NASB) “*So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling.*” (Philippians 2:12 NASB)

As we can see by just these few passages, having a proper fear of the Lord is not merely an Old Testament precept, it is a New Testament precept. Knowing this, it is strange that so many Christians today have fallen prey to the notion that the ‘God of the Old Testament’ was to be feared while the ‘God of the New Testament’ (Jesus) only requires us to have faith. This is both illogical and unbiblical theology. God’s Word tells us He does not change. “***For I am the LORD, I do not change...***” (Malachi 3:6) The same God spoke and moved among mankind in the Old Testament as in the New. It is His same Spirit who inspired men mighty in faith to pen His Word in both eras. “*And so we have the prophetic word confirmed, which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts; knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit.*” (2nd Peter 1:19-21) The Old Testament is just as much about Jesus Christ as the New Testament is. “*But you do not have His word abiding in you, because whom He sent, Him you do not believe. You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me. But you are not willing to come to Me that you may have life.*” (John 5:38-40) The command to fear God or fear the Lord is explicitly discussed a multitude of times from

Genesis all the way through Revelation. We can be assured all believers in every era are expected to practice a reverent fear of the Lord regardless of which Person of the triune, eternal godhead we are referencing.

Another problem which can distract us from having a proper fear of the Lord occurs when we fall into a pattern of acquiring an abundance of head knowledge about God and His Word without receiving the heart knowledge which should go along with it. We need both. Head knowledge gives us all the right information about God from Scripture, whereas heart knowledge brings faith into the mix, making head knowledge spiritually beneficial or profitable to us. A helpful passage in Hebrews brings a better understanding to this concept. *“Therefore, since a promise remains of entering His rest, let us fear lest any of you seem to have come short of it. For indeed the gospel was preached to us as well as to them; **but the word which they heard did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in those who heard it.**”* (Hebrews 4:1,2) The Israelites in the wilderness not only had the very words of God spoken to them through Moses, but they had also experienced numerous mind-blowing miracles of God firsthand. Yet they did not mix those two realities with a righteous, God-fearing faith. How is that possible? In their case, the Israelites continually refused to trust in or believe God had their best interests in mind and as a result, they often lost heart or complained bitterly about the difficult conditions of their wilderness sojourn. This faithless, bad attitude culminated to the point where when they finally spied out the lands God promised to them, they refused to believe He would actually help them overcome the giants living there and thus, they refused to obey His command to take possession of it. Their unbelief and lack of faith in God’s intentions toward them led to disobedience.

The people of God had knowledge of His promises, they saw His miracles firsthand, and they were entirely aware of His commands and precepts. But all this knowledge was not mixed with faith – a God-fearing, God-believing, heart-based knowledge – so it did not profit them on their journey. If we are not careful, we can end up walking on lengthy, difficult, and wayward wilderness journeys of our own because of a similar attitude. We might attain a great deal of head knowledge about God and His precepts, but if we are not mixing that knowledge with faith springing forth from a heart that rightly fears the Lord, we will surely miss out on experiencing the mighty power and promises He gives. Fear is needed. Faith is needed. Faith draws on everything we learn from Scripture and works it out in the heart with trusting diligence and a healthy fear of the Lord.

Pastors and teachers often talk about the ‘head knowledge’ of God versus ‘heart knowledge’ of Him. It is a common discussion point. There is even a well-known saying which declares “the distance between heaven and hell is 18 inches” indicating a straight line which reaches from the head to the heart. Most of us can understand the “head” is associated with rational thought and knowledge *about* something, whereas the “heart” represents the seat of emotion, spirit, will, and moral compass. This truth underscores the idea that one can intellectually understand who God is and what Scripture says, but still not be saved if the heart itself has not been changed by faith in such knowledge. God tells us He gives us a new heart when we become saved. That new heart is a heart that fears Him, believes Him, knows Him, and desires to walk in His ways. *“I will take you from among the nations, gather you out of all countries, and bring you into your own land. Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean; I will*

cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them. Then you shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers; you shall be My people, and I will be your God.” (Ezekiel 36:24-28) As I researched head knowledge versus heart knowledge and the fear of the Lord we must cultivate, a summary of the differences became clear. Head knowledge consists of knowing the truths taught in Scripture. Heart knowledge has the believing faith, righteous fear, and obedient walk which corresponds to such knowledge. We truly need both if we are to walk the narrow path victoriously. Here is helpful list:

- Head knowledge is knowing we are not supposed to walk off the narrow path of Jesus Christ.
- Heart knowledge is *not having any desire* to walk off His narrow path *because of righteous fear*.

- Head knowledge is knowing what the rules, commands, precepts, and truths of God are.
- Heart knowledge is understanding the *practical ways* of obeying them and *not wanting to break any, out of love and reverent fear*.

- Head knowledge is knowing what God desires from us and what changes He aims to work into us.
- Heart knowledge is *wanting* to give God what He desires and *wanting* Him to transform us.

- Head knowledge is information.
 - Heart knowledge is *relationship*.
-
- Head knowledge involves filling the mind with truth.
 - Heart knowledge involves *filling our spirits with God's higher will and desiring to be aligned with it.*
-
- Head knowledge requires the loss of nothing.
 - Heart knowledge requires *the loss of everything to gain the holier ways of God.*
-
- Head knowledge cultivates no true fear of the Lord.
Heart knowledge *begins with a true fear of the Lord.*

Surely, a deeper, more reverent fear of the Lord is desperately needed in the church today. “*The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.*” (Proverbs 9:10) Without a proper fear of the Lord, there is virtually nothing preventing Christians from living just like the godless world around them; cutting corners here and there, indulging in personal vices instead of casting them aside, enjoying the distracting things God calls us to stop chasing, and disregarding the spiritual activities He commands us to do. If we have embraced the gracious love and eternal forgiveness shown to us on the cross of Christ, but are ignoring the holy fear and reverent attitude we ought to have for His sacred Name and Holy Spirit dwelling within us, we will no doubt live irreverently with regard to the Lord’s biblical commands. The apostle Paul reprimands us of such a thing. “*What shall we say then? **Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? Certainly not!** How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it?*” (Romans 6:1,2) God tells us those who rightly fear Him are those who walk in His ways. They are

the people of faith who fear, delight in, and desire to both learn and obey His commands, for they know God will spiritually prosper and bless them in doing so. ***“Who is the man that fears the LORD? Him shall He teach in the way He chooses.”*** (Psalm 25:12) ***“...Blessed is the man who fears the LORD, who delights greatly in His commandments.”*** (Psalm 112:1) ***Blessed is everyone who fears the LORD, who walks in His ways.”*** (Psalm 128:1) ***He who despises the word will be destroyed, but he who fears the commandment will be rewarded.”*** (Proverbs 13:13)

When we love someone, we naturally try to avoid or even fear doing, thinking, or saying anything that would make them angry, sad, or upset with us, do we not? In the same way, love for the Lord and all He has done for us should inspire us to prayerfully walk in His love and avoid anything that would bring about a need for His correction, discipline, or chastisement. ***“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) The grace and mercies of God are bountiful and infinite in Christ. But this truth does not mean we are to be careless with His generosity or casual about His love. Just as Jesus humbled Himself and obeyed the Father to the point of death, we too must humble ourselves and obey to the point of death – especially the death of our fleshly, self-driven tendencies. The Lord intends for the conduct of His children to increasingly reflect His nature as He endlessly works within the believing heart to align us with His will. ***“...He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under***

the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. 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.” (Philippians 2:8-13)

Yes, faith alone is the victory. Faith alone allows the Holy Spirit to enter the heart and quicken it into a brand-new spiritual awareness and spiritual sense of purpose. Such is the meaning behind being born again. Faith alone in Jesus Christ is what overcomes the curse of sin and death that covers this fallen world in a shroud of darkness. *“For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome. For whatever is born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith. Who is he who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?”* (1st John 5:3-5) But let us never forget that faith alone, if it is soul-saving, will also be life-changing and it begins with a righteous and holy fear of God. Hebrews 10:31 declares, *“It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.”* God is to be feared. Faith not only believes the promises of God and the proclamations of His Word which have not yet come to pass, it also believes God is exactly who He says He is. *“Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. For by it the elders obtained a good testimony. By faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the Word of God, so that the things which are seen were not made of things which are visible...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 11:1-3...6)

Who does God say He is? He tells us He is the great I AM. “*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 3:14) Our God is the Almighty One who was, who is, and who is to come. *‘I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End,’ says the Lord, ‘who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.’*” (Revelation 1:8) God is our Creator, He is our Breath of life, He is our Judge, He is our King, He is our Healer, He is our Protector, He is our Provider, He is our Counselor, He is our Teacher, He is our Peacemaker, and He is our Savior. Almighty God is to be feared because He is not only divinely omnipotent, omnipresent, and omniscient, but He is holy – and we are not. The prophet Isaiah experienced a direct encounter with God in heaven. It was an event which produced a very real, deeply abased, and crushingly reverent fear of the Lord. “*...I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of His robe filled the temple...So I said: ‘Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts.’ Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a live coal which he had taken with the tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth with it, and said: ‘Behold, this has touched your lips; Your iniquity is taken away, and your sin purged.’*” (Isaiah 6:1...5-7) Truly we serve a high and holy God who sits on His throne, lifted up in glory. He dwells upon His fiery throne in an infinite, inconceivable dimension known as heaven; sovereignly ruling all things. Our fallen, lowly condition here on earth ought to strike within us a heartfelt reverence for God’s indescribable, awesome, and incomprehensible power, purity and righteousness.

Fear of the Lord is what prepares the heart to *want* to crucify the sin nature, nailing it to the cross of Christ. “*And*

those who are Christ's have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires." (Galatians 5:24) Only when we deny the flesh, pick up our crosses, and follow after Jesus' higher ways can we actually strive to live like Him. "Then He [Jesus] 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) Following Jesus in faith is the act of choosing to live a sin-crucified life in a God-honoring, reverential fear. "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me." (Galatians 2:20) Look at the natural relationship of a boy and his father. When the youth is still small and solely dependent upon the father's love and care, there is only one thing the child really wants – his father's attention. He will do anything to spend time with his dad. He follows him around all day and speaks whatever is on his heart in an easy, natural fellowship of complete trust and innocent love. The child asks many questions and the father patiently and lovingly answers them all, giving instruction and guidance in how to act, think, and do that which is productive or prosperous in this life. The father is also a source of warning and wisdom for the boy, teaching him what he should not be doing as often as he teaches what he ought to be doing. It is the child's utmost desire to please his father and therefore he fears to displease him in any way. When the boy acts out or is rebellious, an immediate rift in the relationship occurs and can only be corrected by the father's chastisement and the child's sorrowful repentance. Then he will climb into his dad's lap and hug him desperately as the loving parent consoles the boy's tears and accepts his apology. We are children of the living God.

There is sound reason why the Creator and Savior of this universe continually refers to Himself as our Father. *“Because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying out, ‘Abba, Father!’”* (Galatians 4:6) The Holy Spirit of Jesus dwelling in the heart of every believer cries out to God just as a son cries out to his father. Paul tells us this; *“Therefore, brethren, we are debtors—not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. For if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, ‘Abba, Father.’ The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God.”* (Romans 8:12-16) The parental relationship is already there, given to us the moment we are born again by faith. We become the Lord’s children by the witness of the Holy Spirit dwelling within us. We have been adopted as heaven’s own rescued orphans, debtors to the Father from the moment of faith and no longer fearing hell. Our lives are no longer our own. They are His.

Some of us have naively glossed over the consequences of our spiritual recklessness and have even become blind to the presence of certain sins in our Christian walk. I am speaking of myself as much as anyone else. We get so caught up in knowing God loves us, we forget He has clear expectations of us as His children. The household of God is consecrated by the blood of Jesus and set apart to serve Him. Therefore, our lives ought to look incredibly different from the lives of the unsaved. *“Your testimonies are very sure; Holiness adorns Your house, O LORD, forever.”* (Psalm 93:5) As the head of our household, God has given His special family rules and expectations both for our well-being and our family’s good name, just as any earthly father

would do. If we love Him, surely we will keep His commands. *“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) *“Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments. He who says, ‘I know Him,’ and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But whoever keeps His word, truly the love of God is perfected in him. By this we know that we are in Him. He who says he abides in Him ought himself also to walk just as He walked.”* (1st John 2:3-6)

We read these verses and agree with them in spirit and in theology, but do we actually walk them out with fear and reverence in our own lives? The title passage of this chapter states, *“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; **a good understanding have all those who do His commandments.**”* (Psalm 111:10) This verse tells us those who obey the commandments of the Lord will have a good understanding of the fear of the Lord. Conversely, we will *not* have a good understanding of the fear of the Lord if we choose *not* to live out His commandments in reality. This is a quality of life issue for the faithful. As we walk in godly wisdom we will increasingly understand how His higher ways work to our benefit and to His glory. In the book of Proverbs, wisdom is personified and as we read through the passages, we are eventually told ‘Wisdom’ is God Himself. Just as He is the *source* of light and yet He *is* light itself, or just as He is the *source* of all love and yet He *is* love itself, so too, God is the *source* of all godly wisdom and He *is* wisdom itself. His Holy Spirit is wisdom. His Son is wisdom. Those who are born again by faith will have His wisdom poured upon them by His Spirit. *“Wisdom shouts in the street, she raises her voice in the markets; She calls out at the head of the noisy streets [where large crowds gather]; At the*

entrance of the city gates she speaks her words: 'How long, O naive ones [you who are easily misled], will you love being simple-minded and undiscerning? How long will scoffers [who ridicule and deride] delight in scoffing, how long will fools [who obstinately mock truth] hate knowledge? If you will turn and pay attention to my rebuke, behold, I [the Wisdom of God] will pour out My Spirit on you, I will make my words known to you.'" (Proverbs 1:20-23 AMP) I camp on this point because it is very meaningful to those of us who want more of God in our lives. If we replace the word 'wisdom' with the One who is being referred to – 'God' – we will see an interesting truth. ***"The fear of the LORD is the beginning of [God] wisdom; a good understanding have all those who do His commandments."*** (Psalm 111:10) Fear of the Lord is truly the *very beginning of God Himself*...it is the first stepping stone upon which we must tread if we want to know the Lord. It is what leads each of us into being open enough to learn about the salvation He offers in the first place. It is the very beginning of having hearts rightly prepared to receive His input, His reproofs, and His guidance. A faith that is abounding in fruitfulness and divine power is a faith which knows a proper fear of the Lord. It is through this godly fear that we recognize our own unworthiness in light of the righteousness and holiness of God. It is only the heart humbled by God-given fear that will find its hope in Christ. Fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom because it marks the very beginning of our awareness of who God really is.

We must learn to fear the consequences of any seemingly harmless disobedience or compromises we may be casually practicing. The effects of biblically contrary or worldly tendencies can be numerous and they have a very long reach. But again, we don't seem to have much reverence for the Lord's instructions today. We watch what

we should not watch, we listen to what we should not listen to, we partake in that which has been instructed against, we ignore God's voice when He speaks, we have daily pursuits which distract or come ahead of our relationship with Him, and we make very little effort to be distinct or set apart from those who do not know the Lord. By these things, we prove we do not fear God nor do we fear the tragic results of our ungodly actions. Please understand, there are consequences. The believer is not exempt from facing the penalties of his or her erring ways. Yes, Jesus' blood washes away all sin for those who believe in Him. But the Lord never promised to remove from us the negative effects which will surely occur in life as a result of careless and rebellious ways. The jailed tax evader can find forgiveness in Christ, but God doesn't remove the judge's lawful sentencing here on earth. The bus driver arrested for driving intoxicated can be forgiven in Christ, but his job is still forfeit and his reputation stained. There are always consequences. When Eve lost her faith in God's intentions toward her, she also lost her fear of Him. In willfully eating what was forbidden, she proved she no longer feared the penalty her rebellious actions would bring forth – consequences of which God provided clear warning. The aftermath she experienced from her lack of fear is no different than our own fallout when we do not rightly fear God today. She became spiritually deadened, separated from the Lord's presence, ashamed of her own nakedness, and enslaved by the dictates of her flesh and the devil himself. Yes, God provided a sacrifice to cover the sin, but Eve and her husband both had to live with the consequences of their life-altering rebellion the rest of their earthbound lives.

Like Eve, when we make light of or disregard the Lord's commands, we too will experience a distancing from His presence, and our hearts will grow increasingly deadened to sin as we become hardened against His

corrections or calloused by self-made rationalizations. We will falter in our spiritual life because we are grieving or quenching the Holy Spirit. We may even have feelings of guilt, shame, or doubt about our faith, spearheaded by the enemy of our souls and the accuser of the brethren – Satan. We will also struggle with the gnawing convictions of the Holy Spirit as He urges us to change our ways and draw nearer to God. We may eventually find ourselves in a deepening bondage to the demands of the flesh as we continue serving it in ways God has told us not to. Finally, there will grow a chink in our spiritual armor through which the devil is able to aim his fiery darts and lay claim on our waywardness, apathy, disregard, or disobedience. All such consequences are a result of not properly fearing God. Again, I speak of these truths as one who has experienced them firsthand. The only solution is to pray for God to instill in us the righteous fear of Him we so desperately need in order to avoid such things.

Psalm 50 contains a tongue lashing which lays out the seriousness of our actions from God’s perspective when we grow too casual with our attitude toward Him. In fact, God charges us with erroneously thinking He is like us; as we attempt to make Him seem not as fearsome as He really is. “...*What right have you to recite My statutes or to take My covenant on your lips? Seeing you hate instruction and cast My words behind you...You thought that I was altogether like you; But I will rebuke you, and set them in order before your eyes. Now consider this, you who forget God, lest I tear you in pieces, and there be none to deliver: Whoever offers praise glorifies Me; and to him who orders his conduct aright I will show the salvation of God.*” (Psalm 50:16,17...21-23) We often do not ‘order our conduct aright’ because we tend to humanize God. We are prone to making Him ‘more like us’ in our minds, just as the passage

indicates. We bring Him down to our level in presuming He is like us, which helps us believe He surely understands the powerful demands of our flesh or is not bothered by our double-mindedness, careless spirituality, or errant faith which walks in a manner far too similar to the secular world. We tell ourselves, 'He is like us' or 'Jesus gets me'. Have you ever seen someone write this sentiment or hear them say it? The underlying premise it proclaims should make us cringe, for it falsely assures us we can live however we see fit or do whatever seems right in our own eyes because God 'gets us', having once lived on this earth just as we do now. It is an unscriptural premise to say the least.

Yes, Jesus became flesh and dwelt among mankind, facing life as a human being, just like us. *"Therefore, in all things He had to be made like His brethren, that He might be a merciful and faithful High Priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For in that He Himself has suffered, being tempted, He is able to aid those who are tempted."* (Hebrews 2:17,18) He became like us not only to redeem us from sin and eternal condemnation as our flesh and blood atonement, but also to make Himself fully merciful to our earthly plights and challenges, having experienced them Himself. But please understand, **Jesus became like us and did not sin.** *"For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but **was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin.**"* (Hebrews 4:15) Jesus became like us not to excuse our willful rebellions with a wink and a grin, but to *show us how to live* in the manner God desires everyone to live – entirely surrendered to the Father and led by the Holy Spirit. Jesus became like us because He had to become human in order to offer Himself as the only acceptable sacrifice able to redeem mankind. Yet Jesus is, always was, and always will be God. He is, always was, and always will

be holy. Therefore, He is most definitely not like us in that His deity is indescribably greater and far above us in every way. He is eternally perfect, righteous, all-powerful, all-knowing, omnipresent, holy, and divine. It is true we are made in God's image. In very specific, limited ways God formed us to be *like Him*. But He is our all-powerful Creator and we are the created. He is to be highly exalted and deeply honored. He is Almighty God. He is altogether too wonderful for words. He is beyond all mortal existence and above all mortal comprehension. Since we are His redeemed sons and daughters, we ought to love, worship, revere, fear, and obey Him just as a child does its Father.

We have our theology reversed when we try to bring God down to our level and make Him seem more like us. Listen, His whole goal with every single believer is to raise us upward out of the mire and into His soaring heights, His purity, His lovingkindness, and His holiness. **He desires to make us more like Him.** Paul urges the believers at Corinth, *"Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ."* (1st Corinthians 11:1) Are we seeking to imitate Christ? Do we seek to be more like our Lord and Savior? That is surely what it means when Scripture urges us to walk in His ways, follow Him, keep His commandments, walk in the Spirit, or walk in the light. *"[We] do not cease to pray for you, and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding; that you may **walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing Him**, being fruitful in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; strengthened with all might, according to His glorious power, for all patience and longsuffering with joy; giving thanks to the Father who has qualified us to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in the light."* (Colossians 1:9-12) *"If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if **we walk***

in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin.” (1st John 1:6,7) “...Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh.” (Galatians 5:16)

Upside down and backwards – this is how the curse of humanity’s fall makes us think and act. We are born looking at this life and the truths of God as though we see them through a hall of bent mirrors at a carnival. Our view is inherently warped by Eden’s rebellion. Only God can straighten our sight and only a proper fear of Him will prepare our hearts to allow Him to do so. May we pray to God today and ask Him to teach us how to rightly fear Him in the reverent, loving, worshipful way He requires. Believe me when I assure you He will answer such a prayer. He answered mine. I asked Him to teach me to fear Him the way the Bible says I should. Ever since I did so, He has begun instructing me in how to rightly fear Him and He continues to teach me in ways I never imagined He would. The Holy Spirit’s conviction is needed, repentance is needed, a spiritually revived heart of faith is needed. We serve a high, holy, awesome, incomprehensible God. May we learn to reverently fear Him. In doing so, we will find ourselves standing at the precipice of receiving all He desires to give. “...Holy and awesome is His name. The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; a good understanding have all those who do His commandments.” (Psalm 111:9,10) This indeed, is the fear we need.



Qumran, Location of the Dead Sea Scrolls, Israel 2006

Fear and Wisdom Lost

*Somewhere far away and long ago
Fear was lost and wisdom tumbled low
Trampled underfoot by arrogance
Tossed aside along with common sense*

*Understanding gasps its ragged breath
Knowledge faces scorn and imminent death
Blindness of the mind ascending high
Hearts of stone cry forth unsatisfied*

*What vain and dread event has thus transpired
To cause this weary journey in the mire
The forfeiture of godly fear to blame
And thus into this wretched state we came*

*Wisdom waits for those who lift their eyes
The fear of God is treasure beyond price*

“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom”

(Psalm 111:9)

Chapter 11

The Joy We Seek

“You will show me the path of life; In Your presence is fullness of joy; At Your right hand are pleasures forevermore.” (Psalm 16:11)

“You will show me the path of life.” What is the path of life? When we consider other passages in Scripture, we can think of the ‘narrow gate’ and ‘difficult path’ which Jesus Christ calls believers to tread, and conversely this also brings to mind the broad, more commonly traveled highways of human philosophies or false beliefs which can ultimately lead to destruction and death. *“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) We know Jesus Christ is our way, our truth, and our life. *“...I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.”* (John 14:6) The path of life is not only Jesus Himself, but it is also indicative of the manner in which we must walk – a way of living in this world which is patterned after the Lord rather than after the ways of unsaved humanity. The path of life is really just what it says – a road which brings us the blessings of a fruitful and joyful life in fellowship with the Lord on earth, and eventually, the

fulfilled promise of an eternal life in fellowship with Him in heaven as well. It is a difficult path simply because those who travel it are commanded to be continually transformed by His Holy Spirit, conducting themselves in a completely different manner than they had prior to salvation. God's intentions for the lives of His people are higher because they are spiritually led rather than carnally driven.

True life begins at the foot of the cross. It is the road traveling to God and the road that travels with God. Those who choose to walk it will be brought into a living, spiritual communion with Him – a personal relationship or fellowship lived out in His presence. Why should we want to be walking in God's presence? Because, as the title passage reads, "fullness of joy" is found in the presence of God. I don't think we can find a verse any clearer or more concise than the one which heads this chapter, as to where our joy can be found. The human soul is desperately lonely for its Creator, thirsting after His Spirit just as a deer pants for water in the desert. Thus, we seek endlessly for what we cannot define until we meet the divine, life-giving presence of God. In that presence is fullness of joy. *"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 unsaved world does not know what it is searching for in its determined efforts to enjoy existence on this planet. If it did, all humanity would fall down and worship God immediately; pleading for the soul-saving forgiveness He offers in Christ and the soul-healing life of His indwelling Holy Spirit. But rebellion's curse causes innate pride and spiritual blindness to reign. The godless persistently attempt to sate what is an eternal, spiritual need by chasing after what can only please the flesh for a passing moment in time. They are chasing after the

wind. *"I set my mind to seek and explore by [man's] wisdom all [human activity] that has been done under heaven. It is a miserable business and a burdensome task which God has given the sons of men with which to be busy and distressed. I have seen all the works which have been done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity [without God], a futile grasping and chasing after the wind."* (Ecclesiastes 1:13,14 AMP)

But if we walk the path of life, we will experience the fullness of joy our souls have always been seeking. This teaching should be a strong encouragement for us to walk God's 'path of life', shouldn't it? It really seems so simple. If we were to walk in God's presence, a well of divine joy will spring up from within causing us to become a truly joyful people. *"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) The Lord manifests Himself by making His presence known to us. He does this via Scripture, the promptings of His Holy Spirit, our prayers, a word of confirmation from another believer, or even through specific dreams – if the messaging we are receiving aligns with Scripture. *"Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God..."* (1st John 4:1) The point is, if we are living in His presence, we can really know and experience a special kind of joy. When we walk in obedience with the Lord, we build our faith and keep ourselves in the light of His wisdom, joyfully surrendered to the generous mercies of Jesus Christ and the eternal life He purchased for us. *"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)

But though we are Christians, some of us are not very joyful people. We simply do not exude the joy Scripture indicates we ought to have. We love the Lord and are thankful for His saving grace, but for the most part we don't spend much time rejoicing or feeling joy in the Lord. There are far too many somber, anxious, and burdened believers filing in and out of churches across this nation every Sunday. It is no wonder the unsaved world wants no part of our faith, for our witness to the lost is severely compromised when we do not have any more joy than those who do not belong to God! I have been a recipient of salvation's inner *peace* since becoming born again, but having an attitude of *divine joy* was another matter altogether and a stepping stone which took me forever to place my own foot upon. Knowing I am a child of God by virtue of faith in Jesus and having His Word as my source of truth and spiritual direction – these two facts were all I ever needed to experience a peace of the soul which the secular world does not understand and cannot attain. But for the longest time, I did not rightly understand how to tap into the exuberant, freeing joy of the Lord which the Bible refers to so frequently and which God says every believer is given.

There have been 'mountaintop' encounters of joy in my walk of faith, such as the first time I sat aboard a fishing boat on the Sea of Galilee, or when I saw the rolling waves of the Mediterranean Sea lapping gently at the shores of Caesarea. These places and many more throughout Israel play such an integral part in God's Word that the blessing of being able to physically visit them in person has brought forth many joyful, spiritual feelings which I will always treasure. Momentary surges of joy have also been felt during certain occasions of fellowship at Bible conferences or in spending time with other Christians as we traveled

throughout Israel together. Spiritual joy rising up in my heart is certainly something I experienced occasionally during a moving worship song. But all such experiences in and of themselves tend to be fleeting in nature, and frankly, were few and far between. Needless to say, for far too long I wondered what I was missing with regard to having this consistent attitude of ‘joy in the Lord’ spoken of in the Bible, and I pondered how I could become mature enough to carry a spiritual joy which would never leave my countenance, but rather, remain a constant state of being. I was thankful and mostly peaceful in my faith. I actively sought to grow my relationship with God through prayer, Bible study, and the fellowship of other believers. But I did not feel I was living as abundantly and carefree as I ought to be. Nor was the overflowing joy of God’s presence strongly evident in my life. So I began studying the Scriptures very seriously for explanations as to why the fullness of joy in God’s presence and the abundant life Jesus promised His followers seemed to be somewhat lacking for me personally.

From these studies I have learned the joy of the Lord is found in many ways, and these ways are intertwined, flowing down from one to another in a cascading progression like a waterfall. First and foremost, throughout the Bible we are told joy is initially found in our salvation. *“Behold, God is my salvation, I will trust and not be afraid; For YAH, the LORD, is my strength and song; He also has become my salvation. Therefore with joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.”* (Isaiah 12:2,3) When we first come to know the truths of God and embrace the salvation He offers through His Son Jesus, there is a newfound joy which springs forth into our lives. I remember it well. Oh, the excitement and inexplicable joy I had in learning the God of this universe has a plan for me – both now and in eternity! The very idea

He even cared about who I was or that I could grow to know Him in a close and intimate way by simple faith in His promised Savior was an amazing discovery. There is a wonderful joy in learning we have a divine Creator who is the source of any goodness, righteousness, holiness, truth, love, and peace to be found on earth, and we can commune spiritually with Him in the midst of the wreckage of this fallen world. I recall being so hungry for His Word I could not get enough of it in those first years of faith. The Holy Spirit moved me to desperately desire to know the Lord well and know Him deeply. The whole world seemed a different place and everything about this life which I had formerly found so confusing, daunting, or meaningless, all began to make sense when viewed through the lens of Scripture and the enlightenment given by His Holy Spirit. I no longer needed to watch movies or read epic sagas about fictitious battles being waged between the powers of good and evil, for I began to understand God's holy war is endlessly fought in realms both seen and unseen, over the souls of men, and thus I had my own very real, epic saga and battle to fight while on this earth. Finding God through faith in Jesus and the knowledge of Scripture gave me an incredible sense of purpose and value found nowhere else in existence – and this discovery fostered an inner, inexplicable joy. *“The LORD is my strength and song, and He has become my salvation. The voice of rejoicing and salvation is in the tents of the righteous; the right hand of the LORD does valiantly. The right hand of the LORD is exalted; the right hand of the LORD does valiantly. I shall not die, but live, and declare the works of the LORD.”* (Psalm 118:14-17)

Meeting the Lord through faith in His promised Son and receiving His gift of salvation brings a spiritual rejoicing and an inner peace to the newly regenerated soul. No longer are we walking in spiritual darkness and apathy toward our

Creator. No longer are we struggling through life thinking everything which happens to us is by random chance or determined through karma, fortune, or misfortune. We have had our eyes opened by the Holy Spirit to see our sovereign God. He shows us throughout His Word how He is good, He is truth, He is justice, He is peace, He is power, He is life, He is light, and He is love. He desires to be our sole source of everlasting joy and our sure direction. We also learn very quickly how God continually works to keep us hedged in with His protection and divine love on a route well-lit by the instructions of His Word and the leadings of His Spirit. We begin to love what God says He loves, and we learn to hate what God says He hates. Our hearts become filled with godly purpose and spiritual understanding as we go about the activities of our days with a new spring in our step.

These joyous things are all rooted in knowing our God of salvation just as He makes Himself known – through His Word, His Son, and His Holy Spirit. *“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, who are kept by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. **In this you greatly rejoice**, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ, whom having not seen you love. Though now you do not see Him, **yet believing, you rejoice with joy inexpressible** and full of glory, receiving the end of your faith—the salvation of your souls.”* (1st Peter 1:3-9) But we must be very intentional about continuing to invest in our

relationship with God, because the initial joys experienced at salvation do not last forever. Conviction of the heart, repentance of a newly revealed layer of sin or inner rebellion, and personal revival are all periodically needed in the Christian walk of faith. We can develop a lack of zeal for the Lord; a decreasing interest in spiritual things or even a tendency to bit by bit wander off the narrow path and fall back into the cunning ways of the secular world around us. Without prayerfully sought spiritual renewal, over the years and seasons of life we can grow bored or apathetic to the wonderful faith which was at first received so exuberantly. Yes, we can leave our first love – and in doing so, we will disregard and greatly weaken the initial joy we had in knowing God and identifying with His gift of salvation so lovingly poured out on those who believe. Losing our first love and joyous zeal for the Lord is a serious problem. We have quite a rebuke in the book of Revelation warning us to repent of it. *“I have this against you, that you have left your first love. Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place—unless you repent.”* (Revelation 2:4,5)

Jesus Christ does not want a joyless, apathetic bride. Among many other Scripture passages, there is a wonderful Psalm which points us back in the right direction and ought to be the prayer of our hearts should we find ourselves in need of spiritual restoration. *“Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me. Behold, You desire truth in the inward parts, and in the hidden part You will make me to know wisdom. Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. Make me hear joy and gladness, that the bones You have broken may rejoice. Hide Your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquities. 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 unto me the joy of Your salvation and uphold me by Your generous Spirit. Then I will teach transgressors Your ways, and sinners shall be converted to You.***” (Psalm 51:5-13) Another way in which we can lose the initial joy of our salvation is by becoming overwhelmed with the trials and struggles of life. The prophet Habakkuk gives us a great testimony to embrace as our own, and I am encouraged to imitate his commitment and trust in God by willfully choosing to praise and rejoice in Him no matter what befalls me this side of eternity. *“Though the fig tree may not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines; though the labor of the olive may fail, and the fields yield no food; though the flock may be cut off from the fold, And there be no herd in the stalls — **Yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will joy in the God of my salvation. The LORD God is my strength; He will make my feet like deer’s feet, And He will make me walk on my high hills.**”* (Habakkuk 3:17-19) Let us never forget; when we became children of God, He became our defender and protector. He is the shield and everlasting righteousness of every believer. Joy is found in remembering these things and trusting in them, even in the midst of battles and afflictions. *“**But let all those rejoice who put their trust in You; Let them ever shout for joy, because You defend them; Let those also who love Your name be joyful in You. For You, O LORD, will bless the righteous; With favor You will surround him as with a shield.**”* (Psalm 5:11,12)

There is a second source of God-given joy which every Christian has access to, and this is the joy of learning God’s Word. As we grow in our understanding of what Scripture teaches, we will be given more tools to not only know God better but to embrace His instructions more deeply and more seriously. In this, is found great joy. When

we rightly comprehend God's precepts, commands, histories, and examples, these truths will bless us by giving us godly purpose and clear direction. During the days of Nehemiah, a spiritual revival was experienced by all the people who sought to restore and live in Jerusalem once again. How was this joyful, spiritual revival accomplished? When God's Word was read and explained to the people in a way they could understand, the Israelites were brought to a state of great rejoicing. *"So they read distinctly from the book, in the Law of God; and they gave the sense and helped them to understand the reading. And Nehemiah who was the governor, Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, 'This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn nor weep.' For all the people wept when they heard the words of the Law. Then he said to them, 'Go your way, eat the fat, drink the sweet, and send portions to those for whom nothing is prepared; for this day is holy to our Lord. Do not sorrow, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.' So the Levites quieted all the people, saying, 'Be still, for the day is holy; do not be grieved.' And all the people went their way to eat and drink, to send portions **and rejoice greatly, because they understood the words that were declared to them.**"* (Nehemiah 8:8-12) They rejoiced because they understood the Word of God.

We too, will increasingly rejoice in the Lord the more we understand the teachings of Scripture, working them out into our lives in very real, beneficial, and victorious ways. The prophet Jeremiah tells us of the profound joy he experienced in receiving God's Word and declaring it to others – even at the cost of terrible persecution and abuse. *"O LORD, You know; remember me and visit me, and take vengeance for me on my persecutors. In Your enduring patience, do not take me away. Know that for Your sake I have suffered rebuke. Your words were found, and I ate them,*

and Your word was to me the joy and rejoicing of my heart; for I am called by Your name, O LORD God of hosts.” (Jeremiah 15:15,16) Psalm 119 sings the joy-filled praises of God’s instructions, statutes, testimonies, commands, and precepts over and over throughout its passages, of which the following two verses are just a sample; *“Your testimonies I have taken as a heritage forever, for they are the rejoicing of my heart. I have inclined my heart to perform Your statutes forever, to the very end.”* (Psalm 119:111,112) *“Princes persecute me without a cause, but my heart stands in awe of Your word. I rejoice at Your word as one who finds great treasure.”* (Psalm 119:161,162) May we rejoice in God’s Word and its life-changing power!

A third source of Christian joy is woven throughout Scripture, and it is found in our obedience and submission to God’s higher will and ways of living. The level of divinely inspired joy we experience on our walk of faith is relative to how consistently and how completely we seek to obey the Lord’s precepts, commands, and guidance. If we submit to His teachings without having to be constantly harnessed or chastised with a bit and bridle like a horse or mule, we will surely be glad in the Lord and able to rejoice in the righteous ways He causes us to pursue. *“I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will guide you with My eye. Do not be like the horse or like the mule, which have no understanding, which must be harnessed with bit and bridle, else they will not come near you. Many sorrows shall be to the wicked; but he who trusts in the LORD, mercy shall surround him. **Be glad in the LORD and rejoice, you righteous; And shout for joy, all you upright in heart!**”* (Psalm 32:8-11) As has been discussed at length throughout this book, fully committed obedience to God and His commands was the source of joy I was lacking in my own walk for a long time. As my testimony indicates, God had to

firmly show me I was not always fully aligned with His higher, set-apart ways in specific areas of my life. It took me a long time and a great deal of inward, personal struggle to realize I wasn't simply 'exercising my unique personality' on certain issues but rather, I was being willfully disobedient to both God's voice in my heart and to His Word. I was still clinging to my own way in a few key areas and as a result, quenching the work and movement of God's Spirit in my heart. This stubbornness restricted the flow of divine joy which I should have been experiencing as a child of God.

Simply put, my joy was not full because it was not complete. Why was it not complete? Because my heart's surrender to the Lord's rule and reign over my life was not complete. It is a problem many Christians have today. The only way to have our joy be complete or full according to Scripture is by truly keeping God's commandments and actively abiding in His loving will. "*As the Father loved Me, I also have loved you; abide in My love. **If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love. These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may remain in you, and that your joy may be full.***" (John 15:9-11) It is so clearly laid out for us. If we devote ourselves to abiding in the commandments and instructions of the Lord, we will abide in His love – and *our joy will be full*. The obstacles which stand between us and joy are the stumbling blocks we have unwittingly chosen to place in the midst of the narrow path God calls us to walk. What are those obstacles? Anything that keeps us from obeying His instructions is an obstacle. Any lifestyle or seemingly innocent habit which distracts us from more seriously pursuing our relationship with God or keeps us from experiencing His presence is also going to distract us from the joy He desires to give. What is the extent to which God wants His faithful ones to pursue

Him? He wants our all. “*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) God does not want a mere piece of our hearts, a portion of our souls, or a part of our minds...He wants all of us. And so, I will say it again; any purposeful disobedience to His instructions is going to cause a spiritual distancing between us and God. If His presence is distant from us, we will not have the fullness of joy we have been promised, for as David tells us in Psalm 16, *“in His presence is fullness of joy.”* To the believer who finds such a premise and its resulting implications seemingly impossible, undesirable, or even tedious to practically or realistically work out in real life, let me assure you, such a reaction is coming from your unsubmitted flesh. It is an indication there are hidden thrones propped up in the heart from which you are still ruling and reigning.

Every throne we choose to sit upon quenches the work of the Holy Spirit, and it is for this reason multitudes of Christians today do not walk in spiritual victory or experience a joyful, freeing, fulfilling relationship with God. Listen, if we can identify activities, attitudes, habits, or lifestyle practices which seem to constantly get in the way of our relationship with the Lord or which negatively affect our witness of Him to others, we ought to view them as deterrents which must be removed if we want to travel more closely with Jesus. If there is something we love to do which tends to cause a slight check in our spirit or makes us sometimes wonder whether God wants us involved with it, take note of those inner flags, for it is the Holy Spirit’s voice sounding forth a warning. We must pull away from whatever

the Holy Spirit is prompting us to feel cautioned by, and cease to be involved with it. I can promise there is such freedom and joy to be found in doing so!

Look to the lives of men and women of faith throughout the Bible and learn by their testimonies. Pay attention to those people who continually put God first and set all else aside as secondary or even as that which must be gotten rid of because it ensnared or stumbled them spiritually. Their lives are given to us as examples for our own learning and for us to imitate. *“Now these things became our examples....”* (1st Corinthians 10:6) *“All these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages have come. Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall.”* (1st Corinthians 10:11,12) God didn’t include the amazing accounts and histories of His faithful children throughout the Bible for us to simply admire and then ignore. He shows us exactly how He calls us to live by showing us exactly how they were called to live. They were witnesses of authentic faithfulness and godly obedience in the broken, pagan world of their eras and they continue to be witnesses to us today. *“Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, 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.”* (Hebrews 12:1,2)

Whether it is an ostensibly harmless pursuit of financial gain that continually saps all our time and energy, a questionable relationship in which God is not at the foundation, or some form of flesh-driven pleasure, worldly

pastime, addictive hobby, or any other distraction which does not glorify God or adhere to His instructions; if we find we are investing in these things in such a way that we are not obeying the Lord's commands to live for Him or pursue His higher ways, we will not grow any deeper in our relationship with Him, nor will we experience the joy of His presence to the extent He wants us to experience it. When we habitually seek to serve secret, fleshly desires or if we have parts of our lives which we refuse to let God govern, our vessels can only be filled with those things and not with the power and mysterious workings of His Holy Spirit. We enter into the deeper joys of the Lord when we learn to let go of our carnal enslavements and be a more faithful servant of God. *"His lord said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord.'"* (Matthew 25:21) God-given joy is like a tumbling waterfall. The joy of salvation comes first, trickling and gaining force as it cascades into the joy which is found in learning and understanding His Word. It then pours with an even stronger flow into the joy of actively obeying His Word, and culminates into the fullness of joy which is found in the bottomless pool of God's refreshing holy presence. All these joyful truths flow from ledge to ledge, gaining the strength and power of His living water, the Holy Spirit, filling and overflowing us the more we build upon these precepts of joy.

There is one more source of Christian joy I want to address in this chapter, and it is the simple fact that joy is a fruit of the Holy Spirit, and thus it is a Spirit-led attitude which we can choose to practice every day as believers. *"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control..."* (Galatians 5:22,23) *"And you became followers of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much affliction, with*

joy of the Holy Spirit.” (1st Thessalonians 1:6) Joy is a choice. It is a willful practice of a Spirit-led mindset and attitude. The Lord does not command His children to do something they have no capability of doing, and we also know that with God, all things are possible. *“Jesus looked at them and said to them, ‘With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.’”* (Matthew 19:26) God commands us to rejoice in the very same way He commands us to love one another, to trust in Him, to have hope in His Word, to pray unceasingly, or to give thanks. Contrary to popular belief, these are not feelings we sit around and wait for. They are actions we are commanded and empowered to carry out as children of God. To rejoice is an action of the Spirit-led life which we are fully capable of performing. *“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.”* (1st Thessalonians 5:16-22) How do we choose an attitude of rejoicing when we are surrounded by so much godlessness, trouble, suffering, and wickedness? Pray. Ask God to teach you the attitude of joy. Pray for His Spirit to empower you to practice a joyful heart for His many blessings in your life. Look for the little joys He gives each and every day. And most importantly, set your eyes and thoughts on heaven. Stop focusing on this world. Focus instead on Jesus, His instructions, and the hope of eternal life which awaits the faithful. *“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) Peter walked on water when his eyes were looking straight at Jesus Christ in his great joy to see Him. What made Peter stumble and fall? He shifted his focus from Jesus to the threatening

winds and roiling waves. *“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!’”* (Matthew 14:28-30) We quench our joy in Christ when we take our eyes off Him and put them on our problems, our threats, our pain, and the sick, failing world in which we live.

May I encourage you today to stop allowing yourself to be caught up in and worn down by the miseries of this sin-stricken planet. Reach for a higher view. Persistently set your mind upon Jesus Christ, His Word, spiritual matters, and heaven itself. This world is not our home. Our treasure is not found here. God has given us a different goal, a different promise, and a different life in Him. *“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”* (Matthew 6:19-21) When we cease in our attempts to fulfill ourselves with the disappointing fare this world has to offer, and instead begin seeking the Lord and the higher things He offers, we will find ourselves able to rejoice. *“Let all those who seek You rejoice and be glad in You; Let such as love Your salvation say continually, ‘The LORD be magnified!’”* (Psalm 40:16) The world can only offer persecution, temptation, cursing, suffering, deception, and evil days. But what does Jesus tell us even about this? Rejoice in Him despite these things! Why? Because great is our reward in heaven. *“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 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 5:10-12)

Choose joy. Rejoice in the reality of Jesus Christ, the spiritual fruitfulness and blessings of His higher ways, and the hope of eternity He has given to those who believe. Fill your mind and heart with whatever deepens your faith and strengthens your relationship with God to the mighty heights He so desires for each of us to reach in Him. *“Finally, believers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable and worthy of respect, whatever is right and confirmed by God’s word, whatever is pure and wholesome, whatever is lovely and brings peace, whatever is admirable and of good repute; if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think continually on these things [center your mind on them, and implant them in your heart].”* (Philippians 4:8 AMP) We have been given the ability and freedom to choose joy every single day. There is a race set before us, and by our faith, Jesus runs it with us. May we look to Him and run with the joy and endurance only He can inspire. *“...Let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, 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.”* (Hebrews 12:1,2) To rejoice in the Lord is a form of worship. It springs forth from a heart that wishes to praise God in action and attitude no matter what the outward circumstances of our lives may be. Worship is not merely a song or hymn. It is a way of living that honors God with fear and reverence. If we desire to worship the Lord in spirit and in truth, we will conduct ourselves in a Spirit-led manner which reflects the thankfulness of a redeemed heart

rejoicing in God and His gracious, merciful provision of salvation and guidance. To rejoice in the Lord is to praise God's holy Name by striving to walk in His holy ways. ***“Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say, rejoice!”*** (Philippians 4:4) The Christian who ‘rejoices in the Lord always’ is a Christian who glorifies God in everything they do, no matter the circumstances, having a cheerful, content, and surrendered heart of love. May we reflect the joy of the Lord as we walk hand in hand with Him on the higher, narrower paths He has called us all to travel. In this, is fullness of joy.



Mount Arbel, Galilee Israel 2006

Looking For Joy

*I searched and searched
For the jewel called joy
To grace faith's crown in my heart
The gem was not found
In the things of this world
For it rests in the presence of God*

*So I prayed my request
To the Lord I drew near
Hoping to rejoice in His love
But I found He stayed back
Faraway and unfear'd
Like a twinkling star high above*

*Holy Spirit then rose
Convicting my soul
A veil of deceit I had worn
I ruled hidden thrones
Carnal seeds I had sown
From freedom in Christ I'd been torn*

*Awakened eyes see
The precious jewel I sought
Fled when the world was let in
Joy's radiant gleam
Shines in life set apart
So I surrendered my all to Him*

*By the cross of Christ
Salvation was wrought
His gift is discovered by faith
But the joy of the Lord
Waits on narrow paths walked
Obedience's sure reward*

Chapter 12

Follow Me

“Then Jesus said to His disciples, ‘If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me.’” (Matthew 16:24)

The Christian is set apart by God and called to travel a narrow, ascending ridge along the mountains of His grace. It is a rare and obscure path balanced between three worlds of which only the believer has been made acutely aware. The celestial kingdom of heaven soars unseen above, the hidden fires of hell burn far below, and the shadowy terrain of fallen earth makes its weary course halfway between them both. There is just enough of God and heaven shining down on the earth to instill the hope of holiness, justice, peace, and joy by way of the cross. And there is just enough of hell’s ruinous flames flickering upward to ensure the presence of evil, destruction, and suffering. The journey of those who walk with the Lord can only take place on a high and narrow road rising far above the earth’s low and crowded highways. On this path every sunrise breaks forth with promise and every setting sun sinks into the horizon with a peaceful sigh of gratitude. It is the spiritual elevation of life where the Christian walks hand in hand with Jesus Christ, Lord of all creation. He inspires, guides, loves, corrects, encourages, and unceasingly protects His own. The ascending road of the

faithful draws the child of God ever closer toward His heavenly kingdom the longer it is traveled. Each hill and valley of life can be met with a faith that perseveres, matures, and is fruitful along the way; blessing and being blessed no matter the circumstances. This indeed, is the sharply defined, spiritually separated, morally uplifted, and divinely consecrated path those who follow Jesus Christ must travel.

But the way of Christ is beset on either side with chasms of spiritual peril, and the armies of God's enemies are encamped around it, awaiting any opportunity to accost a wayward soul that has gotten off track. As believers, we do not always realize how spiritually dangerous it is to stray even just a little from the hedged-in ways of Christ. What we may think are mere ditches of harmless drifting, boundary testing, or curious wandering, are steep and precarious ravines which pose the very real threat of a freefall into places no child of God ever wants to find themselves landing. The clifftop views as seen from the farthest edges of the narrow path are tantalizing and endlessly beckon our attention, tempting us to peek down at the ways of the world with the hidden longings it sparks in our flesh. May we remember the numerous cautions given throughout Scripture which urge us to keep ourselves walking in the love of God, focusing on the straight and narrow path, holding fast to what we believe, and never turning aside to the left or to the right. *"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) *"Let your eyes look straight ahead, and your eyelids look right before you. Ponder the path of your feet, and let all your ways be established. Do not turn to the right or the left; Remove your foot from evil."* (Proverbs 4:25-27) *"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) There is good reason for the Lord’s stern warnings – lest we fall away from our steadfast faith due to increasing disobedience or we drift away from His truths which we had so zealously believed when we first came to faith. “...**Beware lest you also fall from your own steadfastness, being led away with the error of the wicked.**” (2nd Peter 3:17) “**Therefore we must give the more earnest heed to the things we have heard, lest we drift away.**” (Hebrews 2:1) “**Let us therefore be diligent to enter that rest, lest anyone fall according to the same example of disobedience.**” (Hebrews 4:11) The apostle Paul tells us, “...**I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you—unless you believed in vain.**” (1st Corinthians 15:1,2) \

These four passages explain that we keep from falling away by holding fast to the Word of God; diligently studying it, praying over it, and earnestly heeding (obeying) it. If we would just do what the Lord tells us to do, we will not stumble. “*But also for this very reason, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness, to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love. For if these things are yours and abound, you will be neither barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For he who lacks these things is shortsighted, even to blindness, and has forgotten that he was cleansed from his old sins. Therefore, brethren, be even more diligent to make your call and election sure, **for if you do these things you will never stumble**; for so an entrance will be supplied to you abundantly into the everlasting*

kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.” (2nd Peter 1:5-11) Many in the church today are stumbling. They are not personally experiencing the kind of faith they have read about and this leads to a great deal of inner doubt, apathy, and even boredom with regard to all things spiritual. Theirs is an unfulfilling relationship with the Lord and yet they are too embarrassed to even talk about the problem let alone seek wise counsel for a solution. As a result, spiritual carelessness and worldliness are bound to increasingly creep in and swallow them up until one day, the only identity they have in Christ is that of a backslider who has veered off the narrow path. Time is short and the hour grows dark as the end of this age looms closer and closer. No one knows the day or the hour of their own death, let alone the Lord’s return for the church, and this is why it is incredibly crucial that we seek right now to grow stronger in our faith, not weaker.

I have said this before but it bears repeating because it is so important. Faith and faithfulness are one and the same word in both the Hebrew and Greek manuscript languages. When we translate this key word into our English language, the very essence of what biblical faith is and does too often becomes a one-dimensional ideal, “faith”. English has a tendency to oversimplify the deeper, fuller meanings found in the original languages which the Bible was written in, so we now think this requirement of ‘faith’ is synonymous with ‘belief’. As a result, the ongoing action of ‘faithfulness’ which God intended us to understand is made inactive and irrelevant to salvation. What this misstep has done is lead many of today’s Christians into presuming faith is a thing – a noun, an ideal, a value – rather than the dynamic action of the heart God requires. Being ‘faithful’ is really very different than ‘having faith’ and it is here where American believers are stumbling. The former requires our loving diligence while the latter requires nothing but an intellectual

agreement with a theological construct. Scripture shows us a verbal confession of faith by itself is not an assurance of salvation. Anyone who promotes such a premise is spreading a weakened gospel – whether knowingly or unknowingly. The Bible repeatedly teaches us we are not saved by a faith that *professes* Jesus is Lord; we are saved by the Spirit-led faith that moves us to *serve* Jesus as Lord. Jesus speaks of this truth in a grave warning recorded in Matthew’s gospel: **“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. Many will say to Me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!’”** (Matthew 7:21-23)

Clearly, it is not what we say or profess but how we live that Jesus cares about. *“For it is not the hearers of the law are just in the sight of God, but the doers of the law will be justified.”* (Romans 2:13) The issue is not that we do works to become saved, but rather that our Spirit-led obedience to the will of the Father works out our faith and demonstrates our divinely changed heart. Practical faithfulness makes our profession of faith true in both word and deed, while the leading of the Holy Spirit assures us Jesus knows us personally. It is only through our faithfulness in serving the Lord and heeding His commands that He can perfect His will in us and free us from the mastery of our sin nature. Believers are directly told they must learn to walk just as Jesus walked. **“He who says, ‘I know Him,’ and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But whoever keeps His word, truly the love of God is perfected in him. By this we know that we are in Him. He who says he abides in Him ought himself also to walk just as He walked.”** (1st John 2:4-6) The Bible contains several hard

and fast truths about faith and salvation which are not being adequately taught or even discussed in many Christian circles. Seekers of God are told to ‘just believe in Jesus, say a prayer, and be saved’ – as though nothing else need be done and they can go about their lives as usual. This is a false gospel. It is void of the Holy Spirit’s divine conviction of sin (a changed mind); it is void of repentance (a changed heart); and it ignores the sanctifying walk of faith (a changed life) commanded of every believer. Let’s remember that John the Baptist came preaching repentance before Jesus came to preach of salvation. There is a reason for this. Repentance comes first. Jesus Himself preached of repentance before He taught on any other facet of salvation. The Lord began His ministry by first echoing John’s command to repent. “*From that time Jesus began to preach and to say, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.’*” (Matthew 4:17) Two verses later, Matthew tells us Jesus began calling those who believed in Him to drop what they were doing and follow Him. This is a vivid portrayal of repentance in action. “*Then He said to them, ‘Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men.’ They immediately left their nets and followed Him.*” (Matthew 4:19, 20)

Biblically repentant faith can have only one result and that result is a changed heart and changed life – a life of *following Jesus*. What do we think following Jesus means? This rest of this chapter will more thoroughly explore the biblical answer to that question. The cheapened grace so often peddled as Christianity today is deceptive because it lacks the whole truth of the Lord’s gospel. People are being fed a brand of faith which is marketed as Christian but is really more of a religious ideal rather than the dramatic, life changing event God teaches us it should be. The call to faithfulness which God places upon the souls of men *is a call that costs*. Yes, redemption is a free gift of God. It is freely

offered by the One who paid the requisite price of mankind's rebellion. But receiving this inestimable gift will cause a divine invasion of the heart which leads us to pick up our crosses, crucify the flesh, and surrender ourselves to God's rule in every facet of our lives. That is the cost – we lose our lives to gain His. *“Whoever seeks to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life will preserve it.”* (Luke 17:33) *“For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?”* (Matthew 16:25,26)

Faith in Jesus Christ justifies the sinner in the eyes of God, but it does not justify willful, ongoing sin or godless living. *“Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law.”* (Romans 3:31 NASB) We are told here and in a multitude of other passages that faith in Jesus Christ does not nullify the commands of God but rather leads the believer to uphold them. Oh, Christian of today, do you not see what this is telling you? Faith in Christ's work on the cross does not exempt us from obeying Him. He came to fulfill the laws and commands of God and as those who are His faithful followers, we are to do the same, for we are told to imitate the Lord and walk as He walked. *“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) *He who says he abides in Him ought himself also to walk just as He walked.”* (1st John 2:6)

Faith in Jesus Christ justifies. Faithfulness to Jesus sanctifies. The true Christian will walk in newness of life – the marvelous harmony of a morally and spiritually enlightened existence that worships the Father by following the Son in spirit and in truth. We are repeatedly commanded not to continue in our old sins and godless habits because if

we have been born again, that flesh-driven life is now considered to be dead. By faith, Christians have been set free of sin's slavery and raised up to serve the Lord rather than the flesh. Paul further expounds on this truth in the following passage. *“Shall we continue in sin that God's grace may abound? Certainly not! How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it? Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin.”* (Romans 6:1-6)

Matthew's recorded warning is a truth we must take to heart as Christians. *“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.** Many will say to Me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?’ And then I will declare to them, **‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!’**”* (Matthew 7:21-23) We will not be asked whether we called Jesus ‘Lord, Lord’ or even if we did ‘good works in His name’. We will only be asked whether or not we did the will of the Father in heaven while we walked this earth. We will be asked if we followed the Son of Glory in a loving, surrendered, and trusting faith as God has commanded – for that indeed, is the will of the Father for each of us. *“Then a voice came out of the cloud, saying, ‘This is My beloved Son, My Chosen One; listen and obey and yield to Him!’”* (Luke 9:35 AMP) God wrote His Word with the intention that it

would be believed on **and obeyed**. He sent His Son with the same purpose; that He would be believed on **and obeyed**. Jesus and the Word of God are one and the same in authority and intention. There is literally no other reason for Scripture to exist but that those who read it would choose to abide by what it says. *“But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.”* (James 1:22) There is no other reason for Jesus to have come into this world but that those of us who believe in Him would faithfully obey Him. We are never told to play games with or hold scholarly debates over Scripture’s multifaceted meanings, patterns, and imageries while carelessly continuing to live just like the world around us. Whether we fully understand what the Lord has written to the extent we ought to does not matter in the slightest. The Author of the Bible is God. The only response we should have to what He has written is to do what it says.

If we really believe God is our divine Creator and only Savior; if we really believe He wrote His Word by the power of His Holy Spirit; our humble and unquestioning obedience to its instructions is the only sensible reaction we can possibly have. All else is willful rebellion justified by convenient rationalizations which the carnal mind generates in order to avoid changing the coveted ways of our own sin nature. Please understand. If we say we have faith in Jesus and His Word, and yet we choose not to obey the commands He gives, we are offering God a lie. Our faith is lip service. We have merely embraced a theological construct by making a mental assent to it, yet our hearts are unchanged and remain insubordinate to God’s divine will. *“These people draw near to Me with their mouth, and honor Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. And in vain they worship Me...”* (Matthew 15:8,9) There is only one takeaway we ought to have when reading Scripture: Almighty God has spoken, do we dare disobey Him?

Jesus gives a simple command: "Follow Me". This directive is the Lord's clear declaration as to what faith in Him looks like. Following Jesus is nonnegotiable. If we do not strive to follow Jesus in both word and deed, the salvation He won on that terrible cross is not available to us. *"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) *"My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth. And by this we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before Him."* (1st John 3:18,19) Look at how many clear, indisputable examples we are given of this truth. The Lord walked by Peter and Andrew and gave the command; *'Follow Me'*. (Matthew 4:19) The sons of Zebedee, James and John, immediately left their nets, their boat, and even their father, to follow the Lord in unquestioning, faith-inspired obedience. *"Going on from there, He saw two other brothers, James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother, in the boat with Zebedee their father, mending their nets. He called them, and immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed Him."* (Matthew 4:21,22) Jesus walked past an eager scribe and a certain disciple who both declared they wanted to follow Him as well, but He knew their hearts were not ready to repent or obey. Even so, Jesus did not alter His command but simply instructed them to follow Him. *"Then a certain scribe came and said to Him, 'Teacher, I will follow You wherever You go.' And Jesus said to him, 'Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head.' Then another of His disciples said to Him, 'Lord, let me first go and bury my father.' But Jesus said to him, 'Follow Me, and let the dead bury their own dead.'* (Matthew 8:19-22)

When Jesus encountered Matthew (Levi), a tax collector, He bid him to follow. The man left his post to instantly begin

walking with the Lord in faith. *“As Jesus passed on from there, He saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax office. And He said to him, ‘Follow Me.’ So he arose and followed Him.”* (Matthew 9:9) Philip was then called to follow Jesus in the very same manner, and he did so without question, even taking Nathaniel with him. *“The following day Jesus wanted to go to Galilee, and He found Philip and said to him, ‘Follow Me.’ Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael and said to him, ‘We have found Him of whom Moses in the law, and also the prophets, wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.’ And Nathanael said to him, ‘Can anything good come out of Nazareth?’ Philip said to him, ‘Come and see.’”* (John 1:43-46) These passages are not recorded in the Bible for us to just marvel at how amazing it was that these men dropped everything, left their old lives behind, and immediately began follow Jesus in faith. The accounts are written so we would emulate them. Through these historical events God gave us a clear pattern and a concise demonstration of what soul-saving, biblically sound faith is and looks like. To have faith in Jesus is to follow Jesus. It is that simple. *“Then Jesus said to His disciples, ‘If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it.’”* (Matthew 16:24,25) The command of Christ is clear. Follow Him and be saved.

Following Jesus includes serving Him in whatever manners He directs us to serve. Usually our spiritual giftings and ministries will be geared toward those who are in our immediate circle of influence; whether it is the people at our place of work, in our city of residence, in our neighborhood, at our church, or in our home. Some Christians will feel a strong pull for missionary work, but most of us have plenty to do for the kingdom of heaven just by investing in the lives

of those who are right in front of us on a daily or weekly basis. Regardless of where Jesus prompts us to shine His light, the command to follow Him requires from us a life committed to walking with Him by faith. If we are walking with Him, then by necessity we will be walking *like* Him. *“He who says he abides in Him ought himself also to walk just as He walked.”* (1st John 2:6)

It is such a wrestling to bring these truths to light today because so many in the body of Christ are clinging to an overcorrected form of ‘faith alone’ idealism which requires nothing from them but a one-time confession of faith mixed with nominal duties of church attendance or Bible studying. This, my friends, is the essence of religion. But God desires a relationship of the heart. Yes, faith alone saves the soul. Surely there is no amount of good works or religious acts we can do that will redeem us or make any one of us spiritually born again. Redemption is a work only the Son of God could accomplish and it is our faith in what He has done that provides us entrance into His kingdom. *“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) This passage is a wonderful truth of God which decries religiosity and points directly to God’s grace. But we must take such a truth in context with what God says faith IS and what God says faith DOES in a person’s heart and life. When we examine the whole counsel of God, we will see His definition of ‘by grace through faith’ vastly differs from what many people think it means. Far too many people have taken the ‘faith alone’ precept and carried it to an extreme point where it means absolutely nothing to them on a real life platform. Their faith has made no transformative impact. There is no counting the cost, no crucified life, no consecration, no changed heart, no fear of God, and no ongoing sanctification. The Bible informs us

believers such as these are deceiving themselves. *“But be doers of the Word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.”* (James 1:22) *“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?”* (James 2:20-22) Again, works are never the means of salvation. But spiritually renewed hearts and minds which exhibit the good works of God and the fruits of His Holy Spirit are *always* the corresponding result and effect of authentic salvation.

Scripture teaches us the faith that saves is a faith that follows Jesus. How do we follow Jesus? We abide in His Word, we walk according to His Spirit, and we obey His commands. *“If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth.”* (1st John 1:6) *“Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments. He who says, ‘I know Him,’ and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But whoever keeps His Word, truly the love of God is perfected in him. By this we know that we are in Him. He who says he abides in Him ought himself also to walk just as He walked.”* (1st John 2:3-6) God saves souls to sanctify souls. He makes this goal very evident throughout Scripture. The Lord has zero intentions of leaving us in the wretched, self-ruled, self-focused state of godlessness in which He found us. He wants a personal relationship with each one of us and that can only happen if we truly bow the knee and walk with Him in real, spiritual fellowship. There is no fellowship between light and dark, or rebellion and righteousness. *“...For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness?”* (2nd Corinthians 6:14) So yes, we come to Him

as we are. We receive His gift of salvation by faith. But His divine ambition and highest will for those who profess His name is and always has been to transform us from the inside out, and that is only done by our faithfulness to His commands and His Word.

The born-again heart is a spiritually changed heart. It is a new heart given to us by God and its focus will be on new things. It is a softer, circumcised heart that increasingly becomes imprinted by the Lord's own hand as He refashions it according to His higher will and ways. Jeremiah prophesies this very thing about the New Covenant which was to come through Jesus Christ: "*...I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.*" (Jeremiah 31:33) "*With my whole heart I have sought You; Oh, let me not wander from Your commandments! Your Word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against You.*" (Psalm 119:10,11) God pierces and effectually circumcises the formerly hard, sin-calloused heart. He plows its fallow ground with His deep-cutting truths while implanting a brand new desire to seek Him, praise Him, and obey Him. "*...circumcision is that of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter; whose praise is not from men but from God.*" (Romans 2:29) "*Clearly you are an epistle of Christ, ministered by us, written not with ink but by the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of flesh, that is, of the heart.*" (2nd Corinthians 3:3)

No one who is truly born again can keep living their lives in the same manner they were before they embraced Jesus as Lord and not experience a great deal of inner conflict. If such a person were to try and retain their old ways, a battle would rage within, for the flesh lusts against the indwelling Spirit of God. God's Spirit must overcome the pull of the flesh if we are to ever abide in His peace. The eternity of those who

remain relatively unchanged by their faith may be resting perilously on God's righteous balances and it is because their hearts are not humbled and their lives do not glorify God. I am reminded of a passage in Daniel, where the Lord's judgment is pronounced upon Belshazzar. *"But you, Belshazzar, **have not humbled your heart**, although you knew all this. And you have lifted yourself up against the **Lord of heaven**. They have brought the vessels of His house before you, and you and your lords, your wives and your concubines, have drunk wine from them. And you have praised the gods of silver and gold, bronze and iron, wood and stone, which do not see or hear or know; and **the God who holds your breath in His hand and owns all your ways, you have not glorified**. Then the fingers of the hand were sent from Him, and this is the inscription that was written. 'Mene, Mene, Tekel, Upharsin [Peres]' This is the interpretation of each word. MENE: God has numbered your kingdom, and finished it; TEKEL: You have been weighed in the balances, and found wanting [lacking]; PERES: Your kingdom has been divided..."* (Daniel 5:23-28)

If we say we believe in Jesus but we do not strive to follow His commands, we are only practicing a mindset that mimics the devil's chosen stance. The hordes of hell fully believe Jesus Christ is the Son of God who died for all humanity, yet they do not follow Him, worship Him, or obey Him. Their desire is instead to exist in a state of rebellion toward the One who created them, even knowing His wrathful judgment is due them. It is for this reason they tremble. *"You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe—and tremble!"* (James 2:19) How are we any different than the devil and his minions if we acknowledge God's existence, believe Jesus died for our sins, know what the Bible teaches, and yet we consistently

and even willfully disregard His commands or twist His instructions to mean what we want them to mean? Such a costless, powerless, faith as this is a sparkling lure hanging on the line of hell's fishing pole. How many have jumped up to swallow it whole, only to find out too late they have hungrily eaten the bait of damnation? When will we understand a life not surrendered to following Jesus and His Word is not a life of faith in Him at all?

We simply do not know what we lost in Eden. We have no true grasp of it. It is so incredibly difficult for us to wrap our minds around the wonderful things God stands so ready to give us, pour out onto us, and bless us with, if only we would reach up and embrace all He offers while discarding what He tells us to cast aside. God's heart is to give those He made in His image a life worth living; a precious life of spiritual harmony, wholeness, power, and peace. He seeks to reclaim His 'oneness' with us which was so tragically lost in the garden. He redeems us not just for our eternal salvation but to refashion our hearts and our very lives, so we can better reflect His image and experience a level of spiritual wellbeing similar to what He originally bestowed on Adam and Eve. Unlike our English word for 'life', the Hebrew word for life is God-oriented at its base. Knowing this truth can make our walk of faith far more understandable and meaningful. The Name of God in Hebrew is 'Yahweh'. Yahweh is derived from the root word ('haya') which means "to be" or "life". This root word in the very name of God tells us a story. God simply IS; He is the ever-existent One. He IS, always WAS, always WILL BE. He is the Great 'I AM' of the burning bush. God is life itself and the Maker of it. Jesus informs us in John 10:10, "*I came that they may **have life**, and have it more abundantly.*" In John 14:6, He says, "*I am the way, the truth, and **the life**...*" When God says He came to give us life, it means He came to give us

Himself. In Deuteronomy 30:15,16, Moses says this to the people of Israel: *“I have set before you today life and good, or death and evil”*. That is the choice God sets before all mankind. It was the choice given in Eden. It was the choice to be made in the wilderness. It was the choice presented in the promised land of the Israelites. And it is the choice each of us must make today. We choose ‘life and good’ by choosing God. Moses continues in Deuteronomy to explain what that choice looks like: *“I command you today to love the LORD your God, to walk in His ways, and to keep His commandments, His statutes, and His judgments, that you may live and multiply; and the LORD your God will bless you...”* (Deuteronomy 30:16) From the Hebrew worldview, all life is entirely about God – how we live, why we live, and who we live it with. The intention is wrapped up in ‘Yahweh’ and ‘haya’ – God, who *is life*. We were created by God to live for God, with God, and in His nature. When Adam and Eve fell from grace in Eden, the whole basis of human existence was lost; our oneness with God. We lost the excitement and adventure of His divine wisdom and knowledge being daily poured through our souls. We lost His loving presence reigning over every aspect of our lives and we’ve no idea how devastating that loss really is. But God has not forgotten, and that is why He came to give us life – His life.

When used as a verb the Hebrew word ‘haya’ means ‘to live’ but it carries the idea that to exercise human vitality to its fullest, most blessed capacity, we must have every facet of our human nature (body, soul, and spirit) wholly submitted under the headship of God. In fact, this is the full intent of the 1st Commandment. *“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) “To live” in the Hebrew language context means to love and serve God with our

whole being in complete harmony. That is, the heart, soul, mind, and strength of every believer is made harmonious and completely whole by the indwelling presence of God. Today, the way we accomplish this goal by becoming born again through our belief that Jesus Christ is the Lord and Savior of our souls. That is salvation. And then, we *follow Jesus* by embracing the ongoing sanctification which faith requires and of which the Scriptures teach.

How do we follow Jesus? We abide in His Word. We walk in His ways. We obey His instructions. We keep His commandments. These statements all mean the exact same thing. The faith that saves the soul, the faith that God offers the whole world, is the faith that follows His Son. “...*If you abide in My Word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.*” (John 8:31,32) “*He who says he abides in Him ought himself also to walk just as He walked.*” (1st John 2:6) “*Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments. He who says, ‘I know Him,’ and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But whoever keeps His word, truly the love of God is perfected in him. By this we know that we are in Him.*” (1st John 2:3-5) Stay close to Jesus in this life. Biblical faith in the cross of Christ requires the dual-headed actions of both belief and obedience to the One who has redeemed all humanity with His blood. We have a passage in Hebrews which we quote often to describe what pleases the Lord. “*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) In the original language, this passage reads as, “*But without **faithfulness**, it is impossible to please Him...*” There is a stark difference between the two readings which ought to grab our attention and deeply affect how we understand what the Lord’s

expectations of His children really are. Let us also not discount the rest of the declaration which demonstrates there must be a diligence in all our ways to seek the Lord, to come to Him for guidance, to believe what He has said, and thus submit to Him accordingly.

An interestingly-worded truth in an old book written by a worthy Christian author reads as follows, *“Only he who believes is obedient, and only he who is obedient believes.”* (The Cost of Discipleship, by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 1937) The author goes on further to explain that both belief and obedience must bear the weight of faith, for they are yoked as equally as two oxen pulling a plow. Such a description is an accurate picture of a biblical truth we seem to have lost in today’s world. Brothers and sisters, it is clear from Scripture that there is no such thing as faith in the Lord without faithfulness to the Lord. It would be just as absurd for me to tell people I am a carpenter without having ever used a saw or a hammer. How can I say I am what I do not do? How do I justify a title that I have no intentions of making valid in reality? I cannot. And that is why God tells us it is a lie to say we are of the faith if we do not keep His commands. *“Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments. He who says, ‘I know Him,’ and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But whoever keeps His word, truly the love of God is perfected in him. By this we know that we are in Him.”* (1st John 2:3-5) *“If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth.”* (1st John 1:6)

The Lord does not mince words. He is not an author of confusion, but rather gives us His unchanging truths in very direct, black and white terms. *“For God is not the author of confusion but of peace...”* (1st Corinthians 14:33) The Lord

explicitly informs us throughout His Word that a faith which is not being worked out in spirit and in truth is both a lie and a deception.

Follow Jesus. It's a simple command given by the Son of the living God to anyone who desires to walk with Him in this life and the next. May we never complicate what the Lord meant to be simple. May we never dilute or soft-peddle it with the modernized rationales of human philosophy or willful, self-deceiving opinions. *“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. 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 2:6-8) I know this is a hard-hitting chapter. But it contains a fundamental, biblical foundation sorely lacking today. I look around at myself and at mainstream Christianity and wonder how so much of what we see, hear, and practice has been allowed to creep into the church unchallenged and untested by Scripture. People are professing the name of Jesus but are not actually following Him in their daily lives. We seem to think that when we become saved we inherently become sanctified. Salvation and sanctification are not the same. They are two sides of the same coin, to be sure, but while the sacrificial blood of Jesus is divinely imputed to the believer upon salvation, *repentance is never imputed.* Likewise, the lifelong process of *sanctification is never imputed.* Both are commands given to the believer to perform. Only the believer can follow Jesus, for the Lord cannot follow Himself. The Lord also cannot believe for us, repent for us, obey for us, or be sanctified on our behalf. Yes, the Holy Spirit inspires, sustains, and matures us as we walk with the Lord by faith. But the starting point, the ongoing

act, and the race-finishing intention of the heart which opens the flow of His Spirit into our lives and empowers us in our faith is our own personal, intentional obedience to Jesus Christ. May we never disregard the Lord's crucial yet simple command which beckons us to join Him on the narrow path of faith with just two words, "Follow Me."

Follow Me

*The one command I give you
Pick up your cross and follow Me
I will place My Spirit in you
So repent and just believe*

*I can see your life of struggle
Set it down and follow Me
Your selfish ways are trouble
Cast them off and follow Me*

*The burdens you are bearing
Lay them fully at My feet
The crown of thorns you're wearing
Must be worn by Me*

*To have a life worth living
You can choose to follow Me
Take the gift that I am giving
A sacrifice that made Me bleed*

*All your sinful ways surrender
Walk in fellowship with Me
In your heart I'll wield the scepter
Lose yourself and follow Me*

“If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me.” (Matthew 16:24)



Following the Path

En Gedi, Dead Sea, Israel 2006

Chapter 13

God is My Teacher

“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 25:12-14)

There is a due place in our lives for godly, scripturally-grounded teachers of the Bible. The body of Christ desperately needs sound-minded Bible teachers who rightly divide His Word and expound upon it with Spirit-led skill. If it were not so, the Lord would not have created the capacity of teaching as being one of the primary spiritual giftings or ministries which He gives to the church. *“For as we have many members in one body, but all the members do not have the same function, so we, being many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another. **Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, let us use them:** if prophecy, let us prophesy in proportion to our faith; or ministry, let us use it in our ministering; **he who teaches, in teaching;** he who exhorts, in exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness.”* (Romans 12:4-8) *“And **God has appointed these in the church:** first apostles, second prophets, **third teachers,** after*

that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, varieties of tongues.” (1st Corinthians 12:28) God clearly desires certain members of His flock to become teachers of His Word and His ways. Therefore, He consecrates some to have the capacity and calling for teaching the brethren.

However, it is also important for us to understand that our first and foremost teacher is and always ought to be God Himself. The Hebrew word “*moriel*” means “God is my teacher”. May we keep this title in front of us as we strive to learn His Word more deeply and more fruitfully on our own. When we subject ourselves to the teachings of other men and women without first placing ourselves under the Lord’s direct instruction via His Word and Holy Spirit, we will miss out on the depth of comprehension and the meaningful, inner dialogue which only His Spirit can provide through our one-on-one time with Him. God is our ultimate Teacher. It is He who instructs and anoints those whose gifting is teaching. Their task and calling is to simply share what God has revealed to them through His Word, through prayer, and through His mysterious and deeper understandings which the Holy Spirit initiates and accomplishes from within. As we grow in our own faith, we too, must seek to learn from God directly, through those very same venues. It is this personal, intimate learning which every Christian is encouraged to pursue and cultivate, for the Lord is our very best source of spiritual truth, godliness, and wisdom.

Church doctrines, Christian books, Bible studies and commentaries – these all can play a key role in growing our knowledge and maturing our faith. But the highest, most effective, heart-changing wisdom we can ever receive is the wisdom which comes to us from God as we prayerfully read His Word. Only the Lord provides the unique, personal

discipline and inner convictions we need to correct our own false ideas or wrong thinking. *“He who disciplines the nations, will He not rebuke, He who teaches mankind knowledge? The LORD knows human thoughts, that they are mere breath. Blessed is the man whom You discipline, LORD, and whom You teach from Your Law, so that You may grant him relief from the days of adversity...”* (Psalm 94:10-13) Only our beloved Lord and Savior can show us our hidden iniquities and shine His bright, omniscient light upon our secret sins. God Himself is who truly teaches us to properly fear and obey Him in all things. *“You have set our iniquities before You, our secret sins in the light of Your countenance. For all our days have passed away in Your wrath; We finish our years like a sigh. The days of our lives are seventy years; and if by reason of strength they are eighty years, yet their boast is only labor and sorrow; for it is soon cut off, and we fly away. Who knows the power of Your anger? For as the fear of You, so is Your wrath. So teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom...”* (Psalm 90:8-12) When we realize in our deepening intimacy with the Lord how much He is really with us and is entirely aware of our every wayward thought and selfish propensity, we learn by His unseen and sometimes heavy hand upon our hearts to fear Him in a way that keeps us from much evil, prevents us from pursuing cleverly disguised wickedness, and causes us to carefully redeem the time and days we have been given. Only God can do these things for us and within us as our indwelling, holy, and exulted Teacher.

The Lord generously gifted the apostle Paul to be not only a church planter (apostle), an evangelist, a leader, an encourager, and even at times a healer, but He also gave him the gift of teaching. We know this for a fact because to this day Christians across the world continue to learn from Paul’s

divinely inspired epistles written to the many churches he planted on his missionary journeys. Where did Paul get his vast store of wisdom, understanding, and personal knowledge of the Lord and His many instructions for living the life of faith? He learned directly from Jesus Christ. First, Paul was taught by God's Word through a lifetime of avidly studying the Old Testament Scriptures when he was raised up as a zealous and skilled Pharisee in his community. But he was also taught by Jesus Christ Himself, beginning with the moment he was dramatically blinded by the Lord and knocked off his horse on the way to Damascus.

*“Then Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked letters from him to the synagogues of Damascus, so that if he found any who were of the Way, whether men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. As he journeyed he came near Damascus, and suddenly a light shone around him from heaven. Then he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?’ And he said, ‘Who are You, Lord?’ **Then the Lord said, ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. It is hard for you to kick against the goads.’** So he, trembling and astonished, said, ‘Lord, what do You want me to do?’ **Then the Lord said to him, ‘Arise and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.’** And the men who journeyed with him stood speechless, hearing a voice but seeing no one. Then Saul arose from the ground, and when his eyes were opened he saw no one. But they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank... **But the Lord said to him, ‘Go, for he is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel. For I [the Lord] will show him how many things he must suffer for***

***My name's sake.** ' And Ananias went his way and entered the house; and laying his hands on him he said, 'Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you came, has sent me that you may receive your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.' Immediately there fell from his eyes something like scales, and he received his sight at once; and he arose and was baptized.'* (Acts 9:1-18)

The Lord's personal, one-on-one instruction and teaching of Paul (formerly known as Saul of Tarsus) continued over a three-year period in Damascus, where Paul remained far away and set apart from all the other apostles and disciples whom Jesus had raised up during His earthly ministry. *"But I make known to you, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man. For **I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but it came through the revelation of Jesus Christ.** For you have heard of my former conduct in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it. And I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries in my own nation, being more exceedingly zealous for the traditions of my fathers. But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother's womb and called me through His grace, to reveal His Son in me, that I might preach Him among the Gentiles, **I did not immediately confer with flesh and blood, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me; but I went to Arabia, and returned again to Damascus. Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to see Peter, and remained with him fifteen days. But I saw none of the other apostles except James, the Lord's brother.**"* (Galatians 1:11-19)

God was Paul's teacher and He intends to be ours as well. In learning directly from His Spirit and His Word, we can be assured we will receive no false doctrines, no

corrupted theology, and no manmade religiosity. How do we learn from God? We start by having our hearts fully prepared to receive from Him all He desires to show us, all He desires to give us, and all He desires to correct or change in our lives. If we approach Him without any intentions to really submit ourselves to His higher ways and teachings, we will be unable to learn anything from Him at all, aside from the basic principles of salvation and truth which is akin to the milk an infant needs to feed upon when initially born. God has so much more for us than the milk of His Word. But tragically, for many of us, even the milk of the Word is not getting into our hearts, for it has been diluted with the compromises and modernized theological preferences of today's more popular brands of Christianity. Paul rebukes the church in Corinth for not progressing in their faith by using the milk analogy. *“And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual people but as to carnal, as to babes in Christ. I fed you with milk and not with solid food; for until now you were not able to receive it, and even now you are still not able; for you are still carnal. For where there are envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like mere men?”* (1st Corinthians 3:1-3)

Notice from these verses that when we are still infants in the faith, we tend to remain carnal in behavior, mindsets, and attitudes. God wants us to progress far more quickly from that infantile state than most of us usually do. This is because when we do not grow up and become mature, we will not behave in manners which glorify Him or reflect His higher nature, just as Paul alluded to in the passage above. We are encouraged to grow in our knowledge of God to the point where we are able to eat and digest the meat of His Word (the deeper spiritual understandings and crucial principles those maturing in their faith are able to receive, comprehend, and embrace). It is also God's aim to equip us

to then turn around and be fully capable of teaching and sharing these more developed truths and precepts with others – regardless of whether teaching is a spiritual gifting we have been allotted or not. ***“For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food. For everyone who partakes only of milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.”*** (Hebrews 5:12-14) We grow more discerning by practicing and living out the Lord’s instructions. ‘By reason of use’ indicates we have gained practical experience by exercising or living out the lessons we are taught. This firsthand experience causes us to become more spiritually discerning, more able to hear His voice when He speaks, and more capable of receiving and applying further instructions as He reveals them through the diligent study of His Word. ***“Study to show yourself approved unto God, a workman that need not be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.”*** (2nd Timothy 2:15)

The Bible discusses the need for having our hearts prepared to not only seek God’s input but to actually do as He instructs. ***“LORD, You have heard the desire of the humble; You will prepare their heart...”*** (Psalm 10:17) ***“Nevertheless good things are found in you, in that you have removed the wooden images from the land, and have prepared your heart to seek God.”*** (2nd Chronicles 19:3) ***“He came to Jerusalem, according to the good hand of his God upon him. For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the Law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach statutes and ordinances in Israel.”*** (Ezra 7:10) When we prepare our hearts to be amenable to God’s instructions as well as His corrections and discipline, we will find His good, strong

hand upon us; leading, directing, impressing, and heavily influencing our thought patterns in entirely different ways than how we formerly functioned. It's truly an amazing experience to sit at the feet of Jesus by studying His Word and drawing near to Him in prayer, and then be made acutely aware of our wrong thinking or erroneous ways of approaching life which we have constructed over the years. Sometimes, we literally have to unlearn very basic yet ungodly mindsets in order to renew those patterns of thinking with God's foundational precepts before we can move forward and effectively absorb deeper teachings.

Psalm 119 declares this truth in the following verses: *"Make me understand the way of Your precepts, so I will meditate on Your wonders. My soul weeps because of grief; strengthen me according to Your word. Remove the false way from me, and graciously grant me Your law. I have chosen the faithful way; I have placed Your ordinances before me."* (Psalm 119:27-30) "Make me understand the way of Your precepts"... This is not a plea to understand what God's precepts are, but a plea to understand the very *way of them*... how they work, why they work, what they look like, and how they change us, so we can become better equipped to function and even to think in the manners God would have us function and think. We need to learn *the way* of His precepts. This is a much more involved process than simply learning *what* God's precepts are. It is about incorporating them into our lives to the point where they become the fundamental basis of how we live, and move, and have our being. *"In Him we live and move and have our being..."* (Acts 17:28) Furthermore, the verses in Psalm 119 lead to a plea where the psalmist asks God to *"remove the false way from me and graciously grant me Your law."* (Psalm 119:29) We want to not only understand the way of God's precepts, but we need Him to reveal and help us remove all the false

ways we might be practicing. False ways consist of any preconceived, world-influenced, humanistic, culturally-based, fleshly, or unbiblical ideas, patterns, perceptions, reasonings, and understandings of ourselves and the world around us. The issue at hand concerns God's desire for us to take off the fallen ways of our old man in order to put on the godly ways of our new, Spirit-led self. "...*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 4:22-24) It is God's goal to renew both our minds and hearts so we can begin viewing this world how He sees it and we can start conducting ourselves in the spiritually prosperous manners He commands.

"He who instructs the nations, shall He not correct, He who teaches man knowledge? The LORD knows the thoughts of man, that they are futile. Blessed is the man whom You instruct, O LORD, and teach out of Your law, that You may give him rest from the days of adversity..." (Psalm 94:10-13) Once again, we see the Lord gives us a promise of spiritual blessings and rest when we allow Him to instruct us. Such a truth ought to inspire every believer to sit daily at the Lord's feet as His captivated student, learning everything they can about how to walk in His ways. "*Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, To the house of the God of Jacob; He will teach us His ways, And we shall walk in His paths.*" (Micah 4:2) Jesus came to this earth to die not only for humanity's rebellion but He also came to be our Teacher. The Lord's disciples, apostles, the unsaved masses, and even His professed enemies (the Pharisees, Sadducees, Jewish scribes, leaders, and rabbis) recognized Him as a "Teacher sent by God". "...**Teacher**, we know that You are true, and teach the way of God in truth..." (Matthew 22:16)

*“But you, do not be called ‘Rabbi’; for **One is your Teacher, the Christ**, and you are all brethren.” (Matthew 23:8) “Now a certain ruler asked Him, saying, ‘**Good Teacher**, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?’ So Jesus said to him, ‘Why do you call Me good? No one is good but One, that is, God. ‘You know the commandments: ‘Do not commit adultery,’ ‘Do not murder,’ ‘Do not steal,’ ‘Do not bear false witness,’ ‘Honor your father and your mother.’ And he said, ‘All these things I have kept from my youth.’ So when Jesus heard these things, He said to him, ‘You still lack one thing. Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.’” (Luke 18:18-22) The Lord is our heavenly Teacher and we learn best from Him by imitating His ways and working out His instructions for ourselves.*

The problem for some of us is that we like to sit under the Lord as students, but we reject the idea of homework. We do not desire to put into practice what we have learned. This was the dilemma of the rich young ruler spoken of in the gospel of Luke referenced above. He felt he had sufficiently obeyed God’s commands, but he was not willing to leave his old life behind and truly follow Jesus in a new manner of living and being. Jesus promised we will never be without His direct instruction. We who believe and follow Him will have the indwelling presence of His Spirit. *“But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you.” (John 14:26)* We cannot always notice the deep-seated teaching ministry of the Holy Spirit because His ways are quite hidden from our understanding. What we can do is trust God’s Word. He tells us He is always at work for He does not sleep, rest, or grow weary in His efforts to transform and sanctify our hearts, minds, and bodies. If we are submitted to the Lord in faith, and abiding

in His Word, we can depend on this truth. *“My help comes from the LORD, Who made heaven and earth. He will not allow your foot to be moved; He who keeps you will not slumber.”* (Psalm 121:2,3) Even in the night, while we are sleeping, God is working to renew our minds, transform our focus, correct our conduct, and increase our understanding of Him. He will endlessly discipline, restore, and enlighten us whether we are awake or asleep, sick or well, caught up in a wayward doctrine, or walking in His truth. The Lord’s Holy Spirit always works to accomplish His highest will and His best plan for our lives. May we seek to sit as His feet and learn from Him all we can. I have gained much valuable insight from worthy and anointed Bible scholars, godly pastors, Spirit-led brothers and sisters in Christ, and knowledgeable Christian authors. But I have learned most deeply from the lessons God administers by His own hand and Spirit, for He is my greatest Teacher. He is Moriel.

*“In a dream, a vision of the night [one may hear God’s voice], when deep sleep falls on men, while slumbering upon the bed, then **He opens the ears of men and seals their instruction, that He may turn man aside from his conduct, and keep him from pride**; He holds back his soul from the pit [of destruction], and his life from passing over into Sheol (the nether world, the place of the dead). Man is also disciplined with pain on his bed, and with unceasing complaint in his bones, so that his life makes him loathe food, and his soul [loathe] even his favorite dishes. His flesh is so wasted away that it cannot be seen, and his bones which were not seen now stick out. Then his soul draws near to the pit [of destruction], and his life to those who bring death (the destroyers). If there is an angel as a mediator for him, one out of a thousand, to explain to a man what is right for him [that is, how to be in right standing with God], then the angel is gracious to him, and says, ‘Spare him*

from going down to the pit [of destruction]; I have found a ransom [a consideration, or reason for redemption, an atonement]! Let his flesh be restored and become fresher than in youth; Let him return to the days of his youthful strength. He will pray to God, and He shall be favorable to him, so that he looks at His face with joy; for God restores to man His righteousness...” (Job 33:15-26 AMP)



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God is My Teacher

*I await His touch as a jar of clay
On a spinning potter's wheel
Designing me for His highest ways
He shapes my heart to yield*

*I learn His Word as a student rapt
Sitting at the Teacher's feet
God's voice alone instructs my path
Like honey His scrolls are sweet*

*Heart carved deep with the Sword of truth
Moriel lays bare my soul
He crushes sin, revealing higher views
Creating diamonds from my coal*

*I discover more each and every day
Heaven's classroom I won't leave
As the Lord expounds His amazing grace
To God my Teacher I must cleave*

Moriel is His Name

*There is a chasm between
The knowledge we read
And the way in which it is lived*

*His Word we believe
And our minds all agree
But the action falls through like a sieve*

*Man's opinion sneaks in
Vain philosophy wins
Compromised is the service we give*

*Faith's intention is there
But no head is laid bare
To honor the One who forgives*

*We desire to draw near
But we don't walk in fear
And God has no fellowship with sin*

*Every soul needs to pray
His foundations be laid
May His Spirit pierce us within*

*It is God who will teach
And His right hand will reach
Turning hearts to look at Him*

*Every blindness He tears
From the eyes' vacant stare
Righteous fear and understanding sink in*

*Moriel is His Name
Life uncommon we gain
Once faith's true surrender begins*

Chapter 14

The Light Within

“You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden.” (Matthew 5:14)

Do you realize that as a believer you actively carry within your soul the holy, brilliant fire of God? Each of us stands as a flaming torch of heaven shining in the trenches of this shadowy, forsaken land because that is exactly our role as Christians. We are no less than the broken jars of clay encasing Gideon’s lamps, marching on command through this life as soldiers of the Lord. *“Then he [Gideon] divided the three hundred men into three companies, and he put a trumpet into every man’s hand, with empty pitchers, and torches inside the pitchers... ‘When I blow the trumpet, I and all who are with me, then you also blow the trumpets on every side of the whole camp, and say, ‘The sword of the LORD and of Gideon!’ So Gideon and the hundred men who were with him came to the outpost of the camp at the beginning of the middle watch, just as they had posted the watch; and they blew the trumpets and broke the pitchers that were in their hands. Then the three companies blew the trumpets and broke the pitchers—they held the torches in their left hands and the trumpets in their right hands for blowing—and they cried, ‘The sword of the LORD and of Gideon!’”* (Judges 7:16-20) We carry both the sword of the

Lord (the Bible) and the light of God (His Spirit). We are called to shine God's holy lamp of truth, righteousness, faith, and love into the spiritual darkness surrounding us on this planet. We are also told to wield God's sharp and mighty sword, which is the Word of God. "*And take...the Sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God.*" (Ephesians 6:17) "*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) "*Let the high praises of God be in their mouth, and a two-edged sword in their hand!*" (Psalm 149:6)

These passages provide a wealth of inspiring imagery to hold close to our hearts, but let us look more deeply at the Bible to understand the imagery is also our very present reality. God is light. "...*God is light and in Him is no darkness at all.*" (1st John 1:5) He is the divine Source and Creator of all light in our world. His very being is Spirit and consists of a blazing, eternally burning, divine light. "*God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.*" (John 4:24) The spiritual light of God is above, beyond, and outside of the physical or material lights we can see with our frail human eyes, such as the stars, sun, moon, or that which is created by fire, lightening, and electricity. God's light is a truth which is both physical with regard to creation, as well as spiritual as it pertains to the fall of man. All darkness is simply the absence of God's light. Darkness can be caused by the blocked light from the sun via the normal rotation of the earth, or by the passing of celestial objects in front of the sun, moon, and stars. Spiritual darkness is created when the light of God Himself is spiritually blocked through unbelief, wickedness, or sinful rejection. We know that before God commanded the physical

light of this world into existence there was only a formless, dark void. *“The earth was without form, and void; and darkness was on the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. Then God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good; and God divided the light from the darkness.”* (Genesis 1:2-4) And before the light of God’s Spirit and Word enter the soul of man by faith, there exists only a spiritually dark void within as well. When the Bible speaks of God’s light, it most often refers to the divinely given understanding and spiritual revelation found in His Word and taught by His Holy Spirit. The Word of God is His lamp to the human soul and the Holy Spirit of God provides the understanding or enlightenment which opens the eyes of the heart and causes those who were blind to finally see Him as He is, and be convicted by His truths as they have been given. The lamp of God directs our paths as believers, providing the light of godly knowledge in which His children are told to walk. We are guided by God’s holy light through Scripture, through prayer, through the indwelling Holy Spirit, and by His sovereign hand. We know these things, for we have been taught well about the light of God and His Spirit throughout the Bible with its varying and multifaceted meanings. *“For it is the God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.”* (2nd Corinthians 4:6)

In Scripture, God most often manifests Himself to His people in the form of light – usually mimicking a fire or flame to the finite eyes and limited minds of mankind. For example, the Lord appeared to Moses as a fire burning in a bush. *“...And Moses led the flock to the back of the desert, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. And the Angel of*

the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire from the midst of a bush. So he looked, and behold, the bush was burning with fire, but the bush was not consumed. Then Moses said, 'I will now turn aside and see this great sight, why the bush does not burn...'” (Exodus 3:1-3) God led His people in the desert wilderness using a towering cloud of Shekinah glory by day and a divinely lit flame of heavenly fire by night. *“And the LORD went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so as to go by day and night.”* (Exodus 13:21) When the Holy Spirit first came down from heaven and began dwelling within believers, the manifestation of this truth was made evident to all by the appearance of mysterious tongues of brightly burning flames over their heads. *“And suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. Then there appeared to them divided tongues, as of fire, and one sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.”* (Acts 2:2-4) Clearly, God is light. He is a divine, burning, fiery light.

Jesus Christ is the physical expression of God's divine light because of course, He is God in human flesh and He is also the Word of God which brings us His light and divine understanding today. *“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. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.”* (John 1:1-5) Those of us who are ready to receive the Lord's holy presence into our hearts and embrace all He desires to give us will run to the light of God and be saved,

justified, and sanctified. Those who reject His spiritual light are those who choose instead to continue living according to their own godless ways in sin-darkened rebellion against Him. *“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. For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who does the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be clearly seen, that they have been done in God.”* (John 3:19-21) The light of Jesus gives spiritual guidance and understanding which reveals the way to walk on the path of eternal life. *“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)

God is light, Jesus is light, and the Holy Spirit is light. Because of the curse, we are born into this fallen world as mere shadows of who and what God intended for us to be. We are spiritually darkened, empty, and crooked images of God who can bear no resemblance to Him unless we receive His Son in faith. Once we are born again by His Spirit, the Lord starts transforming our hearts and minds so we will desire to become more and more like Him – Spirit-filled images who walk this earth reflecting His wisdom, love, truth, and the fiery light of His holy power. We are sealed with the eternal light of God’s Spirit and by this seal we become a living, breathing source of heavenly light and life, which is why we are told to shine God’s light in the darkness of this fallen world. How do we do that? The more we heed God’s Word and Spirit, the more we can glorify God by the way we live, drawing others to seek His light. *“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) Most of us know these things and we understand the spiritual pictures, meaning, and source of God’s light as it is given to us via His Word. But it is important for us to know God isn’t just teaching a spiritual truth when He speaks of His light residing within us – although that fact is incredibly important as it pertains to our witness and our lifestyles. “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)

I want to broach the matter of God’s light in a far more direct manner. The spiritual light of God is in fact, a holy flame which actively burns and flickers in the heart of every Christian. It is invisible to our physical eyes, but in the spiritual realm, God’s holy fire burning in the hearts of the redeemed is easily seen. Think of it. God places Himself within us the moment we become saved, and we know God is an all-consuming fire. “*For our God is a consuming fire.*” (Hebrews 12:29) Just as He miraculously burned like a fire in Moses’ bush, just as He supernaturally lit the night skies in the desert wilderness above the tabernacle with His divine fire, and just as He wondrously manifested His holy flames or tongues of fire over the heads of the believing disciples in Jerusalem, God burns as a living, purifying, holy flame in you and He burns as a living, purifying, holy flame in me. “*Then the righteous will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father...*” (Matthew 13:43) God is shining forth as bright as the sun in the hearts of His redeemed children. No, we cannot see it with our natural eyes or feel it in our bodies, but the spiritual realm sees the fires of God’s

glorious light in every Christian very well indeed. Both heaven and hell are fully aware of the marked difference between the redeemed and the unredeemed, for there is only one clear indicator needed – God’s eternal flame flickering within the hearts of the faithful. This truth is why Scripture so often tells us we are lights in the dark world. *“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 2:15,16) The precept is not just a beautiful allegory, it is a factual reality. God is not a liar. He means what He says and says what He means. We truly carry the everlasting fire of God burning its sacred, holy light within us. Demons see it and actively hate it, because it marks us as holy and untouchable, while illuminating the darkness they love to utilize to cover their own wicked and deceptive works. *“For it is the God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us.”* (2nd Corinthians 4:6,7) The same power that *is* Jesus lives in us and lights us up from within – intellectually, spiritually, and even practically. Satan hates God, so he hates those who belong to God. Therefore, he and his hordes twist and fret with seething hatred whenever they see the living Spirit of God burning in the hearts and souls of believers.

One of the ways in which the devils of hell can assault the children of God is by leading them into sin. It is by forfeiting the higher ways of God in preference for the lower ways of the world, the flesh, or the devil that we can weaken the flames of the Lord’s fire within. This is why we

are told not to quench the Holy Spirit. The word “quench” means to douse a fire with water, putting it out. *“Do not quench the Spirit.”* (1st Thessalonians 5:19) God’s divine light is a key part of our spiritual armor. *“...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) May we take seriously the burning presence of Almighty God living in our hearts. We have been delivered from the power of darkness and conveyed into the kingdom of Jesus Christ. This truth ought to inspire all believers to walk worthy of the One who reigns from within. *“...We also, since the day we heard it, do not cease to pray for you, and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding; that you may walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing Him, being fruitful in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; strengthened with all might, according to His glorious power, for all patience and longsuffering with joy; giving thanks to the Father who has qualified us to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in the light. He has delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His love, in whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins.”* (Colossians 1:9-14)

Heaven sees its own by looking down and viewing the light of God glowing in the heart of every Christian. How beautiful this sight must be to the Lord! Yet in the practical busyness of everyday matters, we don’t always keep this fact in front of us and we do not always give His presence the honor and awe it truly deserves. It is the refining fire of God which sanctifies, teaches, revives, and refines each one of us

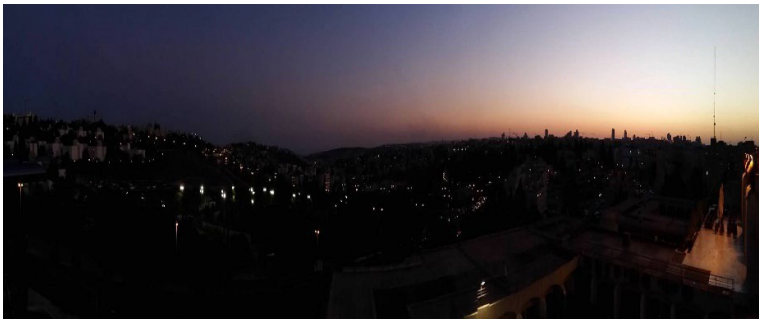
increasingly as we walk with Him. It is His heavenly love which inspires our kindred love and natural fellowship with other believers, uniting us together in the warm flames of His Spirit. *“But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin.”* (1st John 1:7) The light of God’s Spirit dwelling in believers is a marvelous truth of faith written down repeatedly throughout Scripture. Do we grasp it tightly enough? God has come to abide within us by a hidden work of His Spirit, sealing us as His own. According to Scripture His Spirit manifests Himself as holy fire and divine light. Let us consider this biblical fact very seriously and walk in it wisely. Would we dare to consider doing half the rebellious or thoughtless things we so often do if we could look upon the flaming light of God with our physical eyes every time we glanced down at our chest or saw His shekinah glow encircling our bodies whenever we walk past a mirror? I don’t think we would.

Do we believe God’s Word is infallible? Then we must believe He is powerfully residing in our hearts. And since we know He is a consuming fire and the source of all light as we know it, we can trust He is burning quietly inside each of us, a sacred, brilliant, and divine presence. God has come down from heaven and lowered Himself to mysteriously dwell in the souls of the redeemed. His glory has risen upon us and is seen by all who reside in the spiritual realm. *“Arise, shine; for your light has come! And the glory of the LORD is risen upon you. For behold, the darkness shall cover the earth, and deep darkness the people; but the LORD will arise over you, and His glory will be seen upon you.”* (Isaiah 60:1,2) If we are wise, we will live in humble awe of this fact and spend the rest of our days sharing His light with others in hopes of turning many more to

righteousness so they too, might shine like the stars amidst the darkness of our great sky, forever and ever. *“Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the firmament, and those who turn many to righteousness like the stars forever and ever.”* (Daniel 12:3) When everything is fulfilled and we are finally living in the new heaven and new earth, we will dwell in a city which needs no sun, no moon, and no stars. Our living God will be its only light, and we shall all walk in His light forever. What a day that will be! *“The city had no need of the sun or of the moon to shine in it, for the glory of God illuminated it. The Lamb is its light. And the nations of those who are saved shall walk in its light...”* (Revelation 21:23,24) Perhaps I am wrong, but I like to imagine part of the way God’s light illuminates His holy city is through the redeemed. We will walk in the Lamb’s light because we bear His bright, glimmering fire even within our glorified bodies and perhaps we will finally be able to see that light in each other. Obviously, there is no way to know this for sure until we are there, but it bears pondering! Until then, all I can do is encourage us to be more deeply aware of God’s holy fire flickering radiantly within us. By it He seeks to refine, perfect, beautify, and make us truer reflections of Him, just as He intended us to be from the very beginning. *“Then God said, ‘Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness...’”* (Genesis 1:26)

This world is only getting darker. But it is in the darkest watches of the night God’s everlasting love and unchanging truth will shine forth with extra brilliance. The midnight hours of this world’s existence will provide the deepest and clearest backdrop for the dazzling flames of Almighty God. In our greatest battles, the Lord is standing above us holding high His triumphant banner of brilliant truth, and despite our trials we can shout victory in His Name

long before the war is won. *“You have given a banner to those who fear You, that it may be displayed because of the truth.”* (Psalm 60:4) *“...And his banner over me was love.”* (Song of Solomon 2:4) The winds of adversity in the end will finally separate the faithful from the tragically deceived just as wheat is sifted from chaff. Be the light. Be part of God’s choicest harvest. Be His zealous, faithful, and obedient children who wisely walk in the fiery glow of the Lord’s holy love which He pours out into the hearts of those who have surrendered themselves to the power of His enlightening, refining, purifying light!



City lights at nightfall, Jerusalem, Israel 2014

THIS PRESENT DARKNESS

*In this present darkness, no one sees the hidden war
The battle is not of flesh or blood, we don't hear the devil's roar
Where no light shines, only chaos reigns, souls falling in defeat
Hungry for every human life, Satan's sifting us like wheat*

*In this present darkness, hope and joy seem futile dreams
Happiness sought in wickedness is never what it seems
Hiding true revelation, this world wears a darkened cloak
Distracted by our busy lives, hell and heaven seem a silly joke*

*In this present darkness, understanding is destroyed
Wisdom's candle sparsely burns, while blindness fills the void
Selfishness reigns as king, upon countless dreadful thrones
Ruling without truth or vision, ever weary we shall become*

*In this present darkness, we must awaken from the night
Cast off all our burdens and equip ourselves to fight
We are wounded warriors, struggling for our very souls
Giving ourselves up to God; through Christ we reach the goal*

*In this present darkness, the only ones who remain standing
Are those who wear the Lord's armor and Holy Spirit's branding
Where illumination falters, at gloomy shadows cast from hell
Soldier on with the lamp of God and living water from His well*

*In this present darkness
Find the Light
In this present darkness
Shine the Light
In this present darkness
Abide in the Light*

“Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.”

(Matthew 5:16)

Chapter 15

The Joyful Bride

“Let us be glad and rejoice and give Him glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His wife has made herself ready. And to her it was granted to be arrayed in fine linen, clean and bright, for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints. Then he said to me, ‘Write: ‘Blessed are those who are called to the marriage supper of the Lamb!’ And he said to me, ‘These are the true sayings of God.’”(Revelation 19:7-9)

Every believer is considered to be the eternal bride of Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, who is also our King of kings and Lord of lords. What an incomprehensible future awaits us! We have been embraced into a divine royalty the likes of which our finite minds cannot even imagine! We have been spiritually united with God Almighty, betrothed to His only begotten Son to be together forever in faith, that we might live happily ever after in His glorious presence with unimaginable joy and thanksgiving. Is this amazing truth something we hold closely to our hearts as a treasure which cannot be stolen away? May the Lord develop our mindsets and attitudes in such a way that we are led to rejoice daily in our promised, elevated position of unmerited grace and favor as the heavenly bride of Jesus Christ. God rejoices over us. Should we not also rejoice over Him? *“...And as the*

bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you.” (Isaiah 62:5) Surely there are too many of us pressing through this life not fully holding a proper understanding of the astonishing position and divine status to which we have been called as believers in Jesus Christ. We ought to have hearts perpetually moved to sing praises over the One who will make all things new for us in such a beautiful way. God Himself sings over us in heaven. *“The LORD your God in your midst, the Mighty One, will save; He will rejoice over you with gladness, He will quiet you with His love, He will rejoice over you with singing.”* (Zephaniah 3:17) Let us sing to the Lord heartfelt songs of praise, delight, and grateful thanksgiving as we humbly pursue to live more appreciatively of His generosity and in the higher ways of His Spirit. We are His betrothed bride, brothers and sisters! We have an eternal bond with the Lamb of God! *“...Come, I will show you the bride, the Lamb’s wife.”* (Revelation 21:9) Are you not awestruck and thrilled at the prospect of the glorious wedding awaiting you in heaven?

When we read deeply convicting exhortations such as those found in the underlying premise of this book, it is incredibly important for us to take a step back and remember who we are called to serve and why. With God, correction and conviction are always for the end goal of our joy, well-being, and spiritual benefit – both in the present day as well as in eternity. God’s purposes are to accomplish good things for those who love Him. *“All things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose.”* (Romans 8:28) His ways will always be geared to engender a very real future and blessed hope for His faithful ones. We have been given mighty promises which He will keep for He cannot lie – promises containing all the spiritual gifts and empowering we need to override

the trials, tribulation, and sorrows of life on this earth, for they are as nothing compared to blessings He has prepared for us in heaven. *“The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together. For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.”* (Romans 8:16-18) *“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. Then you will call upon Me and go and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart. I will be found by you, says the LORD, and I will bring you back from your captivity...”* (Jeremiah 29:11-14)

The Lord’s thoughts toward us are geared toward bringing us out of our cursed captivity and into an immeasurably glorious future. The assured hope of such a future is something every believer ought to treasure with profound joy. Our finite minds will never fully grasp what lies in store for us in heaven, but by the enlightenment and instruction of God’s Holy Spirit and Word we can surely receive enough of an inkling to inspire in us a zeal and a thankfulness over His lovingkindness as we work out our salvation with heartfelt intentions. *“But as it is written: ‘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.’”* (1st Corinthians 2:9,10) The truths and exhortations of God are not meant to foster anxiety, doubt, or surrendered drudgery in the hearts of believers. He does not wish to see

us begrudgingly work out His commands and instructions with attitudes of worry, resentment, and inner angst. That is not the attitude of an excited bride planning for her long-awaited wedding day, is it? No, and in fact, such a reaction is quite the opposite of what the Lord wants from us.

May we crawl outside of our demanding flesh long enough to realize God's urgent exhortations and blessed instructions are not only intended to bring us to a place of delight and glory in eternity but to give our hearts wonderful, exciting, and spiritually divine purposes now. The Lord seeks to bring us a deeper relevance and show us our eternal value. He desires to bestow very real, practical freedom from the curses and bondages of our sin nature. And it is His marvelous goal to bring about a thrilling, spiritual empowerment of which we could only formerly dream of until the Holy Spirit came to abide in our hearts. If we could rightly understand all the Father has done for us through work of the Son and the Spirit, we would be brought to a steady state of spiritual joy and unceasing thankfulness. There is a unique enthusiasm and anticipation to be found in the discovery that God has given us better things to pursue in this life than the base and temporary enslavements of unregenerate carnality and worldliness; and in realizing His Spirit has made it so we are fully capable of prospering in all He has commanded us to do and be.

The Lord loves a cheerful giver, does He not? *“But this I say: He who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. So let each one give as he purposes in his heart, not grudgingly or of necessity; for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound toward you, that you, always having all sufficiency in all things, may have an abundance*

for every good work.” (2nd Corinthians 9:6-8) Likewise, Jesus deserves a cheerful, joyful bride who is completely surrendered to Him and delighted to abide in His care and purposes. May we sow generously and gladly to the ways of the Holy Spirit, keeping in front of our eyes all He has already given us, and all He yet promises to give. We are called to lay down our lives for Him the way He has laid His down for us, knowing He did it for the joy of obtaining a beautiful bride, purified and refined by His love and care. *“Let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, 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.”* (Hebrews 12:1,2) Jesus endured the cross for the joy that was set before Him; the joy of obtaining and refining us into His spotless, loving, and faithful bride; a bride He captured from the hands of the enemy by His own death on the cross. Therefore, let us be that joyful bride in all our ways; wholly excited and eager to do that which pleases the Bridegroom.

When we commit to imitating Christ as He instructs us, we must imitate His heart too – even if living for Him results in having to die for Him. That is the essence of faith’s witness. The Greek word for ‘witness’ is ‘martyr’ or ‘martyr.’ The meaning implies we are faithful witnesses of the Lord Jesus Christ and His glorious gift of salvation even to the point of death if it is required of us. *“But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”* (Acts 1:8) Are we willing to die for God’s glory and for the faith in Jesus Christ which we profess to carry within our hearts? Is our love for

the Lord a true, agape love – unconditional and unto the death? Paul displayed the heart of Christ when he said to the church at Philippi, *“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, so that I may rejoice in the day of Christ that I have not run in vain or labored in vain. Yes, and if I am being poured out as a drink offering on the sacrifice and service of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all. For the same reason you also be glad and rejoice with me.”* (Philippians 2:14-18) The beloved apostle indicates in this verse he was preparing for martyrdom. He saw his life on earth as eventually being poured out as an offering to the Lord; a sacrifice of love and faith in Jesus which was to serve as an example in building up the faith of those in Philippi and the surrounding churches.

The Holy Spirit empowers each and every one of us to be able to die for Jesus Christ – not just in dying to our old sin nature but also in physically dying at the hands of those who would persecute the body of Christ in such a severe fashion. No man, woman, or child is capable of this level of sacrifice without the Lord’s strengthening help, but we can trust the Holy Spirit of God will enable us in such a moment if it is ever necessary. We need only the committed, steadfast intention of our faith. God will swoop in and fill us with whatever we may lack in such a moment of trial. With the Lord, what seems totally impossible to us is made entirely possible by His sovereign will and His incomprehensible power. *“Jesus looked at them and said to them, ‘With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.’ Then Peter answered and said to Him, ‘See, we have left all and followed You. Therefore what shall we have?’ So Jesus said*

to them, 'Assuredly I say to you, that in the regeneration, when the Son of Man sits on the throne of His glory, you who have followed Me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for My name's sake, shall receive a hundredfold, and inherit eternal life.'" (Matthew 19:26-29)

There are many parallels to be seen in the account of Isaac and his bride, Rebekah, in the book of Genesis. Father Abraham sought a bride for his son of promise, Isaac. She was not to be of the pagan nations but one who would come from his own chosen people of faith. God seeks a bride for His own Son of promise in the very same way. He wants a godly bride, a bride not taken from the godless nations but one born of faith. Just as Rebekah by faith left all she knew and followed Abraham's servant – which many scholars believe was his steward, Eliezer (which translates 'Helper' or 'God Is My Help' in the original language) – to become Isaac's promised bride, believers must also by faith, leave all behind and follow the Holy Spirit's leading (He is our Helper, according to the words of Jesus in chapters 14 and 15 of John) to become the bride of Christ. Rebekah had not yet met her promised bridegroom face to face, but she trusted God's hand in the matter, having heard of her future husband's worthiness, greatness, and goodness by the word of the Father's servant. We also have not met Jesus face to face, yet we faithfully trust God's hand in the matter of our salvation and betrothal to Jesus, for He has told us of the goodness and worthiness of Him by the Word of His Holy Spirit and the Bible. Rebekah was a betrothed bride who anticipated meeting her bridegroom with expectant hope, joy, and zeal. We too are asked to be a bride who anticipates meeting our Bridegroom with expectant hope, joy, and zeal.

May we follow the Holy Spirit to the place where Jesus awaits us, just as Rebekah followed Abraham's servant to the place where Isaac awaited her arrival. *"Now Isaac came from the way of Beer Lahai Roi, for he dwelt in the South. And Isaac went out to meditate in the field in the evening; and he lifted his eyes and looked, and there, the camels were coming. Then Rebekah lifted her eyes, and when she saw Isaac she dismounted from her camel; for she had said to the servant, 'Who is this man walking in the field to meet us?' The servant said, 'It is my master.' So she took a veil and covered herself. And the servant told Isaac all the things that he had done. Then Isaac brought her into his mother Sarah's tent; and he took Rebekah and she became his wife, and he loved her..."* (Genesis 24:62-67)

Can you imagine the joy Rebekah must have felt when she looked up and saw the handsome, gentle face of her patient, loving bridegroom as he stood in the distance, looking for her arrival? Beer Lahai Roi from the passage above translates into "the well of the Living One seeing me." Isaac came by way of the "Well of the Living One who Sees Me"... Jesus Christ is the Living One who sees us and awaits us at His divine well, the fountain of everlasting life in heaven. Like Rebekah, we lift our eyes and see our Bridegroom from afar as we walk excitedly in faith to meet Him. Rebekah was covered with a veil for her proper approach to Isaac, and we too are covered with the white robe of salvation in order to approach Jesus. He stands at the heavenly altar and holds out His hand, smiling as we draw near. We are the joy that was set before Him. He joyfully awaits our full, heavenly redemption, that we may finally be joined with Him in resurrected, redeemed glory. What a day that will be! I cannot even imagine what it will feel or look like, but it will be the very best moment of our lives – and the very beginning of a whole new existence!

But take a moment and picture a different scene. Look at Jesus standing in His place, watching His bride walk up the narrow path of faith along the beautifully adorned wedding aisle which is hedged in on both sides with protective borders and a host of angels standing guard. There are fruitful trees and resting places scattered along the way leading to where He awaits her. But instead of witnessing joy and excitement on the bride's face; instead of a strong, steady pace propelling her forward in her walk, Jesus watches as a listless, distracted bride shuffles along, pausing here and there, and even meandering rather far away for prolonged periods. Her shoulders are bent, her eyes are glancing quite often to the right and to the left with lingering interest, and once in a while, He even sees her gazing backward over her shoulder somewhat wistfully. He sadly realizes as she draws closer that He can see a pained and weary scowl set in her countenance as she slowly makes her way toward Him. Her mind doesn't appear to be set on the One standing before her, for it is instead being endlessly distracted by the lights, sounds, and smells of the surrounding cities set beyond the path; their noisy throngs beckoning with all the earthly temptations they can offer. Envision the promised bride of Jesus Christ carelessly walking toward Him in this fashion, complaining about how hard it is to keep clean the dress she wears, how the veil feels like an annoyance obscuring her face, and how the narrow aisle she walks is so dreary and confining? What a deep, hurtful, far-reaching offense that would be! Think of how He has been providing everything she could possibly need to make herself ready for the wedding day, but on her approach she still does not seem prepared. She has not been receptive to His gifts, His fruitful provisions, His reassurances, and His encouraging instructions which He knows would help her be fully ready and stunningly beautiful on her wedding

day. How disheartening such a scene would be for the Groom! But isn't this sometimes how we walk toward Jesus? Oh, may the Lord forgive us when we commit such error! May He swiftly and soundly correct our wandering ways and unthankful attitudes! When we sometimes complain about or kick against the narrow path being difficult, when we struggle with being clothed in holiness, when we reject or ignore the spiritual growth, fruit, and transforming ministrations of the Lord, we look like that joyless, ungrateful bride. I pray we never approach the marriage supper of the Lamb in such a manner. May we always carry a reverent cognizance of our glorious, special, honored, and consecrated status as the Son of God's holy, priceless, blood-bought, heavenly bride.

God teaches us the covenant of marriage is a wonderful, blessed covenant; one to be sought after and prized. He also intends us to understand a wedding is intended to be an incredibly joyful event which kicks off and celebrates this sacred covenant of unity and fellowship. I believe one of the reasons Christians have lost sight of the joy we are to have in our betrothal to the Lord Jesus is because we have lost sight of the biblical perspective we ought to have for weddings and marriages in society today. No longer are marriages viewed as treasured, sacred, everlasting covenants made by taking sincere, unbreakable vows which are intended to forge lifetime bonds of commitment between a groom and bride. The God-instituted union of marriage and its preceding wedding celebration has become hijacked by the world and the devil himself. Today's marriages have morphed into mutually beneficial contracts for temporary living arrangements serving to achieve tax breaks, share daily household expenses, and appease familial expectations. The commitment is only expected to last as long as both parties remain selfishly content. Moreover,

wedding celebrations today have degenerated into prolific expressions of vanity and lavish financial expenditures elevating materialistic extravagance, drunkenness, and gluttony not reflective of God's original intentions. It is difficult to see our position as the bride of Jesus Christ being sacred, treasured, and spiritually joyful when we do not see earthly brides or the ideal of marriage held in such a fashion.

Let us esteem our position in Christ as being the very pinnacle of blessed status in eternity and on earth. Our walk down the narrow aisle toward the altar where Jesus stands has deep, anticipatory meaning. The wedding gown we wear is beautiful and white, signifying our purified status as the blood-bought bride of our Savior. We are beloved jewels in the eyes of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Walk the path to Jesus with joy and grace, my friends, for you are destined for the most magnificent wedding to be had in human history! Every part of you will finally be fully joined in rapturous harmony and unity with your Creator and risen Savior. Jesus determined before the foundations of the world were set in place that you were worth dying for. He is making you ready for the marriage He has desired to have with you since the beginning of time. You are adorned with the dazzling garment of salvation, spotless and blazing with the Lord's shekinah glory. Walk the wedding aisle with joy as you lift up your eyes and approach the Bridegroom. He awaits you at the altar of His grace, ready to take your hand in His forever. Praise the Lord and rejoice always over His inexplicable favor!



East Gate, Temple Mount
Jerusalem, Israel 2006

“And the glory of the LORD came into the temple by way
of the gate which faces toward the east.”
(Ezekiel 43:4)

Bride of Joy

*Do you hear the notes rejoicing
Heaven's wedding march on high
Let the whole world lift their eyes
A celebration lights the sky*

*Can you see the saints of glory
Gathered 'round to meet the Lord
It is time for heart's reward
As the angels strike harp's chord*

*We are clothed in alabaster
Hallowed by the Spirit's oil
Let us hasten toward His voice
And walk the aisle with radiant joy*

Hallelujah!

~

The End

~

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