**A WEE LITTLE MAN WAS HE**

 *“And Jesus entered and passed through Jericho. And, behold, there was a man named Zacchaeus, which was the chief among the publicans, and he was rich. And he sought to see Jesus who he was; and could not for the press, because he was little of stature. And he ran before, and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see him: for he was to pass that way. And when Jesus came to the place, he looked up, and saw him, and said unto him, Zacchaeus, make haste, and come down; for to day I must abide at thy house” (Luke 19:1-5).*

 I love hearing children sing the Zacchaeus song. This short little rich man would have never dreamed that children would one day sing about him. When the people saw that Jesus was about to enter the house of Zacchaeus it says, *“And when they saw it, they all murmured, saying, That he was gone to be guest with a man that is a sinner” (vs. 7).*

 These people had no reason to hate Zacchaeus. Even though he held a high position, he did his best to live a righteous life. This is proven by his statement in verse eight. Often hatred is not based upon truth, but on perception. To the Jewish people, a publican (tax collector) was equated to harlots and sinners (Matt. 11:16, 18:17).

 After Zacchaeus tells the Lord about his striving to do right by others (vs. 8), the Lord says, *“This day is salvation come to this house, forsomuch as he also is a son of Abraham. For the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost” (vs. 9, 10).* No matter what good Zacchaeus accomplished, he fails in comparison to the Messiah. He was a sinner in need of a Savior.

 The name Zacchaeus means *pure* or *innocent.* It was Jesus who said, *“Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God*” (Matt. 5:8). On that day in Palestine, Zacchaeus saw God. He not only saw him, he communed with him in his own dwelling.

 Metaphorically, Jesus wants to come and abide in your house. He does not want you to be lost (2 Pet. 3:9). Zacchaeus represents every one of us who have climbed that tree to gaze into the eyes of Christ. The world is full of murmurers. People who cannot see past their own prejudices. People who will never embrace the grace of God. Like Zacchaeus, when the Savior called, we came running. Salvation came to our house!

**CAN DOGS GO TO HEAVEN?**

 *“The spirit of God hath made me, and the* ***breath*** *of the Almighty hath given me life” (Job. 33:4*). *“And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and* ***breath****ed into his nostrils the* ***breath*** *of life; and man became a living soul” (Gen. 2:7). “And, behold, I, even I, do bring a flood of waters upon the earth, to destroy all flesh, wherein is the* ***breath*** *of life, from under heaven; and every thing that is in the earth shall die” (Gen. 6:17).*

The breath of life (the soul) is given to every living creature. From the tiniest insect to the giant whales, man has dominion. Since all things, great and small, have been given a soul, man is to respect all life.

 It was Paul who penned that man was a triune being. “*And the very God of peace sanctify you wholly; and I pray God your whole* ***spirit*** *and* ***soul*** *and* ***body*** *be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thess. 5:23).* The spirit is what separates man from all other creatures. He possesses a living spirit that is eternal. The soul and the flesh die. As a man takes his first breath from his mother’s womb, he will one day take his last breath.

In the few biblical instances when heaven is viewed by mortal men, Paul and John, neither mention animals. The cherubim’s and seraphim have faces like animals. However, they are intelligent powerful creatures that stand above and by the throne of God.

 Though animals do not have a spirit that is eternal, they will not be burdened with the possibility of losing their soul to eternal damnation. They offer us companionship, friendship, and love in this world. Oftentimes they bring out the best in us. Their short life span demands that we enjoy them while we can.

 Our emotional attachments to pets is based upon our human need for affection. That wagging tail says it all. They move their heads as if they understand every word we say. Though they are not human, we often treat them as such. That obedient, unconditional, and faithful love never has to be proven. Their passing can be just as devastating as losing your best friend.

 No! Dogs and cats don’t have a spirit that lives on after death. They are here for our enjoyment while living as mortal beings. Howbeit, life is sure easier to handle with dog at your feet.

**DID A WHALE SWALLOW JONAH?**

 *“Now the Lord had prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights”* (Jonah 1:17). We’ve all heard the sarcasm by those who see this event as an impossibility. The throat of a whale for example is to narrow to swallow a man. However, the Bible does not say it was a whale. It was a GREAT FISH that was PREPARED by God. I don’t need to guess, calculate, or fidget about the anatomy of sea creatures to come up with some logical specimen. No! God performed a miracle.

 In the Bible, God does amazing things. He allows a donkey to converse with a man (Num. 22:28). He parts the Red Sea (Exodus 14:21, 22). He sends bread from heaven to feed the Hebrew people (Exodus 16:4). In the life of Jesus, we view him healing the sick, feeding the multitude, and raising the dead.

 “Is anything too hard for the Lord” (Gen. 18:14). That was the Lord’s response to Sarah’s laughter. A woman stricken in years being told that she was going to have a child. Jesus told his apostles, “With men this is impossible; but with God all things are possible” (Matt. 19:26).

 In the story of Jonah, being swallowed by a fish was just one of several miracles. The Lord sent a mighty wind, and later calmed it (Jonah 1:4, 15). He **prepared** a gourd that gave shade to Jonah, and the next day he **prepared** a worm that withered the gourd (Jonah 4:6, 7). Finally, the Lord **prepared** a vehement east wind (Jonah 4:8). Do you see that word, prepared? That is the same word used to speak of God preparing that great fish to swallow Jonah.

 We worship a God who created and established natural laws. Yet, as the Creator, He can transgress those laws. That is the definition of a miracle.

 When we view the story of Jonah, the incident is reflective of a future event. Jesus said, *“For as* ***Jona****s was three days and three nights in the whale's belly; so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth”* (Matt. 12:40). Not only does the Lord lend credence to the event but states it as a prophetic reference to His death and resurrection.

 To the agnostic, he ventures no further than a man being swallowed by a fish. The focus of the story is not centered on the fish, but what takes place in the belly of the creature. It is here that Jonah draws closer to God. He prays, contemplates on his actions, and looks to God for salvation (Jonah 2). We see Jonah at his best in the belly of the fish.

**FOREKNOWLEDGE, PREDESTINATION, AND GOD**

 τεταγμενοι is the word used here in Acts 13:48, and it is different than what Paul usually uses to speak of predestination (προτεταγμενοι nor προορισμενοι). The verb ταττω or τασσω signifies to place, set, order, appoint, or dispose. Which implies that the Gentiles were inclined to accept the gospel. This word is used eight times in the New Testament (Matt. 28:16, Luke 7:8, Acts 15:2, Acts 22:10, Acts 23:23, Rom. 13:1, 1 Cor. 16:15). One Greek scholar stated, “*The word is never used to denote an internal disposition or inclination arising from one’s own self. It does not mean that they disposed themselves to embrace eternal life.”*

Romans 8:29, is a little more difficult. **Προέγνω** is used five times in the New Testament, and each time it is translated, foreknow (Rom. 8:29, Acts 26:5; 1Pet. 1:20; 2Pet. 3:17; Rom. 11:2). It should be made clear that προέγνω (*foreknew)*  is used by the apostle as distinct and different from *predestinated* (προώρισεν). Both words are in direct correlation to conforming (**συμμόρφους)** into the image of Christ.

 For many, they cannot see the difference between foreknowledge and predestination. Paul states in Ephesians 1:1, *“Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the* ***will*** *of God.”* The apostle points to his own conversion, and then draws us into a discussion of the plurality of those who are termed the *saved (“****chosen us*** *in him before the foundation of the world,” vs. 4), (“Having* ***predestinated us*** *unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of* ***his will****,” vs. 5), (“**Having made known* ***unto us*** *the mystery of* ***his will,*** *according to his good pleasure which he hath* ***purposed*** *in himself,” vs. 9), (“In whom also* ***we have obtained*** *an inheritance, being* ***predestinated*** *according to the* ***purpose*** *of him who worketh all things after the counsel of* ***his own will****,” vs. 11*). He ends this part of the book with speaking about Christ being head over His church *(Eph. 1:22, 23).*

 Paul does not speak about his conversion being chosen to be saved but called to minister the gospel. We note throughout the Bible, men are often called to carry the message to the lost, and later lose their faith. Jonah is a prime example. God gets the message delivered through a man, whom in the end, is as lost as you can get. It is noteworthy that his salvation is never presented by the inspired writers, Jesus simply uses Jonah’s three days in the fish’s belly to speak about his time in the tomb.

 Secondly, individual predestination excludes any statement made about God being fair, just, or even loving. How could God SO LOVE THE WORLD, if He chooses the elect and the damned before they are ever born? I believe you are correct to say that God predestined the church universal. Did He know every person who would respond to the gospel message and remain faithful? ABSOLUTELY! God’s book of life is in His mind. There is no huge book where names are written in, erased, and written in again. God doesn’t carry around a pencil in one hand and eraser on the other.

 Satan questioned God’s foreknowledge when he brought up the subject of Job. **“***And the Lord said unto Satan, Whence comest thou? Then Satan answered the Lord, and said, From going to and fro in the earth, and from walking up and down in it.* *And the Lord said unto Satan, Hast thou considered my servant Job, that there is none like him in the earth, a perfect and an upright man, one that feareth God, and escheweth evil?* *Then Satan answered the Lord, and said, Doth Job fear God for nought?* *Hast not thou made an hedge about him, and about his house, and about all that he hath on every side? thou hast blessed the work of his hands, and his substance is increased in the land.* *But put forth thine hand now, and touch all that he hath, and he will curse thee to thy face.* *And the Lord said unto Satan, Behold, all that he hath is in thy power; only upon himself put not forth thine hand. So Satan went forth from the presence of the Lord” (Job. 1:7-12).*

 This is an amazing story because it reveals that Job wasn’t born to be righteous, HE BECAME RIGHTEOUS! He made choices in his life to serve God, and to teach his family to serve God.

 In the end, God makes two remarks that stands out: *“Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth? declare, if thou hast****understand****ing” (Job 38:4). “Who hath put wisdom in the inward parts? or who hath given****understand****ing to the heart? (Job 38:36).”* Simply put, God was saying that His mind, His thinking, His intellect is so superior to man, that if one cannot understand the simple things He has done, LIKE CREATION, how can man comprehend the more complex things?

 Without a doubt, foreknowledge and predestination are two difficult theological terms. Why? Because man does not possess either one. They are always attributed to God.

 Joshua would stand up and say to the new crop of Israelites, “*C****hoose******you******this******day****whom ye will serve; whether the gods which****you****r fathers served that were on the other side of the flood, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land ye dwell: but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord”* (Josh. 24:15). Not having God’s ability to know all things, Joshua was predicting what he hoped would be the case. God however knew that these Israelites would also fail by not destroying all their enemies in Canaan.

 I believe you are right on point to eliminate the discussion of freewill. That is not even being discussed in Acts 13:48 and Rom. 8:29, 30. The emphasis is on the recognition of the church conforming to the image of Christ.

**IS HELL UNDER THE EARTH?**

 *“For great is thy mercy toward me: and thou hast delivered my soul from the lowest hell” (Psa. 86:13).* There are some theologians that have proposed the thought that hell is under the earth. They cite various verses to try and prove their point (Job 11:8; Prov. 9:18, 15:24; Isa. 14:15).

 The serious student must take note that the Old Testament was written in Hebrew and Aramaic, and the New Testament was written in Greek. The word ***hell*** for example is not found once in the Old Testament. The various places where you find the word in English should be rendered ***Sheol***. This is a Hebrew word for the grave.

 In the New Testament several words are used to speak of heaven and hell. First, the word **Hade** is used ten times in the KJV, and eleven times in the original language. It is the place where all the dead are taken.

 In Hades there are two sides divided by a great gulf. On the one side is ***paradise*** (Abraham’s bosom) (Lk. 16:22, 25, 23:43). Across the ***gulf*** is the horrific side. It is here where the wicked are burned and tormented (Lk. 16:23, 24). It is called ***Tartarus*** in the Greek. The angels that fell are also found in this place (2 Pet. 2:4).

 When Jesus comes, Hades will be no more. The wicked will be thrown into Gehenna (Matt. 5:22). The final abode of the wicked. Not only will they be eternally tormented, but they will be outcasted from the sight of the righteous and God. The saints in paradise will be resurrected and lifted into the clouds with Jesus. It is a beautiful thought that all the righteous will see heaven at the same time.

 When the New Testament speaks of heaven, the final abode of the righteous, it is separate and distinct. It is a place being prepared (Jn. 14:1, 2). It is some place out there beyond the stars.

 So where is Hades? It is not for us to know. It could be a place outside the universe or far below the earth. If we pass away before the Lord returns, we will be taken there by the angels. If we die lost, we will be thrown into **Tartarus.** In perspective, it is just a temporary abode. A waiting area where we anticipate the second coming.

**IS IT WRONG TO GET ANGRY AT GOD?**

 Without hesitation, we know it is not right to be angry at God. Yet, throughout the Bible people get angry at God. It is said of Jonah, *“But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was very angry*” (Jonah 4:1). Concerning Cain, the Bible says, *“But unto Cain and to his offering he had not respect. And Cain was very wroth, and his countenance fell. And the Lord said unto Cain, Why art thou wroth? and why is thy countenance fallen? If thou doest well, shalt thou not be accepted? and if thou doest not well, sin lieth at the door. And unto thee shall be his desire, and thou shalt rule over him” (Gen. 4:5-7).* In both situations men are angry at God because of their sins. In the case of Jonah, he ran from God because he knew the outcome of his preaching. Cain, on the other hand, was angry because he disobeyed God’s instructions on what to sacrifice.

 The problem with being angry at God’s commands is the ultimate outcome. You don’t want God to be angry with you! The psalmist used wisdom when he declared, *“O Lord, rebuke me not in thine* ***anger****, neither chasten me in thy hot displeasure” (Psa. 6:1).*

 The Israelites continued resistance to God cost them their freedom. It was David who said, *“For they provoked him to* ***anger*** *with their high places, and moved him to jealousy with their graven images” (Psa. 78:58).*

Further, people often blame God for things He did not do. Job’s wife was like that. When it came time for her to be a supportive wife, she said, *“C****urse******God****, and die” (Job 2:9).* Satan sits back during this whole book and laughs at the many fingers that point to Job and God. The Devil is the master deceiver. He wants the world to blame God for every disaster, every heartache, and all the terrible things.

 Most importantly, being angry at God is selfish. You find that most of the people who are angry at Jehovah try to reflect the blame from themselves. People need to own up to their failures. Moses wrote, *“But if ye will not do so, behold, ye have sinned against the Lord: and be sure* ***you****r sin will* ***find******you******out****” (Num. 32:23).*

 I truly believe that each of us live in a world of choices. It is those choices that either make us or break us. If one fails, it is ignorance to point the finger at God, or anyone else*. “Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God: for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man:But every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed. Then when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin: and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death” (Jas. 1:15-17).*

**IS JESUS COMING SOON?**

 *“He which testifieth these things saith, Surely* ***I******come******quickly****. Amen. Even so,* ***come****, Lord Jesus”* (Rev. 22:20). Seven times in the Revelation letter this expression is used by Christ. Peter standing up with the eleven on the day of Pentecost stated, *“And it shall come to pass in the* ***last******days****, saith God, that I will pour out of my Spirit upon all flesh: and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream”* (Acts 2:17).

 The Bible makes it very clear that we are living in the last days. Peter stated, *“But, beloved, be not ignorant of this one thing, that one day is with the Lord as a* ***thousand******years****, and a* ***thousand******years*** *as one day” (2 Pet. 3:8).* We can surely see that we define a day much differently than God. Though we are living in the last dispensation, the coming of Christ may be long after the present generation has long past.

 There are certain things we should note. First, Jesus is coming soon! Whether it be at the day of your death, or the day when the Second Coming takes place, HE IS COMING!

 Second, get prepared now for the Lord’s coming. The Hebrew writer scribed, *“Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the* ***day******approaching****” (Heb. 10:25).*

The day of judgment is coming for all of us. Time passes quickly! Solomon said, “*There is no man that hath power over the spirit to retain the spirit; neither hath he power in the day of* ***death” (Eccl. 8:8).***

Also, we need to do what we can to help other people prepare for that great day. If we truly love our children, our friends, our relations, we should talk to them about Jesus. That close friend you grew up, graduated with, and admired all these years is lost without Christ. If they die in that state, they will burn in a devil’s hell.

 Many years ago, the mother of Lonnie Harrison was saddened by the death of her husband. When I spoke to her about the necessity to be baptized, she said, “*My husband wasn’t, so neither shall I!”* On their porch was his rocking chair that he often used. I asked her, “*If your husband could come back, and sit on that rocking chair, what would he tell you to do*?” She replied, “*I don’t know*!” I said, “*I believe, wherever his soul is, he would tell you to do what the gospel says!”* Mrs. Harrison later responded to the gospel and became a baptized believer in Christ. She heard her husband speak from the grave. She knew he would not want her to die lost!

 Thus, there are many things we can do to prepare for the Lord’s return. I don’t want to watch the saints rise in the sky without me. I want to be on that cloud with Jesus. I want to live my eternity in heaven. I want to save as many people as I can!

**LIVING ABUNDANTLY**

 ***“****The thief cometh not, but for to steal, and to kill, and to destroy: I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more* ***abundantly****”* (John 10:10).

Have you ever complained about paying taxes, or the lack of wages, or the lack of funds? We should not forget that God was displeased with the Israelites when they complained (Num. 11:1).

 One of the problems we face is thinking about what we would like to have, or desire to have, rather than what God has blessed us with. When we visit people in the nursing homes and hospitals our perspective changes. We come to appreciate our health. A cancer cell out of control, some bacteria damaging one’s organs, or a virus that drains a person’s strength; that’s the reality of our vulnerability.

 Also, if I open my eyes to the world around me, I appreciate the simple comforts of life. I have a car to drive, a bed to sleep in, and food in the refrigerator. In a world filled with hungry people, I go to bed each night full. Think about it, I have a warm house, whereas Jesus did not (Matt. 8:20).

 Further, I have freedom! Many countries enslave their people. They do not have the right to worship God or speak the name of Jesus in the streets. In the streets of Jerusalem, one is forbidden to preach Jesus.

 I thank God that I live in a free society. I have a nice church family that worship in a clean and warm building. We fellowship one another, pray for one another, and enjoy the fruits of our labors together. I do live abundantly! I am greatly blessed. *“They shall* ***abundant****ly utter the memory of thy great goodness, and shall sing of thy righteousness” (Psa. 145:7).*

**PREACHING TO ITCHING EARS**

 **“***For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having* ***itching******ears***” (2 Tim. 4:3).

Recently, I had heard of a church of Christ elder in California who had passed. Several of the local congregations highly praised him for his good service in the Lord’s church. What I recall of that person was his personal request to me not to preach against homosexuality because his granddaughter was offended by such a sermon. Second, he was responsible for setting up a supervisory board to oversee certain duties in the church made up of men and women.

 Throughout the years, I have noted the continued mistreatment of sound ministers in the church being forced to leave. Many congregations do not want a man to give them guidance, but a person who accomplishes what they will not do.

 Let’s be real, many congregations do not have elderships because there are no men in the congregation qualified. Some congregations have men serving in that position who have no right to hold that office. I am a firm believer that congregations were not meant to be led by men’s business meetings. At the same time, congregations need to have training classes preparing men to fill these positions in the future.

 James writes, “*My brethren, be not many* ***masters****, knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation” (James 3:1).* Paul tells Timothy that when an elder sin, “*rebuke before all so that others might fear” (1 Tim. 5:20).*

***RENDERING EVIL FOR EVIL***

 *“See that none render* ***evil*** *for* ***evil*** *unto any man; but ever follow that which is* ***good****, both among yourselves, and to all men”* (1 Thess. 5:15). I feel bad for many of these young kids today. Bullying has become a big problem in the schools. In some instances, that constant harassment drives a child to take his or her own life. Other times, a child pushed to his or her limits, uses a gun against others to release that rage.

 David was a person who felt the pains of bullying. He would cry unto the Lord, *“Have mercy upon me, O Lord; for I am* ***weak****: O Lord, heal me; for my bones are vexed” (Psa. 6:2).* In his lifetime, he was bullied by the giant Goliath (1 Sam. 17), king Saul (1 Sam. 20), and then by his son Absalom.

 Turn to the New Testament, and we see the Lord being bullied throughout His ministry. The Pharisees were always trying to find fault in everything He did. In the end, they dragged Him before the Roman officials to have Him humiliated, beaten, and hung on a cross. Without a doubt, we worship a Savior who understands what it is like to be bullied.

 So how did Christ handle mistreatment? He said, *“But I say unto you, love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and* ***pray*** *for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you” (Matt. 5:44).*

It is sad to say that occasionally you will see bullying in the church. John speaks of a bully in one of the congregations in Asia, *“I wrote unto the church: but Diotrephes, who loveth to have the preeminence among them, receiveth us not. Wherefore, if I come, I will remember his deeds which he doeth, prating against us with malicious words: and not content therewith, neither doth he himself receive the brethren, and forbiddeth them that would, and casteth them out of the church” (3 John 1:9, 10).*

In the world, we must live with the bullies. Yet, in the church, that kind of demeanor is grounds for withdrawal (2 Thess. 3:6, 1 Tim. 6:5). Failure to do so will cause good members to leave. In my opinion, that is unacceptable.

**SEASONED WITH SALT**

 *“Let your speech be always* ***with*** *grace,* ***seasoned******with******salt****, that ye may know how ye ought to answer every man”* (Col. 4:6).

 It was Solomon who wrote, “***The****re is that speaketh like* ***the*** *piercings of a sword: but* ***the******tongue*** *of* ***the*** *wise is health” (Prov. 12:18).* One of the most valuable lessons that a man can receive is how to speak to others properly. The way a man talks says a lot about that man. If he uses profanity, we note that person to be ignorant and insensitive to those around him. If a person is soon angry, we can tell it by the way he or she raises the voice, or often uses visual imagery towards the recipient of that anger.

 Homer called salt a divine substance. During the time of Christ, salt was used in two ways: To season food, and to preserve meats. Paul has this in mind when he states that the Christian must coat his tongue with grace. Think before you speak! And when you do orate what you need to say, say it in a way that will be most effective.

 We must remember that what we say, and how we say things, defines us. First impressions are long lasting. Your bad day coupled with a sharp tongue will build a wall that is not easily broken.

 As Christians we are projecting an image. We need to be able to control our emotions and soften our speech. There is a way to speak the truth without reflecting a prideful attitude.

 Think about the Canaanite woman who came to beg for the healing of her daughter. Mark writes, “*But he answered* ***her*** *not a word. And his disciples came and besought him, saying,* ***Send******her******away****; for she crieth after us” (Mark 15:23).* The disciples lack of concern and spiteful attitude was hideous. They expressed their hatred by using their tongues.

 Can you imagine neglecting the tears of a person who is begging for mercy, for help, for healing? Brethren, it is so necessary to control our speech, and to be a true representative of Christ. As Peter says, *“If any man* ***speak****, let him* ***speak*** *as* ***the******oracles******of******God****; if any man minister, let him do it as* ***of******the*** *ability which* ***God*** *giveth: that* ***God*** *in all things may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom be praise and dominion for ever and ever. Amen” (1 Pet. 4:11).*

**THE CRITIC**

 *“For John came neither* ***eating*** *nor* ***drinking****,* ***and*** *they say, He hath a devil. The Son of man came* ***eating******and******drinking****,* ***and*** *they say, Behold a man gluttonous,* ***and*** *a winebibber, a friend of publicans* ***and*** *sinners. But wisdom is justified of her children” (John 11:18, 19).*

 Can you imagine criticizing Jesus? Even the way He talked to the masses was infuriating to those who despised Him. He was a master storyteller. Much of His teachings were in parables. *“And the disciples came, and said unto him, Why speakest thou unto them in* ***parables****?” (Matt. 13:10).*

 When Paul came onto the scene, he would often speak about his past as a Pharisee, and then his conversion on the road to Damascus (Acts 26). His story became part of the gospel story. Our own stories can greatly influence others to realize the power of the gospel and its ability to save souls today.

 As a minister, I have often been told how to teach and preach. Though the critics have never converted a single soul, most often driven them away, they feel empowered by their ability to dictate. This was the case of Diotrephes (3 John 1:9).

 Many times, the influences of the critic reach further than the local minister. He or she can drive members away. Sadly, they never see themselves as the cause for others leaving.

 We are a unified body of believers in this congregation. Every family that has left are precious souls. The people responsible for their leaving need to exert the effort to do what is necessary to bring them back. I have visited many of these families. The time for criticizing is past. The Bible says, *“Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted. Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ” (Gal. 6:1, 2).*

**THE GRASS IS NOT GREENER**

 *“Live joyfully with the****wife****whom thou lovest all the days of the life of thy vanity, which he hath given thee under the sun, all the days of thy vanity: for that is thy portion in this life, and in thy labour which thou takest under the sun”* (Eccl. 9:9). “*And he had seven hundred****wives****, princesses, and three hundred concubines: and his****wives****turned away his heart” (1 Kings 11:3).*

 It is hard to grasp how a man could write so passionately about marriage, and yet have so many wives and concubines. The power of inspiration is that God often spoke through the mouths of sinners. Moses a murderer, David and adulterer, and Solomon with an insatiable lust that led to his downfall.

 It was often viewed in ancient times that wives were treated more like possessions. They were seen no differently than a prized bull. For Solomon, they served as trophies that proved his wealth and kingship. Yet, when moved by the Holy Spirit, God condemns his behavior. Though some false religions teach that polygamy is not sinful, the true Bible student notes that God never condoned it or accepted it among His people. He simply winked at their ignorance (Acts 17:30).

 Solomon also taught that the man with a wandering eye will not be satisfied. In other words, the grass is not always greener on the other side of the fence. Solomon writes, *“Let thy fountain be blessed: and rejoice with the wife of thy****youth****” (Prov. 5:18).*

If I was to look at biblical examples of great marriages in the Bible, Solomon would be my last choice. I would choose to look at Mary and Joseph, Aquilla and Priscilla, and Elisabeth and Zacharias. These were couples who respected their sacred vows.

 Marriage is an honorable thing (Heb. 13:4). A man needs to keep his eyes on his wife. He needs to keep his heart clean. This means to stay clear of pornography, graphic pictures, or anything else that could set the stage for adultery.

 Wives, likewise, need to be pure. Cherish your husband. You are the weaker vessel physically, but a rock that he can lean upon spiritually. You are indeed a pearl of great price. You are worth far above rubies (Prov. 3:15, 31:10).

**THE RESURRECTION**

 **“***And with great power gave the apostles witness of the****resurrection****of the Lord Jesus: and great grace was upon them all” (Acts 4:33). “Except it be for this one voice, that I cried standing among them, Touching the****resurrection****of the dead I am called in question by you this day*” (Acts 24:21).

Today, many people are celebrating Easter. A day when the Lord rose from the dead. Originally, Easter was a pagan holiday.  The ancient Teutonic goddess of spring was addressed as Eostre. Hence, the coming of spring meant new beginnings. Nature would once again come alive.

 It was no accident that Jesus was resurrected on this day. Through the resurrection of Jesus, a new dawn had broken. The world would never be the same again. Jesus brought hope to a lost world. He brought spring to a horrid winter. John proclaimed, “*In him was****life****; and the****life****was the light of men” (John 1:4).*

 The resurrection becomes the central theme of the early church. Paul proclaimed, *“For if we have been planted together in the likeness of his death, we shall be also in the likeness of his****resurrection***” (Rom. 6:5). He also stated, *“That I may know him, and the power of his****resurrection****, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death; If by any means I might attain unto the****resurrection****of the dead.”*

This weekend more memories will be gathered as we watch the children hunt for eggs, and feast upon some delicacies. Their energy will be a welcomed sight. Howbeit, two thousand years ago, a new celebration would begin. No longer would the sabbath be the day set aside to worship God, but Sunday. It would be the day when God’s people would focus on an empty tomb, and a risen Savior.

**TO WIN A FEW**

 ***“****To the weak became I as weak, that I might gain the weak: I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. And this I do for the gospel's sake, that I might be partaker thereof with you” (1 Cor. 9:22, 23).*

 How far would you go to save your friend from hell? How about your children, or your spouse? Paul would do whatever was necessary, without compromising scripture, to win souls.

 I love the parable of the persistent widow who pleaded for justice to be served against her adversary (Luke 18:1-8). She pleaded her cause before a wicked judge “*which feared not God, neither regarded man*” (Luke 18:2). Yet, she was so persistent that the evil judge honored her request.

 Righteous people are persistent. Why? Because they have a heart of concern. This is the thought that Jesus wanted to place within the hearts of His disciples when he taught about benevolence (Matt. 25:35-46).

 I have often pondered on why it is so difficult for people to remain faithful to God. What keeps them away from services, or from responding to the gospel invitation? What makes a man choose to do evil rather than good?

 I read a story of a man who pleaded with his grown children to read the Bible. Like so many, they had no valid excuse, they just didn’t do it. After the man died, he left each one of his children a Bible. All of them became outraged believing that the father had wasted all his savings. Years later, one of the children decided to pick up the Bible and read a few passages. To his surprise, a hundred-dollar bill was placed between each page. The old man did not waste his savings but placed it where it would do the most good.

 Every one of us have children, family, and friends that are on the path to hell. Our silence, our hesitancy, and our procrastination may cost them their souls. Our pretentious attitude that they are good kids, loving parents, and hardworking will not save them. Paul proclaimed, “*As it is written, There is none righteous, no not one!*” (Rom. 3:10).

 I have heard it said that there are three things we can do for the lost: Pray, preach, pray some more! Paul wrote, *“Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is,* ***that******they******might******be******saved****” (Rom. 10:1).* My heart’s desire is that my friends, enemies, and children will be saved!

**WHAT DID THE DOCTOR SAY?**

 **Physicians** have been around for many years. Job mentions them (Job 13:4), and so does Jesus (Matt. 9:12). Throughout the centuries physicians have gained wealth because of the infirmities of the populace. It is stated concerning the woman who had a blood disease, “*And a woman having an issue of blood twelve years, which had* ***spent all her living*** *upon* ***physician****s, neither could be healed of any” (Luke 8:43).*

It must have been amazing for Luke, a practicing physician, to witness the miraculous healings by the apostles. Most likely, he had met many people who were beyond help. The practice of medicine was primitive. Howbeit, the miraculous powers demonstrated in the First Century were far beyond human comprehension. Scientist today try to dismiss the miracles of Christ with scientific reasoning.

 Though miracles have ceased (1 Cor. 13:10; James 1:25), God’s providential ability to heal has not. Jesus is still the Great Physician. He never leaves us without hope. He does listen to our prayers.

 In this present age, we need to keep our faith. We can appreciate modern medicine, but they can only do what God allows them to do. Much of what they do is a guessing game. A doctor may diagnose a person with a terminal illness. He may state that the person will live no longer than five years. God intervenes, and the man lives twenty more years. Never forget that the date of your death is on God’s calendar, not man’s.

 Thus, the next time a doctor speaks to you listen. Be courteous and kind, but keep in mind that God is in that office with you. He has the final say!

**WHAT IF THEY FOUND THE ARK OF THE COVENANT?**

 Imagine if one was to find the holy grail (the cup used at the Lord’s Supper), a nail that was driven through the Lord’s hands, a plank from Noah’s ark, or the ark of the covenant. Without a doubt, that person would be a very wealthy man if he chose to sell those items.

 Yet, what value would they hold for us today? First, it would be difficult to prove that the item was authentic. Even if it was, it would be the prized possession of some rich man, or some wealthy religious organization.

 Even further, they would hold no supernatural power to heal or destroy. If you remember the story of Uzzah, he touched the ark of the covenant and was killed instantly (2 Sam. 6:6, 7). If man was to find the ark today, it would simply be a well-constructed box with an amazing history.

 Often people fail to realize that the power was God. When the woman with an infirmity touched the hem of Christ’s robe, she was healed (Matt. 9:20). The Bible says about Paul, “*And God wrought special miracles by the hands of Paul:**So that from his body were brought unto the sick handkerchiefs or aprons, and the diseases departed from them, and the evil spirits went out of them*” (Acts 19:11, 12).

 The power of God was not in the hem of the Lord’s garment, or in a handkerchief blessed by Paul; it was in the heart of both these men. We find the power of God in the words that Christ spoke (John 4:53), and the compassion he showed to the multitude (Matt. 9:36).

 Further, man tends to worship religious items. We note in Deuteronomy 34:6, God buries the body of Moses. According to the book of Jude, Satan tried to dig up the body of Moses knowing that the people would worship his remains. God sent Michael, the archangel, to stop this from happening (Jude 1:9).

 In conclusion, my faith is not based on artifacts. My faith is based upon the word (Rom. 10:17). I believe that the stories in the bible are true. I believe that Jesus was born of a virgin, lived a pure life, was hung a tree, and then arose from the dead. That is the gospel story. That is where my faith is founded.

**WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE MADE IN GOD’S IMAGE?**

 *“And God said, Let us make man in our* ***image****, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth*. *So God created man in his own* ***image****, in the* ***image*** *of God created he him; male and female created he them*” (Gen. 1:26, 27).

This passage is often misinterpreted. There are some that profess that man was made to look like God physically. However, God is a Spirit that has no physical parts (John 4:24, Luke 24:39).

 Several facts are given to us in the first few chapters of Genesis that offers insight on the question. First, we note that man receives an **immortal spirit**. This separated him from all the other creatures in the garden. It was Paul who wrote, “***And*** *the very God of peace sanctify you wholly;* ***and*** *I pray God your whole* ***spirit******and******soul******and******body*** *be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thess. 5:23).*

Second, man was made with the **intellectual capacity** to rule over the animal kingdom. In the beginning man was made a perfect creature. He was given the ability to think, make decisions, and communicate with God. This is revealed when Adam names all the creatures that God had created (Gen. 2:19, 20).

 Third, the Adam of the garden was created to be **good.** The psalmist proclaimed, *“Teach me to do thy will; for thou art my* ***God****: thy spirit* ***is******good****; lead me into the land of uprightness” (Psa. 143:10).* When man was created he had no idea what it meant to be disobedient. Not one evil thought entered his mind until Satan tempted Eve.

 Once man sinned, and was cast from the garden, his image changed. The Bible says concerning the birth of Seth*, “And Adam lived an hundred and thirty years, and begat a son in his own likeness, and after his* ***image****; and called his name Seth” (Gen. 5:3).*

 The pre-fall Adam was created in the **moral image** of God. He was made righteous and holy. A perfect being made by a perfect God. Whereas, after the fall, every person faced mortality. It is imperative that we note that sin is not inherited. It is not genetically passed down from one generation to the next. Ezekiel declared, *“The soul that sinneth, it shall die. The son shall not bear the iniquity of the father, neither shall the father bear the iniquity of the son: the righteousness of the righteous shall be upon him, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon him” (Ezk. 18:20).*

 Even after the fall, life was still precious in the sight of God. After the first world was destroyed, Noah was told by God, *“Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed: for in the* ***image*** *of God made he man (Gen. 9:6).”*

Those in the church today realize that all hope rests in Christ. *“For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the* ***image*** *of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren” (Rom. 8:29). “But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same* ***image*** *from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord” (2 Cor. 3:18).* The paradise of God awaits all those who are obedient to the Son.

**WHAT IS THE SIN UNTO DEATH?**

 ***“****If any man see his brother* ***sin*** *a* ***sin*** *which is not* ***unto******death****, he shall ask, and he shall give him life for them that* ***sin*** *not* ***unto******death****. There is a* ***sin******unto******death****: I do not say that he shall pray for it” (1 Jn. 5:16).*

 Most often this verse is used to speak about the sin of suicide. I think it is important to keep the verse in context. John was speaking about prayer in verses fourteen and fifteen. In fact, he states that God hears His servants.

After John’s declaration in verse sixteen, he states, *“All unrighteousness is sin: and there is a sin not unto death.  We know that whosoever is born of God sinneth not; but he that is begotten of God keepeth himself, and that wicked one toucheth him not” (1 John 5:17, 18).*

The key here is in understanding the definition of sin, and the mercy of God. There is no specific sin being spoken about in this passage. The comparison is between those who reside under the mercy of God through true repentance and righteous living, and those who do not. It is our duty as Christians to pray for one another (Rom. 15:30). We should continually make intercession for all men (1 Tim. 2:1). However, if a man does not want to recognize Christ, and be obedient to Him, no prayer on earth will take away his sins.

This verse also teaches us to confess our faults to one another and pray for one another (James 5:16). Unveiling to all of us that our prayers do make a difference in the lives of others.

 Today, many of us have a better understanding of mental illness. Some of our closest friends have suffered from it. Suicide is never justifiable, but it is understandable. A person overwhelmed with the disease can end up in such distraught that he or she feels that suicide is the answer. As the church, we must learn to recognize the various signs of this disease, and do our best to prevent such calamities.

**WHICH BIBLE SHOULD I USE?**

 You often hear arguments concerning which translations are bad, and which are good. One must be very careful when informing someone that the Bible that was given to them by their deceased loved one is a bad translation. I am a firm believer that knowledge is the key. I can take any translation and guide someone to Christ by it.

 Now are there translations I prefer? Yes! I like the King James Version because I have quoted from it for the past thirty-five years. The *New King James Version*, the *American Standard Version*, and the *English Standard Version* are all wonderful translations.

 The best Bible is the one written in the original language. The Old Testament was written in Aramaic and Hebrew. The New Testament was written in Greek. Yet, it would not be appropriate to expect every person who sits in the pew to know these languages. Hence, we depend on the accuracy of the interpreters and Divine Providence.

 The key to proper Bible study is to research the version. The King James version for example was translated by forty-seven scholars, all members of the church of England, taking them seven years to complete. The American Standard Version was completed in 1901 by over one hundred renowned scholars. The English Standard Version came out in 2001 and was translated by more than one hundred scholars. It is probably the best literal translation in English.

 You will be able to see the discrepancies in translations when harmony is unachieved. The Bible is harmonious. It does not contradict itself, nor does is it conflicting. Hence it is that rhythmic flow that points to uniformity and unity.

 In short, be cautious in what translation you use. Prejudicial translations are out there, like the ***Good News Bible***, and the ***Word on the Street Bible***. The Bible is indeed an infallible book but translated in other languages by fallible men. That is why translations that have merely one translator should be avoided.

**WHO WAS STEPHEN HAWKINS?**

 The news reported that Stephen Hawkins died. My wife’s response, “Who was Stephen Hawkins?” Mr. Hawkins was a British theoretical physicist, and a confirmed atheist. When speaking about heaven, he stated, “*I regard the brain as a computer which will stop working when its components fail*.*There is no heaven or afterlife for broken down computers; that is a fairy story for people afraid of the dark.”* He further stated, “*One can’t prove that God doesn’t exist. But science makes God unnecessary. … The laws of physics can explain the universe without the need for a creator*.”

 One second after Mr. Hawkins died, he found out that God is real. A man with a neurodegenerative disease, living most of his life in a wheel-chair, could not accept the reality of Jehovah. That is the true tragedy of his existence. You can have a brilliant mind with fame and fortune, but if it is led without God, what is the worth of that life? (Mark 8:36).

 How is it that men with incredible minds fail to see the logic of an all-powerful Creator? Paul wrote, “Because the foolishness of God is **wise**r than men; and the weakness of God is stronger than men. For you see your calling, brethren, how that not many **wise** men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called” (1 Cor. 1:25, 26).

 Also, why would a man with such a debilitating disease refuse to believe in a God that would give him hope? David proclaimed, “For in thee, O Lord, do I **hope**: thou wilt hear, O Lord my God” (Psa. 38:15). For the Christian any thorn in the flesh will vanish in the next life. There are no cripples, blind, or diseased saints in heaven.

 Most importantly, how could any person believe that the universe happened by chance? David declared, “**The** **heavens** declare **the** glory of God; and **the** firmament sheweth his handywork” (Psa. 19:1). Stephen Hawkins was an advocate of the Big Bang Theory. He could not grasp a universe having a Divine origin. Howbeit, an organized and complex universe demands an organized and complex Creator.

 In conclusion, Stephen Hawkins joins a great number of scientific minds that are now willing to change their perspectives. They found out that God is real, and that judgment Is final!

**WHY ARE THERE SO MANY DIFFERENT DENOMINATIONS?**

 When we look at the great number of denominations that have formed just in the last decade it is staggering. It is also very sad. Yet there is an answer to this question.

 When the church was first established (A.D. 33) on Pentecost, it was singular in nature and design. God was adding people to it (Acts 2:47). The unity of the singular church that Jesus built was the central theme of the early disciples (1 Cor. 1:10, Eph. 4:1-4). However, division started taken place within the first century church. The book of 1 Corinthians was written to stop the division happening in that congregation. By the time the book of Revelation was written, false doctrine had entered several of the churches in Asia (Rev. 2, 3).

 The basic emphasis of the early church was that there was but one body (the church), and one head over the church (Jesus) (Eph. 1:22-23). This wasn’t good enough for many. The people wanted to have one body, but two heads. One being Christ, and one being the Pope. Hence, in 606 AD, Boniface III becomes the first recognized pope of both the East and the West. Without a doubt, this went against the principles of Christ being the only head over the singular church.

 Nine hundred years later, many Catholic priests wanted to break away from some of the teachings of Catholicism. This period was called the Reformation movement. Martin Luther, John Wesley, and John Calvin were some of the key players in the movement. This created the world of denominationalism. They wanted one head in heaven but created many different bodies. This is what we see today. Thousands of different bodies believing in one head. Sadly, this was more corrupt that Catholicism. For they created a church with many different bodies which was contrary to the unity prescribed by the early apostles and Christ.

 What we so firmly believe is that there will always be a body of believers who accept the simple doctrine of one Lord ruling over one church, the church that He built. These people will be unified in doctrine and practice. They will speak when the Bible speaks and be silent when the Bible is silent! They will not attest to any creed, conference, or synod. Every person is treated with dignity, respect, and with brotherly kindness. This was the church that Christ built, and we are the saints that continue that legacy!

**WHY IS IT WRONG TO MODERNIZE THE CHURCH?**

 There are people within the Lord’s church who believe that we are going to have to modernize the church to survive. Yet, what do they mean by the word, modernize? The word means to *adapt (something) to modern needs or habits, typically by installing modern equipment or adopting modern ideas or methods.*

 If one is speaking about constructing a new building, or adding more classrooms, I would say modernize all you want. Howbeit, if you are talking about adding or subtracting things from worship to satisfy this present generation, something is terribly wrong with your thinking.

 Luke writes, “*And* ***all*** *that believed were together, and had* ***all******things*** *common” (Acts 2:44).* In the very beginning when the church was established, the worship of the early Christians was unified. Every Lord’s Day they gathered to partake of the Lord’s Supper (Acts 20:7), give of their means (1 Cor. 16:2), sing praises to God (Heb. 2:12), hear the gospel preached (Acts 13:5), and pray.

 This pattern of worship never altered during the first few centuries of the church. They realize that the true meaning of worship was paying homage to God and not to man. They feared being like their ancestors who perverted worship: *“And they* ***rose******up*** *early on the morrow, and offered burnt offerings, and brought peace offerings; and the people sat down* ***to*** *eat and* ***to*** *drink, and* ***rose******up******to******play****” (Exodus 32:6).*

The preservation of worship is comparable to one wanting to restore and old vintage car. To do such that person must have a schematic of the vehicle, find the parts, and restore it back to its original condition. If he adds anything extra, or fails to put on something original, he fails at his task.

 God has given us a book to follow. It tells us how to worship Him, and what to do when we gather on the Lord’s Day. He leaves nothing out! If we take away from what He requires, WE FAIL! If we add to His worship, WE FAIL! Our worship in this present century should be no different than those early saints. They did not go to services to be entertained. They gathered to hear about Jesus. Their worship was simple and pleasing to God.

**WILL ONE UNREPENTED SIN KEEP YOU OUT OF HEAVEN?**

 How often have you heard a minister preach on this subject? I used to be so afraid that one unrepented sin would keep me from paradise that I felt salvation was not achievable.

 I imagined myself getting into a terrible accident, and right before the impact, a bad word slips out of my mouth. Because of that one fowl word, my eternal reward would be taken away.

 John writes, *“But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin. If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us” (1 John 1:7-10).*

This passage tells me that salvation equates to walking in the light of Jesus. It is His blood that cleanses me. My acknowledgement that I am a sinner, and my willingness to confess my sins, brings me to the cross of forgiveness.

 Let’s look at it from a different angle. What if I believe something that is false. My father was raised up in a generation that was not taught that smoking was wrong. When he went off to war, cigarettes where given to the soldiers in their sea rations. Would that whole generation be condemned because of their ignorance?

 Even further, what about new Christian. Peter says, “*As newborn babes, desire the sincere* ***milk*** *of the word, that ye may grow thereby*” (1 Pet. 2:2). The Hebrew writer proclaimed, *“For every one that useth* ***milk*** *is unskilful in the word of righteousness: for he is a babe” (Heb. 15:13).* New converts may still hold to some false beliefs. It would be the duty of the more mature Christians to teach them and bring them to maturity.

 We need to have a better understanding of God’s grace. The borders of His forgiveness stretch much further than what we perceive. The very best that we can do falls short. I am depended upon His grace, His mercy, and His acceptance.

**YOU LEARN SOMETHING FROM A HEN HOUSE**

 Solomon often learned from watching the animal kingdom how to be a better man. He wrote, “***Go******to******the******ant****, thou sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise” (Prov. 6:6).* Jesus used the example of a mother hen with her chicks to speak about His love for the Jewish nation (Matt. 23:37).

 In the last few months, I have learned about the stability of the hen house. Chickens protect their territory. If anything invades their hen house, they will do everything necessary to alleviate the threat. Sometimes that threat is too strong, like a predator looking for an easy meal. Yet, if a mouse, rat, or something more manageable comes into their domain, they will react. Whenever I catch mice in the house, I just throw them into the hen house, and within minutes they are devoured.

 Brethren, we need to be just as adamant about protecting the church. Jesus said, *“And if a****house****be****divided****against itself, that****house****cannot stand” (Mark 3:25).* The Lord’s church stands on the solid foundation of Christ.

 Jesus called Himself the Chief Shepherd. In this relationship He stated, “*To him the porter openeth; and the****sheep****hear his voice: and he calleth his own****sheep****by name, and leadeth them out. And when he putteth forth his own****sheep****, he goeth before them, and the****sheep****follow him: for they know his voice.”*

Also, the hen house can have only one ruling rooster. I have two roosters, and two male gennies in my flock. However, Tim, the head rooster is dominant. Whether he is lifting his head to crow or makes his way to the front of the line when feeding, he controls the flock.

 Likewise, the church has only one head (Eph. 1:22). You may ask, “*What about the men leading the church*?” The men who lead the church, preferably elders, are interpreters of the word. Everything they do must correlate with what is written in the bible. Often churches try to come up with bylaws. Yet, all that needs to be written is, “*We abide by every word written in the Holy Bible*.”

 I have heard it said that churches need to have something written to protect the church. Yet can you come up with a better set of rules than what is given in the New Testament by Christ and the apostles? He expects you to guard against evil influences (Eph. 6:12-17). Early Christians had to stand firm against outside interference. There were some churches that gave in (Rev. 2, 3), while others stood firmly in the faith.

 In the hen house, the rooster protects and rules his flock. In the church, Jesus Christ stands firmly as the churches originator and protector. We must honor His rule and accept His Kingship.

**ALONE TIME WITH GOD**

 “*And when he had sent the multitudes away, he went up into a mountain apart to pray: and when the evening was come, he was there* ***alone” (Matt. 14:23)****. “But thou, when thou* ***pray****est, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door,* ***pray*** *to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly” (Matt. 6:6).*

We are all aware of our need to have a personal alone time with God. Jesus was no different. This intimate connection to His Father gave Him the ability to endure what no other man could. As God’s elect we need to follow that example for several reasons.

 First, that closet closed alone time will make you **stronger**. Jesus went into the garden three times (Matt. 26). The first two times He came out of the garden He rebuked Peter, James, and John for falling asleep. Howbeit, on that third time, Jesus exclaimed, “*Then cometh he to his disciples, and saith unto them, Sleep on now, and take your rest: behold, the hour is at hand, and the Son of man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Rise, let us be going: behold, he is at hand that doth betray me” (Matt. 26:45, 46).*

 Also, your alone time with God will aid your **spirit.** How often have I gotten goose bumps pondering on God and His creation? Have you stood alone at night and looked at the stars? “***The******heavens*** *declare* ***the*** *glory of God; and* ***the*** *firmament sheweth his handywork” (Psa. 19:1).* Have you stood on a mountain and gazed out at God’s creation? *“Which by his strength setteth fast the* ***mountains****; being girded with power” (Psa. 65:6).*

 Let us not forget those moments we spend reading and studying God’s word. Paul said, “*The* ***Spirit*** *itself beareth witness with our* ***spirit****, that we are the children of God” (Rom. 8:16).* How does the Spirit bear witness? Peter stated, “*For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were* ***moved*** *by the Holy Ghost” (2 Pet. 1:21).* I am moved by the Spirit through the word of God that was given to those inspired men. Those same words move me to action. They not only enlarge my understanding of God, but deepen my relationship with Him.

 Yes! As God’s people we need to have our alone time with Him. Those moments nestled in our closets in communicating to our Heavenly Father. Those serene moments when the heavens are opened and you are standing before the Holy throne. We are talking about those memorial occasions when you feel His presence, and He hears your petitions. Spend some alone time with God, and experience the peace that will be showered upon you.

**ARE YOU HAPPY?**

 *“****Happy*** *is that people, that is in such a case: yea,* ***happy*** *is that people, whose God is the Lord” (Psa. 144:15). “****Happy*** *is he that hath the God of Jacob for his help, whose hope is in the Lord his God” (Psa. 146:5). “He that handleth a matter wisely shall find good: and whoso trusteth in the Lord,* ***happy*** *is he” (Prov. 16:20).*

There are many other passages throughout the Bible that speaks of true happiness, and how it is obtained. In all honesty, we all want to be happy. The problem resides in the fact that many people are not!

 So where does one begin? After Jesus exemplified the true meaning of servitude in the foot washing episode in John Thirteen, Jesus proclaimed, “*For I have given you an example that ye should do as I have done to you. Verily, verily, I say unto you, The servant is not greater than his lord; neither he that is sent greater than he that sent him.* ***If ye know these things, happy are ye if ye do them****” (Jn. 15:13-17).*

The Lord Himself says that happiness is achieved by two things: (1) knowledge, and, (2) obedience. Concerning **knowledge**, Solomon said, “*The heart of the prudent getteth* ***knowledge****; and the ear of the wise seeketh* ***knowledge****” (Prov. 18:15).* Jesus told His apostles, “*And ye shall* ***know******the******truth****, and* ***the******truth*** *shall make you free” (Jn. 8:32).* Free from what? Free from all those things that convict you, and chain you to a life of despair. Free from a disillusioned existence that brings no happiness or joy. Jesus gives us a reason for living, and a hope that is eternal: “*For the* ***hope*** *which is laid up for you in heaven, whereof ye heard before in the word of the truth of the gospel” (Col. 1:5).*

 Second, happiness is achieved through **obedience**. Have you ever been convicted by your conscience? Whether it is a child holding the truth from his or her parents, or a Christian being tormented by an unfaithful life; the conscience is there to move you to action.

 So why don’t we obey? What holds us back from being the Christian we know we can be? Sometimes it is just plain **laziness**. Solomon wrote, “*Slothfulness casteth into a deep sleep; and an idle soul shall suffer hunger” (Prov. 19:15).*

 Sometimes we do not obey because the devil has convinced us that we are not **worthy**. It is sad that many people give up because they think heaven is not achievable. If God was able to save a harlot (Joshua 2), people who once practiced witchcraft (Acts 19), and a murderer (Acts 9); God can save you! Christ has made us worthy if we are just willing to obey.

 My plea for everyone is to take a good look at themselves in the mirror of James chapter one. Note what changes you have to make so that you can live a happy and fulfilling life. Remember that Christ came that *you might have life, and have it more abundantly*! (Jn. 10:10).

**IT’S NOT EASY BEING FAITHFUL**

 David proclaimed, *“Help, Lord; for the godly man ceaseth; for the* ***faithful*** *fail from among the children of me” (Eccl. 12:1).* Isaiah wrote*, “How is the* ***faithful*** *city become an harlot! it was full of judgment; righteousness lodged in it; but now murderer” (Isa. 1:21).* Both men had witnessed the failing of the righteous into unfaithfulness.

 Why is it so difficult to remain faithful? For some it is a constant battle to keep their heads above water. They have this urging to be dedicated to Christ, but seemingly drift in the other direction. There is no secret to faithfulness, nor is there any magical solution to keeping one faithful. There are some basic principles that need to be considered.

 First, one must **prioritize** their **commitments**. There are many people who hate their jobs. Howbeit, every morning they arise, get dressed, and truck off to work. Why? They realize they need the income to feed and take care of their families. In short, we become committed to those things that we know are absolutely necessary for our survival.

 We also set our priorities on those things that entertain us. We all like to do things that relax us and make us feel good. It would be amazing to see how much money is spent in this country on entertainment.

 Sadly, what about the commitment you made to God? I am firm believer that Christians can enjoy entertainment, traveling, and spending time with family. Yet this should not negate our responsibility to God.

**CAN A RICH MAN GO TO HEAVEN?**

 Jesus said, “*For it is easier for* ***a*** *camel to go through* ***a******needle****'s* ***eye****, than for* ***a*** *rich man to enter into the kingdom* ***of*** *God” (Lk. 18:25).* I remember hearing that the eye of the needle was a narrow passage that camels were forced to go through in some tough terrain in Israel. However, this is not true. Luke was a physician. In his gospel the needle mentioned is a surgical needle. With this thought in mind, Jesus was literally saying that it was impossible for a particular type of rich man to go to heaven.

 The question is, “*What type of rich man is inferred*?” If I were to compare the average American to the rest of the world’s populace, he or she would be considered rich. Face it, we live in luxury. We not only have running water, a warm house, and food on the table; many of us have more than one car in the driveway.

 In answering the question, we must note that the Bible speaks of several righteous rich people. It was a rich disciple of Christ that laid Jesus in His tomb (Matt. 27:57). Further, let us not forget King Solomon, even before he strayed, he was extremely rich (1 Kings 10:23). Many of the patriarchs like Abraham and Joseph were wealthy.

 The type of rich person that will never see heaven is one that **lusts** after their riches. Paul wrote, *“For the* ***love******of******money*** *is the root* ***of*** *all evil: which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows” (1 Tim. 6:10).* This passage tells me that money is not the root of evil; the lust of it is! A Christian will be a good steward. Bills will be paid, obligations will be met, and God will not be forgotten when the contribution plate is passed.

 There is also another type of rich person that will never enjoy paradise, one that **lives** for his riches. Paul stated, *“For to me to* ***live*** *is Christ, and to die is gain” (Phil. 1:21).* To young Timothy, Paul writes, “*No man that warreth entangleth himself with* ***the*** *affairs of this* ***life****; that he may please him who hath chosen him to be a soldier” (2 Tim. 2:4).* Many men and women have lost family, friends, and years of life for the gain of prosperity and riches.

 Thus, enjoy the prosperity that God has given you. We have been blessed to be born in such a wealthy and free nation. At the same time live for God, and put Him first in your life. Don’t allow riches to blind you, and deter you from the goal set before you, eternal life!

**DEFINING WORKS**

 The word “*works*” is used some two hundred and twenty-four times in the Bible. It is a word that defines the difference between what is good and what is evil*. “The world cannot hate you; but me it hateth, because I testify of it, that the* ***works*** *thereof are evil” (Jn. 7:7). “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto* ***good******works****, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in the” (Eph. 2:10*). “*They profess that they know God; but in* ***works*** *they deny him, being abominable, and disobedient, and unto every* ***good*** *work reprobate” (Tit. 1:16).*

 The Bible reveals to the reader that truly believing in Jesus is a work*.* “*Then said they unto him, What shall we do, that we might work the* ***works*** *of God?” (John 6:28).* Jesus responded, *“This is the* ***work*** *of God, that ye believe on him whom he hath sent” (Jn. 6:29).* "*Remembering without ceasing your work of faith, and labour of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ, in the sight of God and our Father*" (1 Thess.1:3).

Sometimes the word is used to speak of physical labor. “*And the taskmasters hasted them, saying, Fulfil your* ***works****, your daily tasks, as when there was straw” (Exd. 5:13). “…and in all the* ***works*** *of thine hands, therefore thou shalt surely rejoice” (Deut. 16:15). “Then I looked on all the* ***works*** *that my hands had wrought, and on the labour that I had laboured to do: and, behold, all was vanity and vexation of spirit, and there was no profit under the sun” (Eccl. 2:11).*

In the Old Testament the word is often used to speak about God’s miraculous creation, and His interaction in the affairs of His people. “*And Israel served the Lord all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders that overlived Joshua, and which had known all the* ***works*** *of the Lord, that he had done for Israel” (Josh. 24:31). “Sing unto him, sing psalms unto him, talk ye of all his wondrous* ***works****” (1 Chron. 16:9).*

Within this scope of the miraculous are God’s judgments upon the wicked. “*Come and see the* ***works*** *of God: he is terrible in his doing toward the children of men” (Psa. 66:5). “The* ***works*** *of his hands are verity and judgment; all his commandments are sure” (Psa. 111:7).*

Works are also defined as those things we do for the good of others and ourselves. *“Give her of the fruit of her hands; and let her own* ***works*** *praise her in the gates” (Prov. 31:31). “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven” (Matt. 5:16).* Concerning Tabitha, *“this woman was full of* ***good******works*** *and almsdeeds which she did” (Acts 9:36).* The works of Cornelius were recognized by God before he became a Christian, “*A devout man, and one that feared God with all his house, which gave much alms to the people, and prayed to God always” (Acts 10:2).*

 The story of Cornelius is a primary example of someone who had works without faith (Jas. 2:17). He needed Jesus! If he would have refused the preaching of Christ, the story would have had a different meaning. We thank Jesus for great men like Cornelius who exemplifies the true example of faith coupled with works.

We note that the Pharisees did many things for self-glorification. “*But all their works they do for to be seen of men: they make broad their phylacteries, and enlarge the borders of their garments, and love the uppermost rooms at feasts, and the chief seats in the synagogues, and greetings in the markets, and to be called of men, Rabbi, Rabbi” (Matt. 23:4-7).*

 *Also,* the miracles performed by Christ and His apostles were called works. “*And he did not many mighty* ***works*** *there because of their unbelief” (Matt. 13:58). “But if I do, though ye believe not me, believe the* ***works****: that ye may know, and believe, that the Father is in me, and I in him” (Jn. 10:38).*

In summation, if I were pressed to define “works,” especially in the context of Christianity, it is the application of God’s word within our hearts that motivates us to keep ourselves pure, and to do our best in saving the lost. It is both a mental and physical action that produces results. “*That they do* ***good****, that they be rich in* ***good******works****, ready to distribute, willing to communicate” (1 Tim. 6:18). “Having your conversation honest among the Gentiles: that, whereas they speak against you as evildoers, they may by your* ***good******works****, which they shall behold, glorify God in the day of visitation” (1 Pet. 2:12). “Jesus saith unto them, My meat is to do the will of him that sent me, and to finish his* ***work****” (Jn. 4:34*). Christ exclaimed, “*For the Son of man is come to* ***seek******and*** *to* ***save*** *that which was lost” (Lk. 19:10).*

**DON’T BE DISCOURAGED BECAUSE OF THE WICKED**

 *“Behold, these are the ungodly, who prosper in the world; they increase in riches” (Psa. 73:12). “When I thought to know this, it was too painful for me;Until I went into the sanctuary of God; then understood I their end” (vs. 16, 17).*

 It is so easy to get discouraged at the events that are going on in the world. We often question, “*Why even try*?” As God’s people we must remember that the world does not change. The greedy and disobedient prospered during the time of David, and they continue to prosper. Howbeit, they will have to answer to the God that we serve.

 First, never forget that our **faithfulness is fruitful**. Paul wrote to the church at Corinth, “*Howbeit we speak wisdom among them that are perfect: yet not the wisdom of this* ***world****, nor of the princes of this* ***world****, that* ***come******to*** *nought” (1 Cor. 2:6).* The Hebrew writer penned, “*And has tasted the good word of God, and the powers of the* ***world******to******come****” (Heb. 6:5).* The followers of Christ have a deed for property in heaven. How awesome is that?

 Also, the psalmist proclaims that the **faithless will perish**. *“Surely thou didst set them in slippery places: thou castedst them down into destruction. How are they brought into desolation, as in a moment! they are utterly consumed with terrors” (Psa. 73:18, 19).* All of mankind is subject unto God. The agnostic and unbeliever will not be able to escape the reality of His existence. They will have their proof one second after death.

 Lastly, David states that the **faithful are treated lovingly**. The psalm begins by stating, “*Truly God is good to Israel, even to such as are of a clean heart” (Psa. 73:1).* As the elect of God we are protected and preserved by God. He does not forsake or leave us trapped in despair. He is a loving father that takes good care of His children.

 In conclusion, this world will remain on a course of destruction. This we are sure, but the righteous are headed for a new heaven and new earth. *“And I saw a* ***new******heaven*** *and a* ***new*** *earth: for the first* ***heaven*** *and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea” (Rev. 21:1).*

**ENDURING TRIBULATION**

 The Lord said to Joshua, *“Have not I commanded thee? Be strong and of a good courage; be not afraid, neither be thou dismayed: for the Lord thy God is with thee whithersoever thou goest” (Josh. 1:9).* As God’s elect we come to realize our vulnerability. The perplexity of life is a detriment to our earthly existence. We weep, like others weep; we experience the same hardships that others face. Anxiety, depression, and discouragement can overwhelm us.

 David cried, “*O keep my soul, and* ***deliver*** *me: let me not be ashamed; for I put my trust in thee” (Psa. 25:20).* Trust is about dependency. Though we suffer, we come to accept the fact that God will deliver us at His appointed time. Paul wrote, “*And not only so, but we glory in tribulations also: knowing that tribulation worketh patience” (Rom. 5:3).* We accept the challenge that tribulation makes us a better people.

 The Bible informs the righteous that one should expect hardships in life. Paul exclaimed to the young preacher, “*Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer* ***persecution****” (2 Tim. 3:12).* No doubt there are great rewards for those who obey God. At the same time, our stand for God can be agitating and deplorable to others.

 So what about the peace that Christ promised? “***Peace*** *I leave with you, my* ***peace*** *I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid” (John 14:27).* This promise was given to a group of men who would be martyred for their loyalties to Christ. The peace He promised them was the satisfaction of eternal redemption. Only the Christian has that eternal promise of eternal bliss. One day, this pain, suffering, and discomfort will cease. Yet until that day comes, let’s enjoy the blessings of life, bear the burden of our sufferings, and preach Christ to a dying world.

GOD & NATURE

 *“The Lord is slow to anger, and great in power, and will not at all acquit the wicked: the Lord hath his way in the* ***whirlwind*** *and in the storm, and the clouds are the dust of his feet” (Nahum 1:3).* All of us have witnessed the power of nature. Whether it be strong winds or fierce seas, it amazes us how something so tranquil can be so destructive. Yet things are set on this earth as reminders of our vulnerabilities, and our dependency upon God. This leads us to several points to ponder as we serve our time under the sun.

 First, God can use nature as a tool to **teach** or to **destroy**. In Matthew twenty-four, Jesus spoke prophecy concerning the falling of Jerusalem, He states, *“For nation shall rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom: and there shall be famines, and pestilences, and earthquakes, in divers places” (Matt. 24:7).*

 One must be cautious when trying to pen every natural disaster on God. Jesus said, *“That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust” (Matt. 5:45).* We live in a world where God has established rules even for nature. These dynamic laws, such as gravity, significantly intersect with our existence. If an area receives too much rain, it will flood. If a region experiences certain atmospheric changes, a tornado may form. God made these laws, and He can use them or change them at will.

 **Second**, nature teaches us that God does exist. “*Go to the* ***ant****, thou sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise*” (Prov. 6:6). After Job’s terrible ordeal, God proclaimed, “*Hearken unto this, O Job: stand still, and* ***consider*** *the wondrous works of God” (Job 37:14).* There is a reason for every creature on the planet. Every microbe, insect, and animal are not a product of evolution, but a well calculated thought in the mind of God.

 **Third,** God uses nature as an encouragement to His creation. Whether it be a mountain that Jesus climbs to be with His father (Matt. 14:23); or the green pastures that David writes about in the 23rd Psalm; nature is soothing. How could anyone look at a beautiful sunset and not see God? How could anyone gaze out at the ocean and not feel the presence of God? It was David who wrote, “*The* ***fool*** *hath said in his heart, There is no God” (Psa. 14:1).* It is the fool that refuses to see God. He sees the world as merely carbon, hydrogen, and oxygen. What God has created is much more than solid, liquid, or gas. It is a world filled with mysteries. It is a world that has been created by a small, still, voice. David scribed, “*Thy righteousness is like the* ***great*** *mountains; thy judgments are a* ***great*** *deep: O Lord, thou preservest man and beast” (Psa. 36:6).*

**GOD HAS EVERYTHING UNDER CONTROL**

 Recently, I began preparing a sermon on Daniel chapter three. The Southern Kingdom had been taken over by the Babylonians. That period of captivity would last seventy years according to Jeremiah. The ruler of the Babylonians was Nebuchadnezzar (Dan. 3:1).

 In this scene, the king had made a giant image standing ninety foot high, and nine foot wide. In a decree, he calls all the officials and people throughout the kingdom to come and worship the idol (Dan. 3:2-5). Those who refused would be cast in a furnace of fire (Dan. 3:6). The Chaldeans, who were a semi-nomadic tribe that lived in the southern part of Babylon, accused three Jewish men of disobeying the king’s decree (Dan. 3:9-12). Their names were Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego (vs. 13). The king became angry and demanded that these three be brought before him. Nebuchadnezzar asked for a confirmation on their disobedience. They replied, “*We are not careful to answer thee in this matter. If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of thine hand, O king. But if not, be it known unto thee, O king, that we will not serve thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up*” (Dan. 3:16-18).

 As the story continues, the three are cast into the fiery furnace, and are saved by an angel of the Lord. Seeing their deliverance, Nebuchadnezzar calls them out of the fiery furnace, and then makes a second decree to the people recognizing the God of Israel (Dan. 3:20-30).

 Most of us are well aware of this wonderful story. Yet how many grasp the application? First, these three righteous souls teach us **that loyalty to God supersedes our loyalty to governments**. This is not to negate the fact that governments are ordained of God. The Divine purpose of government is for PROTECTION (Rom. 13:1-7; 1 Pet. 2:13-15). The word **minister** in Romans thirteen is the same word as **Deacon** used in 1 Timothy chapter three.

 A second lesson learned from this story is that God’s people are not to be concerned about **which government they serve under, but what Lord they serve**! In the Old Testament, the Jews often served under ungodly governments. The great majority of the Old Testament is written while the Jews were in captivity. When the gospels come to light, the Roman Empire is in full swing. It is a corrupt system of government with idolatry being at the center. Nevertheless, God sends forth His Son during these harsh times (Gal. 4:4).

 Like today, people during the time of Christ were politically involved. The Herodians (Jewish loyalists to Ceasar) tried to pull Jesus into a discussion about paying taxes*. “Shew me the tribute money. And they brought unto him a penny. And he saith unto them, Whose is this image and superscription? They say unto him, Caesar's. Then saith he unto them, Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's” (Matt. 22:19-21).*

 Do you see what Jesus did? He took no political stand. He didn’t speak ill against Ceasar, or try to discredit the ability of government to collect taxes; No! His heart was centered on the things spiritual, not physical. In that profound theological declaration, “*the things that are God’s*,” is the foundation of our stand as Christians. “*When they had heard these words, they marvelled, and left him, and went their way*” (Matt. 22:22).

 Thirdly, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego teach us that no matter what happens politically or nationally, **God’s people will be cared for**! “***If it be so****, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of thine hand, O king.* ***But if not****, be it known unto thee, O king, that we will not serve thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up.*”

 To these three righteous souls, it was not a matter if God was going to save them, or let them die; it was a matter of trust and obedience. They understood that physical death is inevitable (Eccl. 3:2; Heb. 9:27). They also believed there was something worse than death. To live in a society convinced that something made with human hands was to be worshiped was incomprehensible.

 In conclusion, God is not against you voting or belonging to some political party. He is not against you wanting to put the right person in office. However, let us remember that the fall or success of this country is in His hands. “*Righteousness exalteth a* ***nation****: but sin is a reproach to any people” (Prov. 14:34). “If that* ***nation****, against whom I have pronounced, turn from their evil, I will repent of the evil that I thought to do unto them” (Jer. 18:8).*

**HAPPY NEW YEAR**

 *“Is there any thing whereof it may be said, See, this is* ***new****? it hath been already of old time, which was before us” (Eccl. 1:10).* Though there is nothing new under the sun, we do celebrate the coming of a new year. As we look at the past, we remember those saints that have gone on to meet the Lord. Though their spirits have left this earthly sphere, we pray for the day that we shall see them again.

 With the coming new year, what resolutions have you considered? It is nice to wish for peace on earth, but what about your commitment to that peace? I pray we will see continued growth spiritual and physically for the coming year. I want to make this year an evangelistic year. I want to reach out to the community. We need to work extra hard to bring people to the Lord.

 Another resolve is to be the best one can be. If you know you are falling short, take up the slack. Time does not stand still for any of us. We need to put away the “I know,” and change that to, “I will!” Make this the year of “*No Excuses*.”

 Further, set your affections on things above. Jesus said that a man’s heart will follow his treasure (Matt. 6:21). For most, their treasure is based on earthly things. For the devote Christian, his or her treasure is in heaven.

 Lastly, make this the year of continual growth. Devote time to studying God’s word and applying what you learn. Paul told young Timothy, “*Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a* ***workman*** *that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15).* This passage tells me that God loves the studious student.

 In conclusion, it is imperative that we keep a steady course forward. “*And* ***let******us******not*** *be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint* ***not****” (Gal. 6:9).*

**HOW LONG DO I HAVE TO ENDURE THE PAINS OF LIFE?**

 It was David who asked**, “***How long shall I take counsel in my soul, having* ***sorrow*** *in my heart daily? HHh ow long shall mine enemy be exalted over me?” (Psa. 13:2).*

I believe all of us have pondered on the continued bombardments of affliction and pain experienced in this world. Whether it be taxes, trouble at school or work, or situations that arise in the home; we all experience hardship.

 The key to surviving our time on earth is Christ. We have to move beyond the physical to the invisible. Paul proclaimed to the brethren at Ephesus, “*Blessed* ***be*** *the God and Father of our Lord Jesus* ***Christ****, who hath blessed* ***us******with*** *all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in* ***Christ****” (Eph. 1:3).*

As Christians, we have accepted that Satan is the god of this world (2 Cor. 4:4). Yet he is not the god of my life! Paul stated, *“For* ***we******are*** *members of* ***his*** *body, of* ***his*** *flesh, and of* ***his*** *bones” (Eph. 5:30).* We do not serve Satan, but Christ. I have been delivered, sanctified, purified, and saved by Him. We have no need to fear Satan, but that Old Serpent has every reason to fear us! We are God’s elect. We are an army that cannot be defeated.

 So how long do I have to endure the pains and sufferings of this world? If I have breath, I will continue to endure. However, that day will come when I will enter Paradise, and all suffering, pain, disease, and hardships will be no more! Like John, I proclaim, *“Even so,* ***come****,* ***Lord******Jesus****” (Rev. 22:20).*

**IMPOSSIBLE TO RENEW**

 *“For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Ghost,**And have tasted the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come,**If they shall fall away, to renew them again unto repentance; seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put him to an open shame” (Heb. 6:4-6).*

 It is hard to believe that a dedicated Christian could fall away from the faith, and reach such a point that restoration would be impossible. Yet that is exactly what the passage states.

 By their apostasy they crucify Christ again, and bring shame upon His name. This fall is horrific. No doubt, throughout the ages, many have ended up in this condition. How? That is the question to ponder!

 Frist, their apostasy was **casual**. It did not come all at once. They tasted the good word of God and the powers of the world to come. They worshipped with their brothers and sisters. They were participants and true servants of the King. Howbeit, sin entered the door of their hearts. We must never forget that Satan is the great separator.

 Also, their apostasy was **catastrophic**. They were no longer being moved by the word. Ask any minister what group of people are the hardest to talk to, and you will hear, “*Fallen Christians*!” They know they are in sin. However, Satan has such a hold on them that they have become numb. In the end, they bring reproach upon the church and damnation to their souls.

 Further, their apostasy is **confounding**. These apostates bring confusion to the saints. We ponder how such faithful followers can walk away from their eternal inheritance. How did they become so hardened? How could they bring such shame upon the Messiah who delivered them? We began this article by asking how, but must conclude that the answer remains a mystery.

 As Christians we are told to be **cautious**. Peter proclaimed, *“Ye therefore, beloved, seeing ye know these things before,****beware*** *lest ye also, being led away with the error of the wicked, fall from your own stedfastness” (2 Pet. 3:17).* Jesus warned His disciple to beware of false prophets, of men, and the leaven of Pharisees and Sadducees (Matt. 7:15, 10:17, 16:6). These apostates were not cautious. They did not guard themselves against the wiles of the devil.

 It is sad that the saints have seen many of their brethren fall from grace. I have attended several funerals of the fallen. It grieves me to know of their eternal fate. Peter says it best, “*For it had been better for them****not******to******have******known****the way of righteousness, than, after they****have******known****it,****to****turn from the holy commandment delivered unto them*” (2 Pet. 2:21).

**IN THE SHADOW OF THY WINGS**

 *“Be merciful unto me, O God, be merciful unto me: for my soul trusteth in thee: yea, in the shadow of thy wings will I make my refuge, until these calamities be overpast”* (Psa. 57:1).

 We are all aware that God doesn’t need wings. Neither is there any reference to angels having wings. The psalmist saw himself as a young bird being protected under the wings of his mother.

 I love the many references throughout the Bible of birds in flight. Isaiah wrote, *“But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint” (Isa. 40:31).*  Let us not forget God’s powerful statement to the delivered Israelites, *“Ye have seen what I did unto the Egyptians, and how I bare you on eagles'* ***wings****, and brought you unto myself” (Exodus 19:14).*

 There are so many in this present age questioning the existence of God. Yet all around us nature bows her knees before the Almighty. We should look at the birds in flight, the mighty lion, the great whale, and the diligent ant (Num. 23:24; Ezk. 32:2; Prov. 6:6). As David gazed at the sky, he wrote, “*When I consider thy* ***heavens****, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained” (Psa. 8:3).*

 Can man not see the evidence of God’s existence? Yet even greater than nature is man’s own superiority over the animal kingdom. How can a small man rule a giant elephant? Or a creature inferior in strength kill a ferocious tiger? God said, *“Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth” (Gen. 3:26).*

 As God’s elect we live under the shadow of God’s wings. We were created in His image. We have dominion over the earth because of His Divine decree. We bath in the warmth of the sun, and sleep under the glow of the moon. Every star in the universe was created for a purpose, as well as every cloud that rains upon the earth. God is real! God is divine! I am greatly blessed to be in the presence of the Holy Trinity!

**IN THY LIGHT**

 *“For with thee is the fountain of life: in thy light shall we see light”* (Psa. 36:9). David was perplexed on how the sinner had no fear of God, “*The transgression of the wicked saith within my heart, that there is no fear of God before his eyes” (vs. 1).*

 For those who truly love God, the light personifies **true acceptance**. Our possessions do not make us! Paul stated, “*As sorrowful, yet alway rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet* ***possess****ing all things” (2 Cor. 6:10).*

To the psalmist, his relationship with God was accepting that he was a dependent creature. Brethren, we need God; God does not need us! To the brethren at Philippi, Paul wrote, “*But my God shall supply all your need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus” (Phil. 4:19).*

Second, for those who follow after Christ, the light represents **accountability**. John writes about Christ being the light that came into the world (John 1). He then writes, *“He came unto his own, and his own received him not. But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name: Which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God” (Jn. 1:11-13).*

 My eternal destiny is based upon how I respond to the light. Will I be one who through reception follows the teachings of Christ? Or will I find it too difficult to obey? Before God there is no such thing as an excuse!

 Next, to follow the light is to have **assurance**. I don’t have to worry about tomorrow*. “Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof” (Matt. 6:34).* I don’t have to be afraid. No matter what happens, God is watching over me. We have a God who is concerned about us, cares for us, and covers us with His grace.

**ENTERTAINING ANGELS**

 *“Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares” (Heb. 13:2).* The direct context of this passage is taken from Genesis 18:1-8. “*The Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he*

*sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. He looked up*

*and saw three men standing near him” (Gen. 18:1, 2a).* As the story progresses, the Lord speaks to Abraham and Sarah about the future birth of their son (vs. 9-19), and then about the coming destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (vs. 20-33). Since the two angels and God appeared as men, they were given the hospitality offered to strangers (vs. 3-8).

 The Hebrew writer takes this demonstration of hospitality and applies it to the saints. “*Let brotherly love continue*” (Heb. 13:1). It is a valuable lesson to encourage the righteous to abide in the faith, and to prove our faithfulness in the treatment of others. Howbeit, I also believe it teaches us something about angels.

 First, angels are active in the **affairs of men**. Whether it be coming to the aid of a great prophet like Elisha (2 Kings 6:17) or taking part in the destruction of the Roman Empire (Rev. 8); they are in the backdrop of human history.

 Was it not an angel who delivered Peter from prison (Acts 12:7-11)? Was it not an angel who sent Phillip to meet the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26-28)? It was also an angel that struck down Herod for his irreverent actions (Acts 12:21-23). Throughout the Old and New Testaments angels become part of the redemption story.

 Second, angels do give **account** before God of the actions of men. “*Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan came also among them*” (Job 1:6). We are all aware that God does not need informants. He knows everything! Yet He has assigned tasks to His holy entourage.

 On that day in the book of Job, one can be assured that the holy angels gave unbiased testimony. Unlike Satan who came to accuse. For the righteous, angels are testimonial fans, “*That in heaven* ***their******angels*** *do always behold the face of my Father which is in heaven” (Matt. 18:10).*

 Third, angels are **active** in the lives of men. Jesus told His apostles, “*And he saith unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Hereafter ye shall see heaven open, and the* ***angels*** *of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man” (John 1:51).* While Jesus walked this earth, the angels continually came to His aid. After He was tempted of Satan, the angels came and ministered to His physical needs (Matt. 4:11). It was during His most trying time in the garden that God sent His angel to strengthen His Son (Lk. 22:43).

 In conclusion, I like the thought that I need to be generous and kind to all men. For you never know when you might be *entertaining an angel unaware*!

**REMEMBERING THE FALLEN**

 I don’t know if any of us could show enough appreciation for our soldiers. Citizens have acted in various ways towards those who have chosen to serve. I enlisted during a time when it wasn’t safe to wear the uniform in public places. This was shortly after the Vietnam Crisis.

 The outlook of Americans has changed for the better. Many are proud of our young soldiers serving in foreign fields. Special benefits are granted to them, and it is quite common for them to be complemented for their service.

 With Memorial Day approaching, there are a few things we need to think about. First, the flags that fly on those graves speak of **sacrifice**. The graves of American soldiers are found around the world. Men and women who fought for the freedom we enjoy. Many of them never had the chance to marry, hold a job, or father a child. They were asked to go and fight, and so they did without reservations or regrets.

 Paul, at the end of his struggles, wrote, “*I have fought a good* ***fight****, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith” (2 Tim. 4:7).* What more could a good soldier offer?

 Second, Memorial Day is a time to reflect on the **servitude** of our soldiers. When a young man or woman puts on the uniform they are called a GI (Government Issue). They lose their identity as an individual. They become part of a squad, a company, a battalion, a division. They take an oath, march to a cadence, and submit themselves to a rigorous physical and mental training program.

 Solomon said, *“****Train*** *up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it” (Prov. 22:6).* You train a soldier; he will always be a soldier. When the bugle sounds, his hand will move for the salute. He is not a trained killer on the battlefield; he is a trained protector. He has no animosity toward his enemy. He has been taught to defend his brothers. He has been taught to honor his country.

 As we reflect on this Memorial Day, let’s not forget their sacrifice and servitude. *“Render therefore to all their dues: tribute to whom tribute is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear;* ***honour*** *to whom* ***honour****” (Rom. 13:7).*

**SHOULD WOMEN WEAR HEAD COVERINGS?**

 “*But I would have you know, that the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is the man; and the head of Christ is God. Every man praying or prophesying, having his head covered, dishonoureth his head. But every woman that prayeth or prophesieth with her head uncovered dishonoureth her head: for that is even all one as if she were shaven. For if the woman be not covered, let her also be shorn: but if it be a shame for a woman to be shorn or shaven, let her be covered. For a man indeed ought not to cover his head, forasmuch as he is the image and glory of God: but the woman is the glory of the man. For the man is not of the woman: but the woman of the man. Neither was the man created for the woman; but the woman for the man. For this cause ought the woman to have power on her head because of the angels. Nevertheless, neither is the man without the woman, neither the woman without the man, in the Lord. For as the woman is of the man, even so is the man also by the woman; but all things of God. Judge in yourselves: is it comely that a woman pray unto God uncovered? Doth not even nature itself teach you, that, if a man have long hair, it is a shame unto him? But if a woman have long hair, it is a glory to her: for her hair is given her for a covering.* *But if any man seem to be contentious, we have no such custom, neither the churches of God” (1 Cor. 11:3-16).*

 Before entering the confines of this chapter, it is necessary to note some things about the church at Corinth. First, and foremost, it was a congregation that was losing their recognition as a faithful church. Paul begins the letter by pleading for unity (1 Corinthians 1:10). There was adultery (1 Cor. 5), legal problems (1 Cor. 6), and even favoritism. Paul is concerned with unity in the church.

 Speaking about unity in worship, men and women both a part to play. In this same letter to the church at Corinth, Paul wrote, “*And if they will learn any thing, let them ask their* ***husbands*** *at home: for it is a shame for women to speak in the church*.” (1 Cor. 14:35). Hence, he is obvious that some women were speaking out during services.

 Yet, the key to understanding this passage in chapter eleven is underlined in verses fifteen and sixteen. First, the covering being mentioned is the woman’s hair. Paul calls it her *glory* being given to her as a **covering**.

 Second, Paul proclaims, “*But if any man seem to be contentious, we have no such* ***custom,*** *neither the churches of God” (vs. 16).* The Greek word for *custom,* συνήθειαν, is used two other times in the New Testament (John 18:39 and 1 Cor. 8:7). The word generally has to do with a habit. Something passed down through tradition. This was often the case with the Jews trying to impose their traditions on Gentile converts. Like in the case of circumcision discussed in Acts fifteen.

 The message that Paul was trying to convey to the church centered on the order established in the church. Women were never to usurp authority over the men (1 Tim. 2:12). The husband was to be the head over wife (Eph. 5:23). Why? “*For Adam was first formed, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in the transgression*” (1 Tim. 2:13, 14).

**THANKFUL**

 ***“****Enter into his gates with thanksgiving, and into his courts with praise: be* ***thankful*** *unto him, and bless his name” (Psa. 100:4). “And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to the which also ye are called in one body; and be ye* ***thankful****” (Col. 3:15).*

Hopefully everyone had a great holiday. It was a time to be thankful. Here are just a few things I am thankful for.

 **First, I am thankful for family.** Throughout the world there are people who are alone. No friends, no family, just a mere existence. Some choose this road; others are forced by the cruelties of war, poverty, and abandonment.

 **Second**, **I am thankful for friends**. *“A man that hath* ***friends*** *must shew himself friendly: and there is a friend that sticketh closer than a brother” (Prov. 18:24).* It is a great pleasure to see Jesus as my closest friend. We sing the song, “*What a Friend We Have in Jesus*!” His friendship fills us with warmth, and allows us to enjoy life to the fullest.

 **Third, I am thankful for my heavenly Father**. Every day He listens to my complaints, my petitions, and my prayers. He never forsakes me, nor leaves me deserted in my thoughts. Every spiritual blessing comes down from the Father of lights (James 1:17).

  **Fourth, I am thankful for my church family**. The brethren locally and universally have blessed me beyond words. Great fellowship and friendships have allowed life to be more tolerable. Where would any of us be without the church, without God, and without Jesus?

 Thus, I really enjoyed the holidays. Now it is time to pause, bow our heads, and thank God for all His blessings!

**THE COMING OF SNOW**

 We are all aware that the weather changes suddenly in the great state of Ohio. Many are looking forward to the first snowfall. Others have decided to head for the warm weather in Florida. Yet, we can all accept the fact that God created the seasons for a purpose (Eccl. 3:1).

 Concerning the good wife, Solomon writes, “*She is not afraid of the* ***snow*** *for her household: for all her household are clothed with scarlet” (Prov. 31:21).* Snow and cold has a purpose. The Bible speaks of the treasures of snow (Job 38:22). Those little white flakes that fall from the heavens bring laughter to our children. Though the ground be covered, and the trees glisten with her blanket; snow fills our hearts with joy.

 With the coming of snow, the animals prepare for hibernation. The squirrels gather their nuts, and the bears secure their caves for a long winter’s nap. You can call it instinct. However, I see it as a God created intelligence.

 Also, with the coming of snow is the hope for a brighter day. The snow will pass, and the warm weather will return. It is then that the crops will be planted, and life will flourish. Howbeit, for now, let’s prepare for the snow!

 So, then, let’s get ready for winter. It will be soon that we shall see those small flakes fall from the sky. We will dress our children and grandchildren warmly, and let them enjoy the pleasures of snow.

**THE EMPTY TOMB**

 For the first time in centuries, scientists have exposed the original surface of what is traditionally considered the tomb of Jesus Christ. The tomb is located in the [Church of the Holy Sepulchre](http://www.holysepulchre.custodia.org/) in the Old City of Jerusalem. The tomb itself has been covered by marble cladding since 1555 A.D., and most likely centuries earlier.

 I have difficulty with many of the archaeological digs that try to prove or disprove Jesus. The tomb of Christ was a borrowed tomb. Matthew records, *“And when Joseph had taken the body, he wrapped it in a clean linen cloth,And laid it in his own new tomb, which he had hewn out in the rock: and he rolled a great stone to the door of the sepulchre, and departed” (Matt. 27:59, 60).*

 According to the scriptures the tomb wherein the body of Jesus rested belonged to Joseph. It is most probable that Joseph would later use the tomb for his burial. Hence, the tomb would not be empty.

 Second, man tends to lean toward idolatry when these artifacts are found. In the various sites throughout the region, certain religious groups worship the sites. Note the shroud of Turin, the Roman Catholic Church holds onto this garment believing it to be sacred. Yet, there is no way of proving that this was the burial shroud that covered the body of Christ.

 Even further, the body of Moses was buried by God (Deut. 34:6). The book of Jude gives reference to his burial site when Michael the Archangel wrestles with Satan over the body of Moses (Jude 1:9). Why, because God knew that men would use the burial site, or even mummify the body of Moses to be worshipped by future generations.

 This infinite wise God wants man to follow His Son by faith. Faith is defined as, “*Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (Heb. 11:1).* According to the Bible, faith is seeded by the word of God (Rom. 10:17). My faith is not based upon finding the place where Jesus was buried. I don’t need to see anything physical to prove that He existed. I know, through faith that He lived, died, and was resurrected.

**THE HAND SALUTE**

 Recently we celebrated Veteran’s Day. Sadly, during this period when the nation should have remembered those who fought for our freedom, there were rioters in the streets over the recent election. Solomon proclaimed, “*In the multitude of people is the king's* ***honour****: but in the want of people is the destruction of the prince” (Prov. 14:28).*

As a veteran, I often had to offer the hand salute. Whether it was at the playing of reveille or the sounding of taps, I was taught to salute ***old glory.*** For those who can remember the funeral of John F. Kennedy, the iconic picture of John Jr. offering the salute was heartbreaking.

 If you were to glance at the *Army Manual*, it would define the salute as “*a privileged gesture of respect and trust among soldiers. It is not only prescribed by regulation but is it is also recognition of each other's commitment, abilities, and professionalism.”*

 As a Christian, I am forbidden to worship idols. There are those who view the hand salute as an act of idolatry. This is incorrect! The salute is to honor the uniform, colors, and country. Concerning the uniform, men and women have worn it proudly. Throughout the world there are cemeteries filled with the remains of those who fought for our freedom. To them we salute.

 Also, we salute the colors. The red, white, and blue, along with the stars and stripes were not placed on the flag by accident. To every solider it serves as a pictorial presentation of the sacrifice they are willing to make, and of their fallen friends who paid the ultimate price.

 Lastly, we salute the country. All fifty states are given a star. We are one nation united. We are bound by a Constitution and dedicated to the premise that “*all men are created equal*!” It is in *God we trust*!

 My salute will continue for the uniform, colors, country, and to our new president. Most importantly, I salute God!

**THE PROPHET WHO LIED**

“*He said unto him, I am a prophet also as thou art; and an angel spake unto me by the word of the Lord, saying, Bring him back with thee into thine house, that he may eat bread and drink water. But he* ***lied*** *unto him*” (1 Kings 13:18). This event happened during the reign of Jeroboam. The Kingdom had divided. Rehoboam reigned over Judah while his brother Jeroboam reigned over Israel. Because of this division, Jeroboam did not want his people to go to Jerusalem to worship. Thus, he made his own centers of worship. He ordained his own priests; erected altars; and began making animal sacrifices.

 In chapter thirteen, a man of God comes to speak against Jeroboam’s apostasy. He first cries out against evil (1 Kings 13:1). Second, he prophesizes that a new king would arise that would restore the Kingdom of Israel (vs. 2, 3). This would not come about until three hundred year later under the reign of Josiah (2 Kings 23:15, 16).

 As the story continues, Jeroboam reaches out and tries to take hold of the young prophet. Immediately his hand is withered by God (vs. 4, 5). It is then that Jeroboam cries for help from the man of God, who prays to Jehovah, who in turn, restores Jeroboam’s hand.

 As we read further, Jeroboam says, “*Come home with me, and refresh thyself, and I will give thee a reward” (vs. 7).* The young preacher replied, “*If thou wilt give me half thine house, I will not go in with thee, neither will I eat bread nor drink water in this place:For so was it charged me by the word of the Lord, saying, Eat no bread, nor drink water, nor turn again by the same way that thou camest*” (vs. 8, 9).

 At this point, the prophet departs. Yet on his travel outside of Bethel he runs into an old prophet who had heard about the whole situation. For whatever reason, he invites the man of God back to his house using deception (vs. 18). As he finishes his meal, the old prophet rebukes the man of God and prophesizes his destruction (vs. 21, 22). The story finishes with the young prophet being killed by a lion (vs. 24).

 When one reads this event in the Old Testament, several questions come to mind. **First,** *why would a prophet of God lie?* Was it in support of Jeroboam? Even though he was an evil king, he was nevertheless his king! Sometimes even the most faithful servants can fall because of blind obedience. “***Render*** *therefore* ***unto******Caesar*** *the things which are* ***Caesar****'s; and* ***unto*** *God the things that are* *God's” (Matt. 22:21).*

Next, *could it be that the Old prophet was envious of the young preacher?* It was Solomon who wrote, *“Wrath is cruel, and anger is outrageous; but who is able to stand before* ***envy****?” (Prov. 27:4).*

 No matter what the reason, it is never good to lie. It was Solomon who said, *“For my mouth shall speak* ***truth****; and wickedness is an abomination to my lips” (Prov. 8:7).* There is no justification for the old prophet’s deception. John writes, “*But the fearful, and unbelieving, and the abominable, and murderers, and whoremongers, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all* ***liars****, shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone: which is the second death” (Rev. 21:8).*

 To the old prophet, his lie would haunt him. He would gather the body of the young preacher, bury him in his own tomb, and mourn his death (vs. 28-30). The prophet told his sons, “*When I am dead, then bury me in the sepulchre wherein the man of God is buried; lay my bones beside his bones” (vs. 31).*

 **Second**, *why was God so hard on a deceived prophet?* He had done so well walking away from Jeroboam. He entered Bethel, fulfilled his mission, and was now returning back home. The Bible says, “*A man's heart deviseth* ***his*** *way: but the Lord* ***direct****eth* ***his******steps” (Prov. 16:9)****.* Howbeit, HE DISOBEYED! He, among all people, knew the penalty for disobedience.

 Also, God’s hard judgment upon this young prophet is meant to teach others. Paul states, “*For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our* ***learning****, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope” (Rom. 15:4).* There are many stories in the Old Testament that encourage believers; but other stories are meant to discourage us from making the wrong decisions and regressing from the path of righteousness.

Sadly, the end result for Jeroboam, like the disobedient prophet, would be devastating. *“After this thing Jeroboam returned not from his evil way, but made again of the lowest of the people priests of the high places: whosoever would, he consecrated him, and he became one of the priests of the high places. And this thing became sin unto the house of Jeroboam, even to cut it off, and to destroy it from off the face of the earth” (1 Kings 13:33, 34).*

**TWO THOUSAND STEPS**

 From Gethsemane to the site of the crucifixion, Jesus would have walked about one and half kilometers. That is just less than a mile. Considering the average stride of a human, Jesus would have walked two thousand steps.

 Why does it matter? Howbeit, we must not forget that these were the most important steps ever taken. It was not only a walk of shame and humility; it was a lonely trail to a horrific crucifixion.

 Those two thousand steps changed everything! We not only remember the inhumanity of man; but the overpowering love of God. As the blood dripped from his torn body, and the sweat rippled from his brow; Jesus endured. As the sun burned his skin, and the thorns dug deep into forehead; Jesus endured. Two thousand steps, six hours of agony, and five puncture wounds turned the world upside down!

 Paul wrote, “*Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a* ***new*** *creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become* ***new****” (2 Cor. 5:17).* Why? Because Jesus took those two thousand steps so that I might be made free. Before that walk we were all enslaved to sin; a people without hope! It took a walk, a cross, and a savior to release us from the burden of sin. Paul stated to the brethren at Galatia, *“Who gave himself for our* ***sin****s, that he might deliver us from this present evil world, according to the will of God and our Father” (Gal. 1:4).*

A vast number of people today talk about different marches throughout history. The Civil Rights March from Selma to Montgomery is iconic in African American history. The Indian Trail of Tears forced by President Andrew Jackson in 1838 is still a reflection of the mistreatment of Native Americans. Yet neither compares to that trail of tears that Jesus walked two thousand years ago.

**UNFRIENDLINESS AMONG OUR BRETHREN**

 Why is it that you can visit some congregations where the people are so friendly and others where you are ignored? For many years I served the charismatic movement. Looking back, I know they were a movement that taught error. However, they mastered the art of group dynamics. You felt the legitimacy of their love. Attending services was a great joy, and we are not talking about one day a week.

 *“And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart,Praising God, and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved” (Acts 2:46, 47).* What I see in this passage is commonality! Newly converted souls enjoying fellowship is what you find in Acts chapter two.

 As a minister of thirty-two years, I have a seen a sad transition among the churches. The same philosophies I viewed as a charismatic is what I see among many churches today.

 First, we have become **credential depended**. For the aspiring ministers in the charismatic movement titles were a bragging privilege. Don’t get me wrong, I believe in higher education. As ministers we are told to study (2 Tim. 2:15). Study what? THE BIBLE! Now congregations are asking for ministers with graduate degrees in counseling, education, and various other areas.

 I think it is sad that if the apostles were to walk this earth today very few would find a position in the local churches. They held a three year Jesus degree. They sat at His feet and learned. Not complex theologies, or unprecedented semantics; they were taught simple and basic doctrine.

 Second, many congregations have become **civilly confounded**. The word civilly means “*polite without being friendly*.” This *no care*, *I don’t want* to know attitude is killing the church! People want to feel special, important, and loved.

 I understand that many brethren are cautious today. We have to be on guard against false teachers, and those who threaten harm against the church. However, does that mean we have to be unfriendly? What about the poor soul who is honesty searching for the true church. Jesus said, “*A new commandment I give unto you, that ye* ***love******one******another****; as I have* ***love****d you, that ye also* ***love******one******another****. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have* ***love******one*** *to* ***another” (Jn. 13:34, 35)****.*

Brethren, the doctrine is going to mean nothing to others if we do not show love! In the charismatic movement of the sixties and seventies, love was the motivating force behind their growth. They were nurturing and caring toward the rejects of society. They lacked knowledge, guidance, and understanding, but they had this appealing magnetism that lured in a great number of young people.

 Further, we must be a people who **comply** with the teachings of Christ! When I look at the life of Christ, I see a man who moved people emotionally. He never came in contact with a righteous person. Every human on earth was a sinner who needed a savior! His compassion was unparalleled!

 When I was a charismatic, the Bible was a great mystery. The leaders had made the Bible seem so complex. Without hesitation, I can unveil that the book of Revelation was the main study. Premillennialism, rapture, and judgment were embedded in all those who were faithful to the cause.

 How is it that we who are members of the elect show little respect for the word of God? We take it for granted. We have been taught, converted, and turned loose to fend for ourselves. The lack of enthusiasm among the ministers can be clearly seen in those who sit in the pew.

 To my preaching brethren, I beseech you to make the best out of what God has given you. Study hard, and prepare your sermons to motivate, convict, and educate members. Make your sermon time an experience*. “****I******was******glad*** *when they said unto me, Let us go* ***i****nto the house of the Lord” (Psa. 122:1).*

 Also, we must be a people who are not guided by **confused condemning**! The way we look at others is often guided by what we are told. Christ was called Beelzebub by some and the Messiah by others! These two titles were in opposition.

 When I was a young minister, I was arrogant, naïve, and antagonistic. I had knowledge without wisdom, and servitude without compassion. I am not that person anymore at sixty-one.

 As a charismatic, accusing or judging another was subject to discipline. Bringing up someone pasts was frowned upon. This attitude should also be recognizable in the Lord’s church!

 Has a brother or sister ever told lies about you? The hardest thing in the world to fix is a lie! Note what Paul writes about a certain group of people to Titus, “*One of themselves, even a prophet of their own, said, the Cretians are alway* ***liars****, evil beasts, slow bellies” (Titus 1:12).*

After the resurrection, the guards were told by the authorities to tell the lie that the body of Jesus was stolen by the apostles. Matthew writes, *“So they took the money, and did as they were taught: and* ***this*** *saying is commonly reported among the Jews until* ***this******day****” (Matt. 28:15).*

 Lastly, the Lord’s people need to **confirm** their **commitment** to truth. *“Don’t tell me you’re a Christian, SHOW ME!”* I believe in truth by action. I love to preach and teach. Yet my obligation as a Christian extends much further than the classroom or the pulpit. Taking time to visit the sick, elderly, and erring is a major part of my commitment to Christ (Matt. 25:34-46). I don’t do these things to be saved; I do them because I AM SAVED!

**WE REJOICE**

 The psalmist wrote, “*But I have trusted in thy mercy; my heart shall* ***rejoice*** *in thy salvation*” (Psa. 13:5). Christ said, *“I say unto you, that likewise joy shall be in heaven over one* ***sinner*** *that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance* (Luke 15:7).

 On December 31, 2017, Nicki Smith responded to the gospel invitation, and her sins were washed away. On that very morning, brother Ron Williams came forward and rededicated his life to Christ. As others would celebrate the coming of a New Year, the saints at Washington Courthouse rejoiced over the saving of two precious souls.

 Be assured that it was not Bill Myers that saved these individuals. I have preached many sermons that have often landed on hardened hearts. Paul once proclaimed to the brethren at Corinth, *“I have* ***planted****, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase” (1 Cor. 3:6).* It was just two weeks ago that Nicki made the statement that the sermons moved her to tears. What actually moved her to tears were the words from God’s inspired word.

 Ron made mention that he had been thinking a lot recently concerning his soul. The strength of his grandparents and parents had greatly influenced Ron. It reminded me of what Paul wrote concerning the upbringing of Timothy, *“When I call to remembrance the unfeigned faith that is in thee, which dwelt first in thy grandmother Lois, and thy mother* ***Eunice****; and I am persuaded that in thee also” (2 Tim. 1:5).*

I wish that I could say that life will be easier for both Nicki and Ron. Howbeit, we know that it is not easy being a Christian in this present world. Yet both of them have a church family that loves them and will always be there for them. Most importantly, God will not forsake them. There is no doubt in my mind that there was a big celebration in heaven last Sunday. Let us continue to pray for them and encourage them.

**WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A GOSPEL PREACHER?**

 What does it mean to be a gospel preacher? It is accepting the fact that you are charged to preach truth, without prejudice, and without exception. It means studying hard and simplifying what you have learned to educate every member. It is the privilege of caring for souls, praying for the lost, and rejoicing with the angels. Being a preacher allows you to be associated with a congregation, but always kept at a distance. The time, effort, and success are not based on how many are taught, baptized, or brought back to safety; but simply doing what it is your duty to do. You will be hated by some, adored by others, and saddened by the loss of friendships. Time will go quickly, but not so smoothly. You will sometimes be in the valley of despair, or occasionally climbing mountains. Lies will be told to dishonor your reputation. The devil will never leave you alone. He will use your family and friends to cast doubt before you. Money will be limited, and retirement is out of the question. You will often be misinterpreted, and misrepresented. The garden of tears is your refuge, and the cross of Christ is your strength. You have not chosen a career or occupation; you have chosen an identity. Some will call you brother, others will call you preacher. To a few you are the devil incarnate, while others look upon you as a counselor of righteousness. Every word you say will fall under criticism. According to the scriptures even your feet are beautiful (Rom. 10:15). You are a minority. While others sleep in the comfort of their beds, you suffer the loss of sleep. You’ve experienced the joy of conversion, and the agony of so many lost souls. You have learned the value of balanced preaching. At times you edify. At times you rebuke and condemn. You are not perfect. You are a sinner. You are a teacher. You are a leader. You belong to the greatest fraternity ever created. You are a gospel preacher!

**WHAT IS A MARRIAGE?**

 In this present age, the concept of marriage is appalling and not appealing. There are so many young couples choosing to live together rather than marry. They want to test drive the relationship. However, they fail to realize that marriage is honorable and living together isn’t! (Heb. 13:4). We all should want to live ***soberly****, righteously, and godly, in this present world* (Titus 2:12).

 First, marriage is about **commitment**. Jesus said to the Pharisees, “*For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: and they twain shall be one flesh?*” (Matt. 19:5, Gen. 2:24). That cleaving centers on commitment. The marriage bond is a sacred bond. Those vows taken between a man and a woman should be internally etched in their souls.

 Also, marriage is about **sacrifice**. A woman gives up her name, and often her identity. The sacrifice that many women make to simply be a wife and mother is tremendous. Yet, it is not only the women who must sacrifice, but men. Husbands must learn to give and take. They must love, honor, and protect their wives.

 Further, marriage is centered on **God**. A minister does not have the power to join two people together (Matt. 19:6). The holy covenant is performed by God. He makes the rules. No individual or government has the right to change what God had already established in the Garden of Eden.

 Marriage is **conditional**. The conditions focus on God’s ordained requirements in order for two people to be married. For example, two men do not have the right to be married or have a relationship (Lev. 18:22, Rom. 1:26, 27). Homosexuality is a sin.

 Another condition centers on the **singular**. A man is allowed to have one wife and one wife only. Polygamy is a sin. God has never sanctioned a man to have more than one wife. Through ignorance many of the Old Testament characters engaged in such acts (David, Solomon).

 Last, marriage is about **faithfulness**. Remember that God said that no man should separate what He has joined together. David was a married man when he looked upon the nakedness of Bathsheba, and so was she (2 Sam. 11:3). That adulterous relationship led to the death of Bathsheba’s husband, and the fall of David’s kingdom.

 Husbands and wives need to be faithful to each other. The marriage bed must be left undefiled. Solomon transgressed and paid dearly for it. Howbeit, it was Solomon who wrote, “*Let* ***thy*** *fountain be blessed: and rejoice with the* ***wife******of******thy******youth****” (Prov. 5:18).*

**WHAT IT MEANS TO PREACH**

 Anyone who has attempted to preach understands that it is not as easy as it seems. If Washington Courthouse would have heard me thirty years ago, you would have not been thrilled. It has taken me years of studying, practicing, and experience to gain the confidence I have now. As a Christian minister, I still strive to be the best that I can be.

 As a minister, I have tried to keep three basic principles. They are not difficult, but necessary in succeeding in this vocation.

 First, speak **Bible**! *I have* ***preached*** *righteousness in the great congregation: lo, I have not refrained my lips, O Lord, thou knowest (Psa. 40:9). Then Philip went down to the city of Samaria, and* ***preached*** *Christ unto them (Acts 8:5). “And there they* ***preached*** *the gospel” (Acts 14:7).* Preaching righteousness, Christ, and the gospel is the summation of evangelism. Like everyone else, I want to hear the story of Jesus. I want to know about His identity; His saving grace; His aspiring love for me. Preaching from the pulpit is more than a story being told, it is a life being shared.

 Secondly, speak **boldly**! *“But, lo, he speaketh* ***boldly****, and they say nothing unto him. Do the rulers know indeed that this is the very Christ?” (Jn. 7:76). “And he spake* ***boldly*** *in the name of the Lord Jesus, and disputed against the Grecians: but they went about to slay him” (Acts 9:29).*

Paul instructed young Timothy, “***Preach*** *the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all long suffering and doctrine” (2 Tim. 4:2).* As a minister, I like exhortation more than rebuke; and I like to be in season, instead of out! However, I would not be much of a gospel preacher if I played it safe. I am commanded to preach the word, and that means every “jot” and “tittle!”

 Third, speak **briefly**! I remember being told as a student in preaching school, “You **stand** up, you **speak** up, you **shut** up!” People are not gathering to hear someone ramble. They are not coming together to view some theatrical actor entertain them; people are assembling to worship God.

 A brief message considers both time and audience. A sermon can be so short that it does not cover the subject, to being too long that it does not consider the audience. I will never judge a minister by the length of his sermon, but by the soundness of his message. Yet I will suggest that a rambling minister breeds a mumbling crowd.

**GROANING IN THE SPIRIT**

 *“When Jesus therefore saw her weeping, and the Jews also weeping which came with her, he groaned in the spirit, and was troubled…Jesus therefore again groaning in himself cometh to the grave. It was a cave, and a stone lay upon it” (John 11:33, 38).*

 It is without reservation that we come to accept that every word out the Holy Bible is inspired. Words do have meaning. In this instance at the death of Lazarus, the Lord’s internal reaction is identified. John would not have known how the Lord felt, nor any other man that was there at the home of Mary and Martha. Yet the Holy Spirit felt it important to unveil this emotion in the heart of Jesus.

 *He groaned in the spirit* informs the reader that Jesus shared the emotions of others. The Lord was saddened by the tears that flowed from the eyes of Mary. How often have you wept with a friend or family member? Jesus was God, but He was also a man. The Bible states, “*For* ***we*** *have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted* ***like*** *as* ***we*** *are, yet without sin” (Heb. 4:15).*

 Also, the groaning of Christ was sparked by the questioning of the crowd (vs. 37). Jesus had proved Himself to be the Messiah. Sadly, narrowmindedness led many to doubt His abilities. In their minds death was final. Little did they know that Jesus had power over the grave?

 Further, the groaning of Christ proved His divinity. God has full control over His emotions. He does not fly off the handle or react like ordinary men do. Every act performed by Christ was justifiable. Whether He was purging the temple or rebuking an apostle; Jesus controlled His emotions. This is not to say He did not weep (Jn.11:35). He was often moved by the crowd. Howbeit, the stirring of the Lord’s spirit led Him to the cross. He was indeed a man of sorrow (Isa. 53:3).

**WHERE CAN YOU FIND A FAITHFUL MAN?**

 *“Most men will proclaim everyone his own goodness: but a faithful man who can find?”* (Prov. 20:6). I remember as a child playing baseball. I was no doubt one of the worse ball players ever. Playing street ball began with two captains choosing from a group of boys who they wanted to be on their team. Most often I was one of the last ones chosen.

 If God was going to head up a roster of faithful men, would you be chosen? Being a disciple of Christ is about commitment. That is why Paul uses the Olympian and Roman soldier as examples of the true followers of Christ (1 Cor. 9:24, Eph. 6:11-17). For the runner he is told to run well, and for the Soldier, he is to put on the whole armor of God.

 Recently, we have seen one baptism and two rededications. Seeing Bertha coming forward Sunday evening was encouraging. I believe you could not find a more dedicated, loving, and caring person than our sister. Yet, she felt something lacking. She felt a need to do more. She wanted to make sure of her salvation.

 Running the race and fighting the fight of faith is all about being sure. Christianity is not about possibilities, but about achieving. It was Paul who proclaimed, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me!” (Phil 4:13).

 We are a blessed congregation here at State Route 38. God has been good to all of us, and He will continue to do so if we fight the good fight of faith and run the race with diligence.

**WHO WERE THE ESSENES?**

 When one thinks of the Essenes, they equate them with the Dead Sea Scrolls. Josephus lists the Essenes as one of the three sects of Jewish philosophy alongside the Pharisees and the Sadducees. Many of them took an oath of celibacy and piety. They did not possess land or title having a strong belief in communality. They also believed in a strict observance of the Sabbath.

 After three-year probation, a new convert would take an oath that included the commitment to practice piety towards God and righteousness towards humanity, to maintain a pure lifestyle, to abstain from criminal and immoral activities, to transmit their rules uncorrupted and to preserve the books of the Essenes and the names of the Angels.

 Yes! They had a book list of angels, most probably passed down through oral tradition and mythology. It would be a mistake to believe that they were given inspiration by God to formulate this book of angels.

 However, their preservation of manuscripts at Qumran was amazing. Though many of the scrolls (900 documents) contain books from the Old Testament, the group also included books not found in the Bible like the Book of Enoch.

 Their influence upon the First Century Jewish world is astounding. Their converts were found throughout the Roman Empire. We do not find the Essenes being mentioned in the gospel stories because they separated themselves from other Jewish groups. They no doubt had knowledge of Christ, and probably assimilated some of His teachings to their own philosophies. Yet, they copied, collected, and preserved manuscripts for the purpose of instructing future converts.

**WILL I RECOGNIZE MY FRIENDS AND FAMILY IN THE NEXT LIFE?**

 *“And it came to pass about an eight days after these sayings, he took Peter and John and James, and went up into a mountain to pray. And as he prayed, the fashion of his countenance was altered, and his raiment was white and glistering. And, behold, there talked with him two men, which were Moses and Elias” (Luke 9:28-30). “And in hell he lift up his eyes, being in torments, and seeth Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom” (Luke 16:23).*

 In the first passage above is the transfiguration, and in the second is a statement made by Jesus concerning the rich man and Lazarus. In both episodes there is awareness and recognition. Not only will we see and recognize our loved ones, we will also be aware of those who surround us in the next life. Moses and Elijah, though they died centuries before, maintained their physical appearance in a spiritual form, and also their individuality. The same is true concerning the rich man, Lazarus, and Abraham in Luke sixteen.

 In another example, Saul used a witch to bring back the spirit of Samuel. The Bible reads, “*And he said unto her, What form is he of? And she said, An old man cometh 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 himself. And Samuel said to Saul, Why hast thou disquieted me, to bring me up?” (1 Sam. 28:14, 15a). As in* our previous examples, Samuel maintains his appearance. His memory and awareness is intact.

 Last, but not least, John describes a glorious scene in heaven, “*After this I beheld, and, lo, a* ***great******multitude****, which no man could number, of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues, stood before the throne, and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands” (Rev. 7:9).* I would like to think that John sees me in this great cloud of saved people. Without a doubt it is the church made up of moms, dads, relatives, and friends! Thus, not only will there be recognition in heaven, we will have an eternal celebration with all the saints! I hope to see you there!

**WHY ME LORD?**

Kris Kristofferson wrote a song entitled**, *“Why Me Lord?”***  It focused on the many blessing that God granted him throughout his life. Yet, often people asks this question pondering on the many trials of life. The psalmist wrote, “*Lord, why castest thou off my soul? why hidest thou thy face from me?* ***(Psa. 88:14).***

Even the most faithful Christian can go through hard times. John the Baptist wanted to know before he died if Jesus was truly the Messiah (Luke 7:19, 20). Brother Paul was rotting in a prison cell when he wrote, *“At my first answer no man stood with me, but all men forsook me: I pray God that it may not be laid to their charge. Notwithstanding the Lord stood with me, and strengthened me; that by me the preaching might be fully known, and that all the Gentiles might hear: and I was delivered out of the mouth of the lion” (2 Tim. 4:16, 17).*

Paul understood that God is always present. He does not leave us in the darkness. God is light, and through His Son He brought that light into the world. Sadly, most people desire the darkness rather than the light.

 Why does God allow good people to suffer? We constantly hear of people suffering great losses due to the sinful nature of man. Whether it be a mass shooting at a local school, or genocide being practiced in some foreign nation; man’s inhumanity to man is atrocious. Satan is a happy beast that thrives on sin. He is a home wrecker, a war monger, and a murderer.

 Yes, God does allow good people to suffer, but He also offers you solace during those troubled times. It is his hand that grips yours when trouble arises. It is His bosom you rest upon when you need a hug. It is His light that guides you through the storms, and then calms the sea.

 The second stanza of the song says it all, “*Try me Lord, if you think there’s a way that I can try to repay all I’ve taken from you. Maybe Lord I can show someone else what I’ve been through myself on my way back to you.”*

**MOSES STRUCK A ROCK**

 ***“****Take the rod, and gather thou the assembly together, thou, and Aaron thy brother, and speak ye unto the rock before their eyes; and it shall give forth his water, and thou shalt bring forth to them water out of the rock: so thou shalt give the congregation and their beasts drink. And Moses took the rod from before the Lord, as he commanded him. And Moses and Aaron gathered the congregation together before the rock, and he said unto them, Hear now, ye rebels; must we fetch you water out of this rock? And Moses lifted up his hand, and with his rod he smote the rock twice: and the water came out abundantly, and the congregation drank, and their beasts also. And the Lord spake unto Moses and Aaron, Because ye believed me not, to sanctify me in the eyes of the children of Israel, therefore ye shall not bring this congregation into the land which I have given them” (Num. 20:8-12).*

This is one of the most interesting stories of the Old Testament. Prior to this incident, the people murmured about being thirsty and God had Moses strike a rock to bring forth water (Exod. 17:5-7). Yet on this second occasion, Moses is told to speak to the rock.

 God is all about specifics. Moses was to obey without question. The whole exodus story is layered with voiced commands and specific details. Whether it was the lamb’s blood poured on the lintels and side posts (Exod. 12:22, 23), or the various laws concerning sacrifice; God expected complete obedience.

 Some might say that God was too hard on Moses. They may look upon his disobedience as, “*No big deal*!” God declared to Isaiah, *“For* ***my*** *thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your* ***ways******my******ways****, saith the Lord” (Isa. 55:8).* We must never forget that sin is a big deal to God.

 Note the destruction of Uzzah, *“And when they came to Nachon's threshingfloor,* ***Uzzah*** *put forth his hand to the ark of God and took hold of it; for the oxen shook it. And the anger of the Lord was kindled against* ***Uzzah****; and God smote him there for his error; and there he died by the ark of God” (2 Sam. 6:6, 7).*

 Here was a man trying to stop the ark from falling over and died in his tracks. God had given the command that the Levites were not to touch any holy thing, which included the ark, or they would die (Num. 4:15). His direct violation of that command cost him his life.

 Like Moses, God acted upon Uzzah’s disobedience. It is so necessary to show reverence to God and His commands. Every word of God is pure, and beneficial to the recipient. That is why we must study it and apply it to our lives.

**PARABLES NOT FABLES**

A **fable** is a short, pithy animal tale often ending with a proverb stating the moral lesson. A **parable** is a succinct, didactic story, in prose or verse that illustrates one or more instructive lessons or principles.

Nowhere in scriptures do you read, “Once upon a time.” This fable beginning notes a fictional story saturated with mystical creatures and childlike lessons. When Jesus used parables, He spoke of realistic truths easily relatable to the masses.

 The apostles asked Jesus why he taught the people in parables, He replied, “*Therefore speak I to them in* ***parables****: because they seeing see not; and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand*” (Matt. 13:13).

 When Jesus used parables, they were centered on His doctrine. Before orating the Parable of the Sower, Mark records, *“And he taught them many things by parables, and said unto them in his doctrine” (Mark 4:2).*

 The Bible is not a book of fables. It is a Holy Spirit inspired document that renders legitimacy to man’s origin, fall, and God’s plan to reconcile man back to Him. It opens the heart of man to the Divine wisdom of God. The message of the gospels unveils a Messiah who relates the common folks. This is the reasoning behind the parables. *“That seeing they may see, and not perceive; and hearing they may hear, and not understand; lest at any time they should be converted, and their sins should be forgiven them” (Mark 4:12).*

**THE ART OF INSTRUCTING**

 *“And thou shalt* ***teach*** *them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up”* (Deut. 6:7). “***Train*** *up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it” (Prov. 22:6).*

Have you ever wondered about the Jewish intelligence even during modern times? Whether one speaks of Irvin Berlin, Sigmund Freud, or Albert Einstein; the Jewish nation had seeded some great minds. From their early beginnings, they had been taught the art of learning, not from man but from God.

 God instructed the nation to teach their children by repetition. As Christians we often fail because we feel that repetition is taught to our children and lost when we become adults. Ask members what scriptures they have memorized, and they will quote those passages that have been repetitious like the plan of salvation (John 3:16, Acts 2:38, Rom. 10:8, 9, Mark 16:15, 16).

 We teach our children the books of the Bible. Most often we use songs to instruct them. I remember sitting in class at the school of Preaching and being asked to name the twelve apostles. I accomplished the task by remembering the *Apostle’s Song* which I learned as a child.

 To the early Jews learning the books of the Bible, understanding when they were written, and why they were written was a must. Jesus even rebuked the leaders for not knowing the scriptures (John 5:39, Matt. 22:29). In the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, Abraham said, “***The****y have Moses and* ***the******prophets****; let* ***the****m hear* ***the****m” (Lk. 16:29).*

 My intent in my classes is to bring to your remembrances things you have learned in the past. I want to encourage you to study, and to appreciate the Bible as the inspired word of God.

**A MOTHER’S INSTRUCTIONS**

 “*The words of king Lemuel, the prophecy that his* ***mother*** *taught him*” (Prov. 31:1). There are many who believe that king Lemuel is Solomon, and the mother of course is Bathsheba. The name Lemuel means “one from God,” or “one belonging to God.”

 King Lemuel educates us in the power of an influential mother. Recently we celebrated Mother’s Day. The restaurants were filled with families focusing their attention on mothers. You even heard a sermon last Sunday on the art of raising children placing emphasis on the traits of certain women in the Bible.

 Without a doubt, great men are molded by great women. Yet, the greatest influence is from the God-fearing woman. She knows that it is not an easy task to raise a child to love and serve God. She spends her days praying for them, caring for them, and willingly sacrificing for them. Without a doubt that is the gest of the attributes of a virtuous woman in Proverbs thirty-one.

 Solomon proclaimed, *“Every wise* ***woman*** *buildeth her house: but the foolish plucketh it down with her hands”* (Prov. 14:1). The art of establishing a warm environment begins in the heart of a woman. A Christian mother holds strong to her faith. She encourages others to love the church and protects her children from evil influences. She does not usurp authority over her husband (1 Tim. 2:12), and she willingly submits to her husband (Eph. 5:22).

 As another Mother’s Day has past, I remember my mom. I miss her presence. From the rocking of the cradle to the rolling of the hearse, she was a great mom. She did her best, and kept the faith, what more could a son ask for?

**TAKING CARE OF OTHERS**

I heard a story of an elderly woman who decided to prepare her will and told her preacher she had two final requests. First, she wanted to be cremated, and second, she wanted her ashes scattered over Wal-Mart. “Wal-Mart?” the preacher exclaimed. “Why Wal-Mart?” “Then I'll be sure my daughters visit me twice a week.”

This tale may sound funny, but I wonder how much truth is brought forth? We live in such a fast-paced world where neglect is the norm. We don’t make many visits, and we rarely see our grandchildren. I have heard that the average person spends less than ten minutes a day in prayer. That adds up to six hours a month, three days a year, and seven months in a lifetime.

 I wonder how much praying the people in this country did eighty years ago? The nation was suffering a depression. What about World War II? Young men were marching off to war with the chance of not returning home alive. I would dare say that a great number of people spent long periods on their knees.

 What about being active in our Christian responsibility to one another? James writes, “*Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To* ***visit*** *the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world” (Jas. 1:27).*

 Even further, what about our responsibility to widows? Paul said to young Timothy, *“But if any* ***widow*** *have children or nephews, let them learn first to shew piety at home, and to requite their parents: for that is good and acceptable before God” (1 Tim. 5:4).*

Christianity is more than a card in the mail, or a telephone call. Being a saint in the Kingdom of God demands activity. Not only am I seeking to get involved in the lives of my church family, I want to be out in the community saving souls.

 As God’s elect, we need to move beyond the false perception that the church is to be ran like a business. Our mission is to save souls. In doing so, we take on the responsibility of caring for those souls that are converted. It is all about faith. The understanding that if we do our part, God will bless us (1 Cor. 3:6). The greatest blessing is the privilege to walk down the streets of gold together with Jesus.

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**CAN ONE GET TO HEAVEN WITHOUT BAPTISM?**

 Jesus said, *“And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature.He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned”* (Mark 16:15, 16).

 The Great Commission is unquestionable. It clearly reveals that baptism is necessary for one to be saved. However, there are those who are excluded from this command. In other words, I can name several groups of people that do not need to be baptized to go to heaven.

 First, children do not need to be baptized. Jesus said to His disciples, *“Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little* ***children****, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven. Disciples” (Matt. 18:3).* Ezekiel writes, “*The soul that sinneth, it shall die. The son shall not bear the iniquity of the father, neither shall the father bear the iniquity of the son: the righteousness of the righteous shall be upon him, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon him*” (Ezek. 18:20).

 Obviously, children are placed into a different category than adults. They are not mature enough to understand the basic principles necessary to become a Christian. Though we would not call them saved, meaning obedient to the plan of salvation; they are safe.

 Second, the mentally disabled need not to be baptized. This is depended upon the severity of the disability. Yet, what would justify a person with the learning capacity of a five-year-old to be immersed in the waters of baptism? Belief is a prerequisite before baptism. Faith comes through hearing the word of God (Rom. 10:10). When one is devoid of the ability to understand, he or she is not a candidate for immersion.

 For every functional mature adult, baptism is necessary. You cannot go to heaven without putting on Christ, and the only means of doing so is through baptism (Rom. 10:9, 10; Gal. 3:27). One cannot enter the gates of heaven blemished with sin. Baptism washes away the filth of sin (2 Cor. 7:1, Acts 22:16).

 Capable adults cannot go to heaven without being a member of the Lord’s church. How do you gain entrance? Through baptism (Acts 2:38, Acts 2:47). Hence, unless you are disabled mentally, or a child, baptism is necessary.

**CAN THE CHURCH SUPPORT NON-CHRISTIAN BENEVOLENCE?**

A young lady in the community needs money for a cancer treatment. Can a local autonomy use the money out of the church treasury to offer support? That is a tough question!

 Let’ begin by stating that there is not one passage in the entire Bible that speaks of this type of benevolent spending. Every action of benevolence in the New Testament speaks of the saints helping saints (Acts 11:27-30, 1 Cor. 16:1-4, 2 Cor. 8:1-4, 2, 2 Cor. 9:1-6, Rom. 15:25-27). Whether it be helping the poor Grecian widows of Acts 6 or Paul collecting money for the poor saints in Jerusalem (Rom. 15:26); we have no directive to aid non-church members financially.

 This does not mean that the church can’t have a food pantry or hand out clothing to the needy in the community, we are talking about taking money out of the church treasury to do such.

 On an individual basis, I can disburse funding to whomever I wish. Yet, even when so doing I would not support an organization that teaches contrary to truth. It is not difficult to see that there are some good programs throughout the country that render great services to all. For example, The *American Cancer Society*, or the *Red Cross* are among my favorites*.* The Bible says, “*As we have therefore opportunity, let us* ***do******good******unto******all******men****, especially* ***unto*** *them who are of the household of faith” (Gal. 6:10).*

 I believe that many churches fail because they have a lack of understanding concerning benevolence. Helping others is based on needs and not wants. Luke writes, *“Neither was there any among them that lacked: for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the prices of the things that were sold, And laid them down at the apostles' feet: and distribution was made unto every man according as he had need”(Acts 4:34, 35).*

Let’s face it, the church is an easy target for people. The typical beggar will often give a sad story, and then ask for funding. They may, for example, ask for a tank of gas, or food to feed their hungry children. The con is often unveiled when you offer them food from the pantry and they refuse. A person who is truly in need will take what you give them.

Benevolence is a good thing. Whether it be an individual member helping a stranger, or the church aiding a member; it is a powerful tool. Yet we are aware it can be abused. That is why the Bible tells us to be *wise like serpents and harmless as doves* (Matt. 10:16).

**ARE YOU SMARTER THAN A DONKEY?**

 *“And the angel of the Lord went further, and stood in a narrow place, where was no way to turn either to the right hand or to the left. And when the ass saw the angel of the Lord, she fell down under Balaam: and Balaam's anger was kindled, and he smote the ass with a staff. And the Lord opened the mouth of the ass, and she said unto Balaam, What have I done unto thee, that thou hast smitten me these three times? And Balaam said unto the ass, Because thou hast mocked me: I would there were a sword in mine hand, for now would I kill thee. And the ass said unto Balaam, Am not I thine ass, upon which thou hast ridden ever since I was thine unto this day? was I ever wont to do so unto thee? and he said, Nay. Then the Lord opened the eyes of Balaam, and he saw the angel of the Lord standing in the way, and his sword drawn in his hand: and he bowed down his head, and fell flat on his face*.*” (Num. 22:26-31).*

 In this biblical narrative, Moab sent the prophet Balaam on his way to curse the Israelites. God intervened by sending an angel to stand in the way so that Balaam could not travel any further. At first, the donkey was the only one able to see the angel with the mighty sword. Balaam in his determination, tried to force the beast to press forward. The donkey refused and crushed Balaam’s leg against the rocks. On several occasions, Balaam struck the animal with a rod. Hence, God intervened an allowed the donkey to speak to Balaam.

 The logic of the animal surpasses the logic of man. He speaks of his complete devotion to his master. He makes him realize that they were both in imminent danger if they proceeded. At that point, Balaam’s eyes were opened, and he sees the angel.

 In this Bible story, we see a donkey respecting the God of heaven. His fear of God was greater than his fear of Balaam. The angel said to Balaam, *“Wherefore hast thou smitten thine ass these three times? behold, I went out to withstand thee, because thy way is perverse before me:And the ass saw me, and turned from me these three times: unless she had turned from me, surely now also I had slain thee, and saved her alive. And Balaam said unto the angel of the Lord, I have sinned; for I knew not that thou stoodest in the way against me: now therefore, if it displease thee, I will get me back again.”*

 The story of the talking donkey allows us to see the foolishness of men and the wisdom of nature. All creatures, great and small, belong to God. Even in their limited understanding, they know that God exists. Though they serve men their allegiance is to their Creator. Throughout history, God has used creatures to punish and persuade individuals as well as nations.

**STRAINING AT A GNAT**

 ***“****Ye blind guides, which* ***strain******at******a******gnat****,* ***a****nd swallow* ***a*** *camel” (Matt. 23:24).* Jesus spent three and half years of ministry listening to the religious leaders of His day misuse the scriptures. He stated, “***Search******the******scriptures****; for in* ***the****m ye think ye have eternal life: and* ***the****y are* ***the****y which testify of me” (Jn. 5:39).*

 If you would take a close look at the various teachings in one’s community, you would find the same problem. People misuse the scriptures one of three ways. **First**, they create doctrines by choosing certain scriptures. They do not concern themselves with the who, what, when, where, and why? For example, Jesus promised the apostles that He would send them the Comforter. He said, “*But* ***the******Comforter****, which is* ***the*** *Holy Ghost, whom* ***the*** *Father will* ***sen****d in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you” (Jn. 14:26).* Several charismatic groups believe this passage is universal. They teach that every Christians receives Holy Spirit baptism.

 **Second,** people can misuse the scriptures by subtracting or adding to the word. Take for example the subject of baptism. Many denominations insist that one does not have to be baptized to be saved. Yet the Bible is insistent that one cannot be cleansed without it (Mark 16:15, 16; Acts 2:38, Acts 22:16, Gal. 3:27, Rom. 6:3-6).

 Along this line, there are some groups that add to the word. Asks a great number of people in the denominational world on how one is saved, and they will profess, *“Just asks Jesus to come into your heart*!” The only way you will find this in the Holy Bible is if you add it. Not even the notion is taught in the scriptures.

 Third, people misuse the scriptures by misunderstanding Bible language. How often do you see people running to the book of Revelation to stress some belief? That book is written symbolically. It demands the reader understand that premise. Yet so many try to turn the figurative into literal.

 The Bible is a book of language. It uses metaphors, similes, hyperboles, and parables. The context dictates how it is to be interpreted. Peter said it best, *“Knowing this first, that no prophecy of the scripture is of any* ***private******interpretation****” (2 Pet. 1:20).*

**THE STRENGTH OF WOMEN**

 **“***Now the name of the man was Nabal; and the name of his wife Abigail: and she was a woman of good understanding, and of a beautiful countenance: but the man was churlish and evil in his doings; and he was of the house of Caleb”* (1 Sam. 25:3)

The story of Abigail and her husband Nabal is intriguing. Here was a bad man married to a wonderful woman. Abigail did her best to be the best wife she could possibly be. Yet she had a husband that was weak and egotistical.

 There was also Ahab. The Bible says, “And **Ahab** made a grove; and **Ahab** did more to provoke the Lord God of Israel to anger than all the kings of Israel that were before him” (1 Kings 16:33). Sadly, wicked Ahab was married to the evil Jezebel.

 Throughout my ministry, I have seen a lot of strong women who never missed a service and were dedicated to the Lord. Some of these women were married to men who were either weak in their faith or had no faith at all. This was also noted in the early church. Peter writes, “*Likewise, ye wives, be in subjection to your own husbands; that, if any obey not the word, they also may without the word be won by the conversation of the wives;While they behold your chaste conversation coupled with fear*” (1 Pet. 3:1, 2).

 Women are seen accomplishing great things in the early church. Luke speaks of the strength of Christian women in the book of Acts (13:50, 17:4-12). Paul even acknowledges certain women disciples who were laboring in the Kingdom (Phil. 4:3).

 Why does faithfulness seem to be rooted in many women? First, Christian women learn strength through their submissiveness. They are commanded to be submissive (Eph. 5:22, Col. 3:18). The elderly women are to teach the younger women to be sober minded, and to love their husbands and children (Titus. 2:4).

 Second, women have a natural ability to care for the weak. The psalmist writes, “*He maketh the barren woman to keep house, and to be a joyful* ***mother*** *of children. Praise ye the Lord” (Psa. 113:9).* Motherhood is an amazing thing. The tender caress of a mother with child is iconic of Christ and the church. This love is extended to others. Solomon writes, *“She stretcheth out her hand to the poor; yea, she reacheth forth her hands to the needy*” (Prov. 31:20).

 Third, women are sensitive creatures with a deep desire to be loved. This is seen in the relationship between Mary, Martha, and Jesus (John 11). The tears of Mary brought Jesus to tears (John 11:33-35). How many men crumble at the tears of women?

 Every Christian man needs to appreciate our ladies in the church. They often exhibit a strong and enduring faith. They are valuable assets in the Kingdom. They are great examples for others to follow.

**DWELLING IN UNITY**

 ***“B****ehold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!” (Psa. 133:1).  The word is defined as “concord, harmony, and oneness” (Webster’s). In denominational Christianity the term is redefined. It no longer places emphasis on commonality but accepted division.*

 *Compromise is the word most often used to denote ecumenicalism. This strange belief that people can believe whatever they want, and still be saved.*

 *How could one believe that the God of strict commands and complete obedience in the Old Testament changed to a God of compromise in the New? Jehovah said, “For I am the Lord, I* ***change******not****; therefore ye sons of Jacob are* ***not*** *consumed” (Mal. 3:6).*

 *The scriptures teach that division is* ***destructive*** *(Mark 3:25). It destroys homes, families, and churches. We have all seen homes where the husband attends a denominational church while the wife seeks to be faithful to the Lord. Imagine Jesus being at the center of your life, but you are unable to share Him with your spouse.*

 *Also, division is* ***devilish****. It is a product of Satan. Even his own house is united (Matt. 12:26). He works diligently to divide the church, and to bring disharmony.*

 *Division is also* ***dangerous****. Judgment is an extremely powerful tool that God uses against those who prohibit unity. The last of the seven things God hates in Proverbs six aims at the one who “sows discord among the brethren” (Prov. 6:19).*

 *It would be a great thing for people to put away their differences and accept the teachings of the Bible. What a great day it would be if every denominational sign was burned, and all those who proclaimed to be Christians could stand firm for Christ. That is what I pray for, and that is what I seek.*

**WHY DO SOME PEOPLE MAKE OUR LIVES SO DIFFICULT?**

 Paul proclaimed, “Let us therefore follow after the things which make for peace, and things wherewith one may edify another” (Rom. 14:19). Throughout the history of the Bible, a great number of evil people aim at making God’s followers miserable. Whether it be an Ahab and Jezebel, or the Pharisees so determined to hang Christ to a tree; bad people have always existed.

 The Bible is not silent concerning the motives behind such people. For example, we note that it was envy and jealousy that led Christ to Golgotha (Matt. 27:18). Solomon wrote, *“Wrath is cruel, and anger is outrageous; but who is able to stand before envy?” (Prov. 27:4).*

Another motive why people make other lives miserable centers on ignorance. We allow tradition or our personal beliefs to cast judgments upon others. Peter said, “*If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God; if any man minister, let him do it as of the ability which God giveth: that God in all things may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom be praise and dominion for ever and ever. Amen” (1 Pet. 4:11).*

I’ve heard Christians speak against a man wearing a beard. In all honesty, beards are traditional. Our grandparents who lived in the mid-19th century more than likely wore a long beard. Jesus Christ wore a beard. *“I gave my back to the smiters, and my* ***cheeks*** *to them that* ***plucked*** *off the hair: I hid not my face from shame and spitting*” (Isa. 50:6).

Further, people can make our lives miserable because of their own miseries. *“If I’m not happy, I don’t want you to be happy!”* For many turning to strong drink is a way to forget their troubles. Solomon wrote, “*Let him drink, and forget his poverty, and remember his misery no more” (Prov. 31:7).* Sadly, children and spouses suffer physical and emotional abuse by those addicted.

 Is there any reason why a Christian should live in misery? Truthfully, they should not! We worship a God who loves us, protects us, and never forsakes us. God does not want you to be miserable but happy. He does not want you to wallow in the mire of sorrow and despair. He wants you to live in peace (Psa. 29:11). Jesus said to His apostles, “**Peace** I leave with you, my **peace** I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid” (Jn. 14:27).

**THE DIGNITY OF ELI**

 ***“****Then Eli called Samuel, and said, Samuel, my son. And he answered, Here am I.   And he said, What is the thing that the LORD hath said unto thee? I pray thee hide it not from me: God do so to thee, and more also, if thou hide any thing from me of all the things that he said unto thee.  And Samuel told him every whit, and hid nothing from him. And he said, It is the LORD: let him do what seemeth him good”* (1 Sam. 3:16-18).

 Three times in the night, God called to Samuel, and the young man ran to Eli believing it was his tutor that called him. After the third time, Eli tells Samuel to lie down and listen to all that God has to say to him. It was a message concerning the fall of Eli and his sons.

 The next morning, Eli has the young man tell him the prophesy. After the young prophet relays the message, Eli says, “*It is the Lord: let him do what seemeth him good.*”

 It must be very difficult for fathers to have evil sons. This was true in Eli’s case (1 Sam. 2:12), and Samuel’s (1 Sam. 8:3). Wicked children raised by righteous men.

 **Howbeit,** Eli exhibits the character of a man of integrity. One should not forget that Eli did rebuke his sons for their sins. The Bible states, “*Notwithstanding they hearkened not unto the voice of their father*” (1 Sam. 2:25).

 The problem in this situation is that integrity should lead one to do the right thing. In this case, the right thing meant that Eli’s sons should had been stoned to death. According to the latter half of verse twenty-five, God already had their demise in hand.

 Eli’s affection for Samuel was admirable. It is also apparent that Samuel loved and respected Eli. Hence, his hesitancy to relay the prophesy to the old prophet. The man of God showed no hatred toward the message, or disrespect to Jehovah. He realized that he was a failure for not pursuing punishment against his sons. In the end, the news of his sons dying in battle and losing the ark of the covenant caused him to fall backward and lose his life (1 Sam. 4:12-18).

**WHAT IF THE WORLD WAS TO END TODAY?**

 **“**But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up.  *Seeing* then *that* all these things shall be dissolved, what manner *of persons* ought ye to be in *all* holy conversation and godliness, Looking for and hasting unto the coming of the day of God, wherein the heavens being on fire shall be dissolved, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat?” (**2 Pet. 3:10-12).**

 This is the last promise of the Bible. A pledge that one day Jesus will come again. By this very knowledge, one should do all that is necessary to secure a place in the clouds.

 In this promise, three facts are presented. First, the Lord’s return will be **mysterious.** As a “thief in the night.” There are going to be no signs written in the heavens, or some warning signal given. When the trumpet sounds (1 Cor. 15:52), all things physical will be destroyed. Some have supposed that this trumpet will be blown by Gabriel. Howbeit, note what the Bible says, “For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first” (1 Thess. 4:16). Gabriel is not mentioned. There is only one archangel and his name is Michael (Jude 1:9).

 Second, the Lord’s destruction will be **miraculous. “I**n the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up.” The great flood only destroyed the world. This final judgment will destroy the whole universe. This event will not only show the power of Christ, but the eternal separation between the righteous and the wicked.

 Third, the final destruction should be **motivating**. “*Seeing then that all these things shall be dissolved, what manner of persons ought ye to be in all holy conversation and godliness.”* Every person, if they live long enough, will go through life changing events. I’ve met people who had near death experiences. What about the person who is forced to live on the streets after losing everything? Whatever the case, the end of the world will be the most glorious or awful day in the history of mankind.

 Now comes the big question: “*What are you doing to prepare for that day*?” If Jesus were to come this very moment, would you be ready? You will either be lifted in the clouds or thrown in a devil’s hell. I don’t know about you, but I would much rather dwell with God in heaven, than live in torment with Satan.

**A STRESSFUL POSITION**

When I heard that Mark Bass had a heart attack, the minister at Alkire Road church of Christ, I felt miserable. The doctors focused on a major blockage in his heart, but I wondered if his difficulty was partially brought about by stress.

 In my short period as a minister, I have had three known heart-attacks. I can inform the reader that they were stress related.

 We live in a world much like that of Jeremiah’s, “*Arise, get you up unto the wealthy nation, that dwelleth without* ***care****, saith the Lord, which have neither gates nor bars, which dwell alone” (Jer. 49:31).* Paul speaking about the many trials he underwent, wrote, *“Beside those things that are without, that which cometh upon me daily, the* ***care*** *of all the churches” (2 Cor. 11:28).*

Caring for people is stressful. Let’s remember that we are told **NOT TO WORRY** (Matt. 6:25-34). Never are we told that we will live a stress-free life. It is said of Jesus in the garden, “*And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly: and his sweat was as it were great* ***drops******of******blood*** *falling down to the ground” (Lk. 22:44).*

 For the gospel preacher, his whole focus is on saving souls. He preaches not to get an applause but a response. He has many sleepless nights thinking about erring members, the sick, and those he is unable to touch.

 Men like Mark are rare jewels. He is sound in the faith and has done a wonderful work for Ohio. He serves under a great eldership. I pray for his recovery.

**A WISE LIFE**

 “For wisdom *is* a defence, *and* money *is* a defence: but the excellency of knowledge *is, that* wisdom giveth life to them that have it” (Eccl. 7:12).

 When I think about life, I must consider that it exists on several plains. Anatomically, we have been given organs that sustains our lives. These various systems of the human body serve but one purpose, to maintain an equilibrium so cells can reproduce, and life functions can continue.

 Psychologically, there must be the alleviation of certain negative factors that can affect physical systems. Depression, anxiety, and other disorders can lead to physical ailments that will greatly hinder one’s life expectancy.

 Spiritually, the mature functional person will see that life is more than physical or psychological but centered on God. One’s personal relationship with God makes all the difference. Therefore, Solomon aims at having man comprehend the concept of wisdom. He is not talking about human wisdom, but he wisdom that comes from above. It was Paul who concluded, “That your faith should not stand in the **wisdom** of men, but in the power of God” (1 Cor. 2:5).

 Throughout the Bible we read of people making unwise choices. The repetition of many forsaking God and following the ways of the world is a major theme in the Old Testament. God does His best to show His love, and man does his best to evade that love. The psalmist proclaimed, “O **love** the Lord, all ye his saints: for the Lord preserveth the faithful, and plentifully rewardeth the proud doer” (Psa. 31:23).

 Solomon said, “He that trusteth in his own heart is a fool: but whoso walketh **wise**ly, he shall be delivered” (Prov. 28:26). That is what a wise life is all about, DELIVERANCE. Paul wrote, “O wretched man that I am! who shall **deliver** me from the body of this death?” (Rom. 7:24). Brethren, we all need to be delivered. We need God at the center of our lives. Daily I need to seek a closer relationship with Him. One’s bible should be worn, tattered, and used. Our loyalty and faith should never come into question. For our life is centered on the true wisdom that comes from above.

ARE ANY SEEKING GOD?

 “The LORD looked down from heaven upon the children of men, to see if there were any that did understand, *and* seek God.   They are all gone aside, they are *all* together become filthy: *there is* none that doeth good, no, not one” (Psa. 14:2, 3). This passage is quoted by Paul in Romans 3:10. Without a doubt, the whole unregenerated world is so labeled.

 No matter how righteously a man seeks to live, he will fall short. The psalmist proclaims that there is NONE RIGHTEOUS. Every human on the planet has that one thing in common, unrighteousness! We are all sinners.

 If man is so unworthy, so wicked, what hope does he have? Peter proclaimed, “Neither is there **salvation** in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). There it is, SALVATION IS FOUND IN CHRIST!

Yet to receive this salvation, I must SEEK Him.

 Most of the people on this planet believe that Christ existed. You would find very few that would label Him a wicked person. Many would either proclaim that He was the Son of God or a great prophet. In the New Testament, the demons were the first to acknowledge Him as the Messiah (Matt. 8:29). A great number recognized Him as a great miracle worker but were unsure concerning His identity.

 Throughout the centuries, the church has been assigned the task of opening the eyes of the blind. We are to preach Christ. When God looks down upon this earth, He is expecting to see a body of believers obeying His marching orders (Matt. 28:18-20, Mark 16:15, 16). Yet it is difficult enough for members to make it to services, let alone across the street to teach others about Christ.

 This article began with the questions, “Are any seeking God?” That is question we all must answer. All response will have eternal consequences.

**WHY DO THE HEATHEN’S RAGE?**

 ***“****Why do the heathen rage, and the people imagine a vain thing?   The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD, and against his anointed, saying, Let us break their bands asunder, and cast away their cords from us.  He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh: the Lord shall have them in derision.   Then shall he speak unto them in his wrath, and vex them in his sore displeasure” (Psa. 2:1-5).*

 David composed this psalm after taking back Jerusalem from the Jebusites (2 Sam. 5:7-9). He saw the foolishness of nations revolting against God. God never loses, and in His wrath comes vengeance.

 David makes some key points to be considered. First, how can you defeat a God that sits above the heavens? Not only does He sit upon His throne, He laughs at the ignorance of men. Imagine how perverted a mind must be not to accept God’s position. He is not some human that one can run or hide from. He is Yahweh, Elohim, the great I Am.

 Second, God jeers those that oppose Him. Men will never have the last word! They may curse Him, and slander His name; but in the end, God’s judgment will be cast. Nahum wrote, “***Who******can******stand*** *before his indignation? and* ***who******can*** *abide in the fierceness of his anger? his fury is poured out like fire, and the rocks are thrown down by him” (Nahum 1:6).*

Third, David points out that it is not smart to offend God. “*Then shall he speak unto them in his wrath, and vex them in his sore displeasure.”* We often see God’s reaction toward disobedience in the Bible, Moses writes, “*And when the people complained, it* ***displeased*** *the Lord: and the Lord heard it; and his anger was kindled; and the fire of the Lord burnt among them, and consumed them that were in the uttermost parts of the camp” (Num. 11:1).*

Fourth, David states that those who oppose God will **tremble** at His response. That is what is meant by, “*and vex them in his sore displeasure.”* In the manifestation of God’s presence all men tremble. As Moses did before the burning bush, and as Luke records, “*Saying, I am the God of thy fathers, the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. Then Moses* ***trembled****, and durst not behold” (Acts 7:32).*

We must learn that God is to be respected by all nations. He is to be taken seriously. And His word is not to be rejected, nor denied.

**PUT A CANDLE IN THE WINDOW**

 **“***Neither do men light a* ***candle****, and put it under a bushel, but on a* ***candle****stick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house*” (Matt. 5:15). In this world of complexities, we live in cities that are greatly illuminated. I remember years ago landing in Los Angeles, and before touching down viewing the brightness of that city.

 During the days of Christ, men lit candles to bring light into their homes. Yet, how would one light the candle days? One must remember that matches weren’t invented until 577AD - and that was by the Chinese. The ancients used hardened steel against flint to create a spark that ignited the wick. Most households, in the first century, would have had a fire-striker (or fire steel) handy.

 To produce more light, the Hebrews used lanterns. *“Judas then, having received a band of men and officers from the chief priests and Pharisees, cometh thither with* ***lanterns*** *and torches and weapons” (Jn. 18:3).* These lanterns were filled with olive oil: “*And thou shalt command the children of Israel, that they bring thee pure* ***oil*** *olive beaten for the light, to cause the lamp to burn always” (Exodus 27:20).*  Recalling the parable of the ten virgins, the foolish ones forgot to carry oil for their lamps (Matt. 25:3-8).

 As Christians, we are to carry our light always. We place it in our windows to reveal to others that Christ dwells in our homes and in our hearts. As spiritual lighthouses we give hope to every seafarer that is trying to find his or her way to shore. To spread hope to the world, we must shine our lights. By failing to do such, we keep the world in darkness, and put in jeopardy our own souls.

**TIME TO COME BACK HOME**

 I love the story of the prodigal son in Luke 15:11-32. Especially verse 17, which reads, *“And when he came to himself.”* That focused on the moment that the lost son realized how lost he was and saw the necessity to return home.

 I have been at this congregation for over two and half years. At the present I have taught 536 lessons from the pulpit and in the classroom. I have witnessed the death of over a dozen members. And I have enjoyed the growth of so many within this small congregation.

 I have also sorrowed at the members who left this congregation prior to my arrival. I have spoken with many of them, and they are constantly in my prayers. I compassionately urge them to return home again. It is rational to perceive that they are wallowing in the mire. They are angry, upset, discouraged, and afraid.

 Do not allow the elder brother to discourage you. He is the one who does not wish for your return. His own selfish desires drove you away. It will be by the power of God that he will be silenced. Focus on the loving Father who offers you peace (Psa. 29:11). The Savior who is willing to grant you forgiveness (Col. 1:14). The good brethren who pray for you every day (Philemon 1:4).

 I made a pledge, when I first became a minister, to stand firm for the word of God against all odds if necessary. I am pleading on bended knee for those saints who have left this body of believers to come back home. You have been away long enough. Come home, and let us kill the fatted calf, and defeat that old serpent that holds you in his grips. Come home to God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. Come home to your family. COME HOME!

**WOMEN CAN DO IT BETTER**

 I have a great admiration for Christian women. Every great man will have a good woman beside him. Yet there are those who often find fault with men believing that they are the weaker vessels.

 Truthfully, I don’t care what the world thinks, or what one’s perspective is on the subject. I simply know what the Bible says.

 First, God proclaims that women are the weaker vessels. “*Likewise, ye husbands, dwell with them according to knowledge, giving honour unto the wife, as unto the* ***weaker*** *vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life; that your prayers be not hindered” (1 Pet. 3:7).*

I do not believe that women are the weaker vessels intellectually speaking. The implication is that she is more tender and delicate. In retrospect, this implies that she is to be protected and treated with dignity.

 Second, God warns women not to dominate over men. *“Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence” (1 Tim. 2:11, 12).* A woman who is bitter and seeks to braw instead of being submissive can be dangerous. Solomon knew this all too well when he wrote, *“It is better to dwell in a corner of the* ***housetop****, than with a brawling woman in a wide house” (Prov. 21:9).*

 Third, God is a man! God is always spoken of in masculine gender. In fact, all creatures in heaven are males. Woman was made as a help-meet for man (Gen. 2:18). Adam was lacking something in his life. He had no clue what he needed, so God caused him to fall asleep, and from his rib he made Eve. It is the first love story in the Bible. A narrative of a couple falling from grace and dealing with the tragedies that come from being separated from the garden.

 In this world, it is not about doing it better, but doing it right! In many congregations, the most righteous saints are female. They attend all the services and contribute generously to the propagation of the gospel message. Where would we be if not for our Christian ladies?

 **MONSTERS OF THE BIBLE**

 Where do you find dinosaurs in the Bible? Believe it or not, they are found in various places. The word dinosaur was coined by Sir Richard Owen in 1842. The term means "terrible lizard." Therefore, it makes sense that the Bible would not have the word dinosaur within its pages. Yet, it does describe these giant creatures throughout the Bible.

 First, the Bible speaks of **leviathan**. Consider the following verses:

**Job 41:1**, “Canst thou draw out **leviathan** with an hook? or his tongue with a cord which thou lettest down?”

[**Psalm 74:14**](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Psalm+74:14&version=KJV), “Thou brakest the heads of **leviathan** in pieces, and gavest him to be meat to the people inhabiting the wilderness.”

[**Psalm 104:26**](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Psalm+104:26&version=KJV), “There go the ships: there is that **leviathan**, whom thou hast made to play therein.”

[**Isaiah 27:1**](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Isaiah+27:1&version=KJV)**,** “In that day the Lord with his sore and great and strong sword shall punish **leviathan** the piercing serpent, even **leviathan** that crooked serpent; and he shall slay the dragon that is in the sea.”

 It is not difficult to see that leviathan is a sea dinosaur. Most probably a Mosasaurus. Isaiah calls it a serpent, and a “*dragon that is in the sea*.”

Second, God speaks of the strength of **behemoth**. *“Behold now behemoth, which I made with thee; he eateth grass as an ox. Lo now, his strength is in his loins, and his force is in the navel of his belly. He moveth his tail like a cedar: the sinews of his stones are wrapped together. His bones are as strong pieces of brass; his bones are like bars of iron. He is the chief of the ways of God: he that made him can make his sword to approach unto him. Surely the mountains bring him forth food, where all the beasts of the field play. He lieth under the shady trees, in the covert of the reed, and fens. The shady trees cover him with their shadow; the willows of the brook compass him about. Behold, he drinketh up a river, and hasteth not: he trusteth that he can draw up Jordan into his mouth. He taketh it with his eyes: his nose pierceth through snares*” (Job. 40:15-24).

 Behemoth matches up with a land dinosaur perfectly. This is a large herbivore creature that eats grass like an ox, but as a long tale like a cedar tree. He is powerful, fearful, and wonderfully made. It sounds much like the Diplodocus that was a gentle giant during the early days of man.

 Thus, dinosaurs did exist thousands of years ago, and not millions. How they vanished from the planet is only known by God.

**THE CEASING OF MIRACLES**

 ***“****Charity never faileth: but whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away.   For we know in part, and we prophesy in part.  But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away”* ( 1 Cor. 13:8-10).

 Many years ago, when I was in the charismatic movement, I felt that this passage spoke about the second coming of Christ. It was my belief that miracles would remain until Christ (the Perfect One) would return. In my ignorance, I failed to recognize that the pronoun is neuter gender, and not masculine.

 The passage does not read, “When HE which is perfect shall come,” but “When THAT which is perfect shall come.” God is telling us that all the miracles would no longer be viewed when something would come about. The question is, “What is this PERFECT THING?”

 The Bible does not leave you in limbo! Three times Paul uses the word “perfect” in his first letter to the church at Corinth (1 Cor. 1:10, 2:6, 13:10). The word itself means, “complete” or “mature.”

 It must be understood that the power to perform miracles was passed on through the laying on of the apostles’ hands (Acts 8:18). The qualifications of an apostle are clarified in Acts 1:21, 22. First, one had to be alive during the personal ministry of John the Baptist. Second, one had to be a witness to the resurrection. With that in mind, we note that no apostles are living today.

 If the vehicle to impart these gifts no longer exists, then it should be concluded that miracles ceased after the last recipient of these gifts passed from this earth.

 Still what is this perfect thing? Once again, the Bible gives you the answer. James writes, “*But whoso looketh into the perfect law of liberty, and continueth therein, he being not a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the work, this man shall be blessed in his deed*” (Jas. 1:25).

 In other words, when the gospel was complete, written down, and in the hands of men, miracles were no longer needed. Jesus predicted this day when He told Thomas, “***blessed******are******they******that*** *have not seen, and yet have* ***believe****d*” (Jn. 20:29).

 Just because there are no miracles today does not mean that God is not active in our lives. It simply should be understood that we are the adoptees of a greater faith. One that is simply based upon the written word (Rom. 10:17).

**TAKE TIME TO BE HOLY**

“Take time to be holy, Speak oft with thy Lord; Abide in Him Always, And feed on His word. Make friends of God’s children; Help those who are weak, Forgetting in nothing His blessings to seek.”

 William Longstaff was an English businessman —a layman who, after hearing a sermon on the text, “Be ye holy, for I am holy” (Lev. 11:44), inspired him to write a poem. He sent his poem to a Christian magazine that printed it.

 George Stebbins, a musician, cut out the poem and filed it away. Years later, it was requested of him to write a hymn about holy living. Hence, he remembered the poem he filed away and set it to music. William Longstaff probably never lived long enough to hear his poem set to music, but it has moved a lot of hearts throughout the years.

 What one gains from this song is the fact that being holy is a work. It is not only bowing in prayer before the Lord but reading and studying His word. As Longstaff wrote, “*Forgetting in nothing His blessings to seek*.”

 Our whole existence should be aimed at being holy. Whether it be at worship services, or at home in the comfort of our families; holiness is essential. Every father wants to be a good father, and every mother loving. Thus, we must perceive that a holy home is a healthy home. Putting God first (Deut. 6:5).

 The philosophical concept of utilizing time fully is ironical. We treat time as if we have plenty of it, or somehow, we can manipulate it. Time can either be a blessing or a curse. When I see it as God’s gift to value and use it wisely; time is a blessing. When I waste time by focusing on my own wants and desires; it is a curse!

 A man can get so engulfed in his work, his recreation, his desires that there is no time for God. He believes that there will be time to serve later. “I’m going to,” is a dangerous direction to follow. It is most often concluded, “I’m never going to!”

 In conclusion, TAKE TIME TO BE HOLY!

**PUBLIC SINS**

The act of confronting a brother or sister on an individual basis is recorded for us in Matthew 5:21-26 and Matthew 18:15-20. However, public sins are handled much differently in the New Testament.

 Note these passages: “*Now I beseech you, brethren,* ***mark*** *them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them” (Rom. 16:17). “Brethren, be followers together of me, and* ***mark*** *them which walk so as ye have us for an ensample” (Phil. 3:17). “And have no* ***fellowship*** *with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them” (Eph. 5:11).*

Why such drastic action against those who publicly sin? It is obvious that those who are willing to cause discord and division can destroy the local congregation. They can create an atmosphere of despair causing people will leave (3 John 1:9, 10), and the community will be hardened against that local autonomy.

 Also, these individuals are cursed by God. Solomon wrote, “*These six things doth the Lord hate: yea, seven are an abomination unto him: A proud look, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood,An heart that deviseth wicked imaginations, feet that be swift in running to mischief,A false witness that speaketh lies, and he that soweth discord among brethren*” (**Prov. 6:16-19**). According to this passage, one that sows discord in the church is an abomination before the Lord. If that isn’t cursed, I don’t know what is? The word “abomination” means “extreme disgust.”

 Further, public sins bring unrest in a peaceful environment. The saints are the elect. They have become members of a peaceful Kingdom, ruled by a peaceful King. We should expect no less when we come together for worship, eat a fellowship meal, and participate in other Christian events. Jesus said to His apostles, “***Peace*** *I leave with you, my* ***peace*** *I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid”(John 14:27).* He also said, “*These things I have spoken unto you, that in me ye might have* ***peace****. In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world” (John 16:33).*

It is indeed a difficult thing to mark and avoid one that soweth discord. Yet it is a necessary act that brings about a necessary result. It cast fear among others, and it is an action commanded and ordained by God.

**I GAVE MY LIFE FOR THEE**

*I gave My life for Thee, My precious blood I shed, That thou might'st ransomed be, And quickened from the head; I gave, I gave My life for thee- What hast thou giv'n for Me? I gave, I gave My life for thee- What hast thou giv'n for Me?*

 Frances Ridley Havergal wrote this poem while she was in Dusseldorf, Germany. She had traveled to this region of the world to do some specialized study. While there, she saw a copy of Sternburg’s great painting: The *CRUCIFIXION.* The title above the picture was, ***All this I did for thee; what has thou done for Me?***

 Inspired by the probing question, she wrote her famous poem, ***I Gave My Life for Thee***. Howbeit, she was not happy with the poem and threw it into the fire, but a draft blew the paper out of the fire and onto the hearth. Feeling that this might have been Providential, Miss Havergal took the slightly-scorched paper, folded it, and sent it to her father in England.

 He composed a tune to match the words and had it published. However, the tune we now use with this superb poem was written years later by P. P. Bliss.

 I’ve written on this hymn before. I find it to be comforting. It forces us to question our actions. It also makes us aware of our inactivity. We believe so strongly, often professed, that we can do nothing without God. However, we do most things without Him. We propose our love to Him, and never show our love for Him.

 Christianity is a way of life. A volunteer submission to put away the old man and follow the teachings of Jesus. It is all about change, sacrifice, and servitude. I was not baptized to be a general in the Lord’s army, but a mere private that obeys all commands without question.

 Yes indeed! I love the last stanza to this song, “*And I have brought to thee, Down from My home above, Salvation full and free, My pardon and My love; I bring, I bring rich gifts to thee- What hast thou brought to Me? I bring, I bring rich gifts to thee- What hast thou brought to Me?”*

**WHO’S THE KING?**

 On stage at one of Elvis Presley’s concerts, a fan belted out, “*Elvis you’re the king*!” Elvis responded by pointing to the heavens and saying, “*He’s the King*!” Those who know me realize that I am an Elvis fan. I loved his music. It should be noted that Elvis never took a drug that was not prescribed. That doesn’t mean he didn’t abuse them, but he was an advocate against illegal drugs.

 However, it is not my intention to have an article about Elvis. No matter how good looking he was, or how well he could sing, Elvis understood there is only ONE KING, Jesus Christ.

 Centuries ago, God was very upset when the Hebrews asked for an earthly king. The book of Samuel records this moment in history, “*And the Lord said unto Samuel, Hearken unto the voice of the people in all that they say unto thee: for they have not* ***rejected*** *thee, but they have* ***rejected*** *me, that I should not reign over them*” (1 Sam. 8:7).

 During the personal ministry of Christ, Nathanael is the first to acknowledges Jesus as King. “*Nathanael answered and saith unto him, Rabbi, thou art the Son of God; thou art the* ***King*** *of Israel” (Jn. 1:49).* Yet it was to Mary that the angel proclaimed, “*He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest: and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David:And he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end*” (Luke 1:32, 33).

 Napoleon wrote, “*Alexander, Caesar, Charlemagne, and myself founded empires; but what foundation did we rest the creations of our genius? Upon force. Jesus Christ founded an empire upon love; and at this hour millions of men would die for Him.”* Thomas Jefferson said, “*I am a real Christian – that is to say, a disciple of the doctrines of Jesus Christ.”* Rulers, emperors, kings, and presidents throughout history recognized the sovereignty of Christ. Their rule, their kingdoms, and sphere of influence decays with the times. Mortal men rise and fall, like nations; howbeit, the throne of God is eternal.

 When the gavel of Divine Justice is swung, men feel the wrath of the Almighty. He is a King that rules. He actively participates in the lives of His subjects. Those who oppose Him will one day bow before Him (Phil 2:10).

 It should be important to all of us to be found in the King’s favor. I don’t want to have God as my enemy. Jesus said, “***Abide*** *in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it* ***abide*** *in the vine; no more can ye, except ye* ***abide*** *in me*” (Jn. 15:4). “*Abiding in Christ*” is the only safe-haven for mortal man. It is that protected shield against the coming wrath of the King.

**AMERICA THE BEAUTIFUL**

In the summer of 1893, Chicago had put on an exposition in Chicago celebrating the discovery of America by Christopher Columbus. A group of teachers from Wellesley College stopped there on their way to Colorado. One of the professors, Katherine Lee Bates, was among that party of travelers. As they continued their travel westward, she was impressed on how beautiful and wonderful America was. She saw the beauty of the windy city, the shores of Lake Michigan, the Zebulon Montgomery Pike, and the wonders of the Rocky Mountains. With all these images, she sat down and wrote the song, *America the Beautiful*.

 *O beautiful for spacies skies, For amber waves of grain; For purple mountain majesties, Above the fruited plain. America! America! God shed His grace on thee; And crown they good with brotherhood, From sea to shining sea.*

 When singing this hymn, one must remember who makes America. It is not the people, but God. He created every mountain, stream, and valley. His hand graciously painted the horizon, and with the stroke of His brush the sky came to life.

 So, the next time you step outside at night to look at the stars in the heavens, or gaze at the fading sunset; bow your head in prayer and thank God for America. Thank Him for allowing you to see the beauty of all that He had created.

**BLESSED ASSURANCE**

 It is not often that a friendship is formed between the rich and the poor. Phoebe Knapp, the wife of Joseph Knapp, the founder of the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, became close friends with Fanny Crosby. Miss Crosby was a blind hymn writer who lived in the slums but attended the same congregation as Mrs. Knapp. As their friendship grew, she invited Fanny over to her house. After a quaint meal, she took Fanny to the music room where Mrs. Knabb played a song for the blind hymn writer. After it was performed, she asked Miss Crosby what she thought the song was saying. Fanny replied, “It says blessed assurance.”

 With the musical score, Fanny wrote the beautiful hymn, “Blessed Assurance.” During Miss Crosby’s lifetime she wrote eight thousand hymns. Yet the one she is most remembered for was the one co-written by Phoebe Knapp. True friendship is not gained by wealth and fame, but by sharing the same heart.

THE HYMN “IN THE GARDEN”

 C. Austin Miles was a photographer in 1912. He spent many hours in his dark room not only for the pleasure of developing pictures, but enjoying quiet time reading his Bible. On one occasion, he sat in his dark room reading from the 20th chapter of John. There John tells the story of Mary coming to the tomb mourning the loss of Christ. It was there that she leaned down to investigate the tomb only to find it empty. Yet it was not empty. Two angels were sitting where the Lord had been laid. In her confusion, the gentle voice of Jesus is heard. He asked, “*Woman, why weepest thou? whom seekest thou*?” Expressing her sorrow, Jesus calls her by name (John 20:16). Without hesitation she recognized the voice to be of the Lord’s.

 The words of John 20 allowed him to imagine what took place that day. He saw himself in that story. He saw himself kneeling to look inside the tomb. He felt the hairs of his arms rise when the Lord called his name. He recognized the Savior that day and cried out, “*Rabboni*” (Master) (John 20:16). That is what the bible does, it allows us to be participants. He was so moved by what he read, he took pen and paper and wrote the song, “*In the Garden*.”

*(1)I come to the garden alone,*

*While the dew is still on the roses;*

*And the voice I hear,*

*falling on my ear,*

*The Son of God discloses.*

***CHORUS:***

*And He walks with me, and He talks with me,*

*And He tells me I am His own;*

*And the joy we share as we tarry there,*

*None other has ever known.*

**WHY DO CULTS FLOURISH?**

Many of our sister congregations have folded in the past few decades. Why? That is the million-dollar question. While we have seen the demise of many churches, cults seem to rise and flourish. The mega-church philosophy has shifted the thinking of the populace to a more pragmatic approach to religious ideology. People want to belong, accepted, and led.

 To belong is at the gest of cultish theology. They built communes separating themselves from the mainstream of society. We live in a society of bullies, and hardened hearts that communicate through cell phones and computers. People desire to be loved.

 The bulk of the Lord’s teachings centered on love. The Bible states, “*Now before the feast of the passover, when Jesus knew that his hour was come that he should depart out of this world unto the Father, having* ***love****d his own which were in the world, he* ***love****d them unto the end” (Jn. 13:1).*

Though cult leaders often teach a perverted love, it attracts many people who are void of any love in their lives. This is even true of criminals like Charles Manson that without hesitation took in the strays of society.

Church growth in our modern society is hindered by a lack of care for the community. We don’t speak to our neighbors because we don’t know our neighbors. We don’t care about our neighbors. This attitude alone drives people to seek out cults and cultish philosophies.

 Second, people do not only want to belong, they want to be accepted. One can belong to a congregation all their lives and never be accepted. Cults offer equality and a comradery among its members.

 In Acts 15, the discussion of circumcision was brought before the church in Jerusalem. After it was concluded that it was not a necessity, Luke records, “*Then pleased it the apostles and elders with the* ***whole******church****, to send chosen men of their own company to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas” (Acts 15:22).* From a biblical perspective, unity is the key. Many cult leaders center their attention on this very fact. People within the cult are never to deter from the rules established by the leader. Those who do are quickly disciplined or removed from the group.

 The last reason people join cults centers on leadership. Most people are followers and not leaders. They don’t like making decisions. They find the Bible to be difficult, and its teachings to be somewhat out of date. They seek men with new perspectives and are willing to guide them in every direction.

 Even in the ecumenical churches, this foundation is apparent. They believe the minister to be the pastor. If they are questioned, he will be the one they turn to for the answers. How often have I heard, “*Let me go ask my preacher*!” The Bible instructs all members, “*But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts: and be ready always to give an* ***answer*** *to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear” (1 Pet. 3:15).*

 In conclusion, the church must mirror the church of the first century. We must have an identity that is separate and apart from denominationalism. It is imperative to reach out to every creature and preach to them the truth. If not, many of them will be swallowed up by devilish cults that feed upon their desires.

**SWEET BY-AND-BY**

 A gifted violin player by the name of Joseph T. Webster was often tormented by depression. On one of these occasions, he was visited by Fillmore Bennett. He was a concerned friend who understood the melancholy mood brought on by the infliction. Not wanting his friend to sink deeper into depression, he talked Joseph into writing a tune for a hymn. Showing signs of despair while writing the tune, Fillmore asked his friend, “What’s the matter now?” Joseph responded, Oh, it will be alright by and by.” Fillmore in turn said, “That’s right, trials do generate great glory for us in the sweet by-and-by.” Thus, the title for the song was erected.

 *There’s a land that is fairer than day,*

*And by faith we can see it afar;*

*For the Father waits over the way,*

*To prepare us a dwelling place there.*

 *In the sweet by and by,*

 *We shall meet on that beautiful shore;*

 *In the sweet by and by,*

 *We shall meet on that beautiful shore.*

**IF TOMORROW NEVER COMES**

 Years ago, Garth Brooks wrote a song, “**If Tomorrow Never Comes**.” The chorus read, “If tomorrow never comes will she know how much I loved her, Did I try in every way to show her every day that she’s my only one. And if my time on earth were through and she must face this world without me, Is the love I gave her in the past gonna be enough to last if tomorrow never comes.”

 The song speaks of a man living as if today was the last day of his life. He doesn’t wait to tell his wife how much he loves her. He says and does everything as if they were the last moments he had with those he loved.

 As Christians we should live as if tomorrow never comes. If we did our faith would be unwavering. We would do our best to live the kind of life that glorifies God. We would work to be the best husband or wife we could be. We would focus on our parenting skills, our work ethics, and our relationships.

 In the past few years I have witnessed several people live their last moments. Some had the chance to say goodbye, others were not that fortunate. Yet to live and die for Christ is the key. It was the apostle Paul who proclaimed, *“For whether we live, we live unto the Lord; and whether we die, we die unto the Lord: whether we live therefore, or die, we are the Lord's”* (Rom. 14:8).

 We all leave behind our own legacy. Soon we are going to have a day of remembering some of our past saints. They loved their families and died happy. For some these memories fade, for others they live everyday thinking about the past.

 We all will have that last day. It is not “if” but “when.” Moses told the Israelites, *“Consecrate yourselves****today****to the Lord, even every man upon his son, and upon his brother; that he may bestow upon you a blessing this day” (Exodus 32:29).*

 Nothing I have said is new. We are constantly reminded of our own mortality. My dad used to say that he checked the obituary page of the newspaper every day to see if he was in it. At the age of fifty-nine his name was printed on the obituary page of the Goshen News.It is hard to believe that I have lasted four years longer than he.

Like Paul, my prayer for all the saints at Washington Courthouse is that they might be saved (Rom. 10:1). I want to see you succeed. I want to sit beside you in paradise. I have enjoyed your fellowship on earth and look forward to it in the next life. Thus, let’s all live as if tomorrow will never come.

**Jesus Loves Me**

       In 1860, Susan Warner was a novelist. One of the books she wrote was entitled *Say and Seal*. Susan solicited the aid of her sister, Anna Bartlett Warner, to help with this novel.

 In the manuscript, one of the characters, Mr. Linden, comforted Johnny Fax, a dying child, with the words of “*Jesus Loves Me*.” This led both to further write the tune and words for the song.

 The sisters were both highly educated and devoted their lives to the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. They conducted bible studies for young cadets. After their deaths, their home, Good Crag, was willed to the Academy, and turned into a national shrine.

 Both sisters were buried with military honors in recognition of their spiritual contributions to the lives of the young military officers.

*(1) Jesus loves me! this I know,*

*For the Bible tells me so;*

*Little ones to Him belong,*

*They are weak but He is strong.*

*CHORUS: Yes, Jesus loves me!*

*Yes, Jesus loves me!*

*Yes,  Jesus loves me!*

*The Bible tells me so.*

**HOW OFTEN DO YOU STUDY THE BIBLE?**

 Lifeway Research recently posted their statistics on how often people read the Bible. They found that 19% read the Bible every day. Twenty-six percent read it a few times a week. Another 14% state that they read the Bible once a month. Lastly, eighteen percent of the people polled said they read the Bible rarely or never.

 These are only statistics, but I think it is important to view what category one falls under individually. This poll focuses simply on reading the Bible. However, reading and studying are two different things. Paul told young Timothy, “***Study****to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15).*

While Paul was in a prison cell, he asked Timothy, “*The cloke that I left at Troas with Carpus, when thou comest, bring with thee, and the books, but especially the****parchments****” (2 Tim. 4:13).*  The parchments were dressed skins that the ancients used to write upon. However, the books could have stood for letters written by other apostles, or writings gathered for study. Whatever be the case, Paul was wanting to further his knowledge.

 Before one begins to read a Bible book, engage in some **research**.There are so many sources that will give you insight on the history of that book. Knowing when the book was written, who wrote it, and why it was written can greatly enhance one’s understanding of the book.

 You must be able to put on your ancient glasses when looking at a Bible book. Do not try to understand a book with Twenty-first century glasses. Words used thousands of years ago are not commonly used today.

 Second, while reading a Bible book, use **references**. Most English Bibles have references attached to verses. In the New Testament, when the prophets are quoted, turn back to those pages and get an understanding when and why the prophecy was delivered. This will give you an appreciation of the value of inspiration.

 Third, in studying the Bible, **repetition** is the key. Many evangelists will read the whole book first, then the chapter. This will be repeated several times. Why? To get acquainted with the general overall view of the book, and to grasp the flow of the message. We must remember that the Bible, when it was first written, did not have book, chapter, and verses. The Old Testament was written in Hebrew and Aramaic, and the New was written in koine Greek. Most of the words were ran together.

 Fourth, **rely** on the testimony of sound men. I don’t put my faith in any person, but there are those men in the brotherhood who are brighter and more knowledgeable. Paul wrote, *“And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and****teachers” (Eph. 4:11).*** If I wanted to know about brotherhood issues, I would turn to Mark Bass. If I was seeking knowledge on a Hebrew or Greek word I would make a phone call to one of our schools of preaching, or colleges.

 In short, it is good to take time to read the Bible every day. Howbeit, it is even better when you study the sacred book.