

Seeing the Crown

A Devotional for Bereans

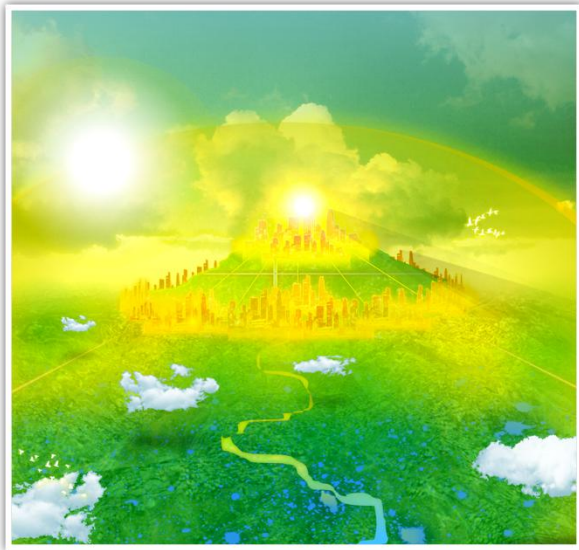
Vol. 2

"The Bereans...received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true." (Acts 17:11)



Berean Lamp Ministries

Volume 2: Berean Lamp Ministry Devotional Series



Cover Art: this is an artistic representation of Christ's Millennial Kingdom that He will build up as God's Holy Mountain, Mount Zion, on present day Jerusalem when He returns. Christ will rule from His Holy Mountain for 1,000 years before this old earth will be destroyed and a new Heaven and new Earth will be made, which He shall rule for all eternity. *"Thus says the Lord, 'I will return to Zion and will dwell in the midst of Jerusalem. Then Jerusalem will be called the City of Truth, and the mountain of the Lord of hosts will be called the Holy Mountain'"* (Zechariah 8:3). *"For the Lord has built up Zion; He has appeared in His glory"* (Psalm 102:16). *"Now it will come about that In the last days The mountain of the house of the LORD Will be established as the chief of the mountains, And will be raised above the hills; And all the nations will stream to it. And many peoples will come and say, 'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, To the house of the God of Jacob; That He may teach us concerning His ways And that we may walk in His paths.' For the law will go forth from Zion And the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. And He will judge between the nations, And will render decisions for many peoples; And they will hammer their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not lift up sword against nation, And never again will they learn war"* (Isaiah 2:2-4). All Believers will inherit this Kingdom of their Lord, Savior, and King, Jesus Christ! Even so, Amen.



Berean Lamp Ministries

"To encourage one another – and all the more as you see the day approaching." (Hebrews 10:25b)

Berean Lamp Ministries seeks to:

1. Encourage and strengthen the Body of Christ by providing the means for each of its members to share their spiritual gifts with one another, rooted in the Word of God, thereby growing into deeper union with one another and with Christ (1 Corinthians 12:12-31).
2. Minister to non-believers; be a witness for Christ and a testimony to His Body in the world.

Berean Lamp Ministries is a place for the body of Christ to come for encouragement and spiritual sustenance in the face of our swiftly changing world that is rapidly abandoning God. We would appreciate your help in spreading the work of this ministry. Thank you, and God bless. - **Pastor Scott Moller**



Explore more devotionals, articles, sermons, and music from the Body of Christ—also sign up for the bi-monthly Newsletter and learn more about the Berean Christian Fellowship and its ministry, the Berean Lamp—by visiting us at:

www.bereanlamp.org

We would like to give thanks to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ for this opportunity to share in His ministry to His saints – all glory and honor and praise be to Him who purchased us from our debt to sin by the shedding of His blood and saved us for the resurrection to Life when He conquered death and hell by His resurrection.

We would also like to thank our generous Body, who have supplied all the photographs in this devotional. Their hard work and dedication in sharing their gifts have made this ministry possible.

We pray that this work ministers to your heart and encourages you in your walk. Let's all take time to be in God's Word together.

*All devotionals written by Nathan Warner
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Faithless Consumerism

“For the word of the Lord is upright, And all His work is done in faithfulness” (Psalm 33:4).

Why are we becoming an increasingly faithless society? Why are we so ill-committed to the things we promise to see through—even as “Christians?” Why are we shunning responsibilities? What principles in our lives are distracting us from God’s command for us to be faithful—to Him, and to our spouses, children, churches, employers, and governments?

Let’s look a bit at something called “materialism” — “a preoccupation with or emphasis on material objects, comforts, and considerations, with a disinterest in or rejection of spiritual, intellectual, or cultural values” (Dictionary.com). Consumerism is what you get in a materialistic society. When we consume something, we “use it up” or get what we need/want out of it. When we’re done with it, we “toss it out” and find something to take its place. If something doesn’t perform to our expectations we simply replace it. Advertisements daily teach us that the point of life is “satisfaction,” which is always available at a small effort or a price—“something better” is always out there.

This has an effect on our relationships, because we begin to measure everything’s worth by our “happiness” and our “pleasure,” which means everything has a price tag. If our marriages, children, churches, commitments, etc are making us unhappy, we “sell out” and start over. A consumerist mindset makes everything expendable. It used to be that “your word was your bond,” and God’s certainly is, but today “a promise just means I’m loyal to you until something better comes along.” Today, so many relationships exist for the

sake of expedience, not love. Even Believers “shop” churches and “switch” at the slightest inconvenience to them. This mentality has poisoned our society, just as it did in Israel when Hosea declared, *“the Lord has a case against the inhabitants of the land, Because there is no faithfulness or kindness Or knowledge of God in the land”* (Hosea 4:1). God, however has been and will remain faithful to Israel and His Church, regardless of their faithfulness to Him. His *“faithfulness continues throughout all generations”* (Psalm 119:90a) and His *“compassions never fail. They are new every morning; Great is Your faithfulness”* (Lamentations 3:22b-23). God is faithful through the ups and downs of life, nor does time change His mind as Isaiah declared: *“O Lord, You are my God; I will exalt You, I will give thanks to Your name; For You have worked wonders, Plans formed long ago, with perfect faithfulness”* (Isaiah 25:1). God does not return or replace us when we displease Him, nor does He walk out on His commitments. *“If we are faithless, He remains faithful, for He cannot deny Himself”* (2 Timothy 2:13), yet there are consequences for our sin.

And even if we are following God, we can still endure loss of “happiness” and “pleasure,” in life, but even this is God’s faithfulness to us with Eternity in mind for the Psalmist declared, *“in faithfulness You have afflicted me,”* (Psalm 119:75b), and *“those whom the Lord loves, He disciplines”* (Hebrews 12:6a). God’s plan of Salvation through Jesus Christ goes beyond showing His faithfulness to us—it proves His immeasurable love for us. *“Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass”* (1 Thessalonians 5:23-24). Amen.

Thoughts? _____

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The Word That Grabs Our Attention

“O land, land, land, Hear the word of the Lord!” (Jeremiah 22:29)

In a republic or a democracy, there are many, many leaders who give competing, dissenting words on any given issue. As a result, we probably don't pay as much attention to the voices in our government as we would if we lived in a dictatorship or a monarchy. After all, it's people who have authority that we listen to most, because we know they can change our lives for better or for worse. In just a few words, a dictator can put you out of a job, endanger your family, pardon you from execution, or cause the deaths of millions.

When Mao Zedong published his “Little Red Book” people in China paid attention because the words in this book were deciding their lives and held the power of life and death as they saw it. When Hitler wrote “Mein Kampf,” people across the world paid attention because his words spelled out his plan for the world. Mankind eagerly waits on the words of “great” men to learn what their “policies” and “plans” will be, because they often spell the difference between wealth and ruin, life and death. Yet the physical life they offer is not theirs to give and the death they threaten comes to all mankind. Yes, their words may be an interruption to our earthly plans if we are financially ruined or if we die, but the power we think they have is not truly theirs and it ends abruptly on their deathbed.

How ironic that we wait breathlessly on words of our fellow men which are often forgotten in less than a generation when they, like we also die, but we ignore the words of God! Not only has He given us the breath we have, but He offers His

promise in His Word of undamaged, unblemished life that does not taste even the slightest flavor of death to *“those who hear the word of God and observe it”* (Luke 11:29b). As Believers, we know like Peter (by the Holy Spirit) that Jesus' Words are *“words of eternal life”* (John 6:68b), for *“The grass withers, the flower fades, But the word of our God stands forever”* (Isaiah 40:8). The promises of Hitler, Napoleon, and Herod lie as side-notes in museums, the rubble of their nations, and the tombs where their bodies were lain, but God's Word will never be buried, even though people ignore and reject it. It is a great irony that men's words only have power because people are willing to obey them, yet God retains all power in Heaven and Earth though all Earth and Heaven rebel against His Word.

It is the saddest thing in the world that people cling in *rigor mortis* to words that turn to dust in their hands rather than embrace the fruitful Words of Life. Just as God warned Israel, *“‘days are coming,’ declares the Lord God, ‘When I will send a famine on the land, Not a famine for bread or a thirst for water, But rather for hearing the words of the Lord’”* (Amos 8:11), so *“the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths”* (2 Timothy 4:3-4), yet we are to *“preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction”* (2 Timothy 4:2), because God's Word is the only plan and policy of Salvation through Jesus to all mankind and is the only word that undoes the world's worst.

We ought to share with each other and the world how God's Word *“became for me a joy and the delight of my heart; For I have been called by Your name, O Lord God of hosts”* (Jeremiah 15:16). Even so. Amen.

Thoughts? _____

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Self Help or Dying to Self?

“Whoever trusts in his own mind is a fool” (Proverbs 28:26a).

Pastors and ministries have failed generations by preaching different gospels than *The Gospel*. This is no slight matter for Paul declared, “even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be **accursed!**” (Galatians 1:8). One false gospel that is widely being preached today is the good news of “self-help.” Haven’t you heard? God wants you to be “happy,” so do what makes you happy! “Self Help” teachers tell us to “give God a try” as if He is a brand of lip balm or a new shampoo. They tell us that if we use “God’s plan” correctly (in “easy” steps), we’ll get what WE want, because God “gets His pleasure out of our happiness.” These shameful teachers misuse Scripture to build the “I” up in us rather than Christ, and their prayers are a business transaction: “God, I’ll do what you want, but give me what I want in return.”

After all, doesn’t the Bible say, “God helps those who help themselves”? Many Christians believe this is a verse in the Bible, but it is not. This “self-help” motto finds a comfortable seat with the Self-Improvement or Self Help movement, which teaches “the use of one’s own efforts to achieve things and better oneself without relying on others” (Oxford Dictionaries/Merriam Webster). It is contrary to God’s message of Grace and reliance on Him for all things, “*Thus says the LORD: ‘Cursed is the man who trusts in man and makes flesh his strength, whose heart turns away from the LORD’*” (Jeremiah 17:5), for as Paul explained, “*I know that*

nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not” (Romans 7:28). Self-help only leads to spiritual death.

“Self-Help” teachers are not just scattering God’s seed among thorns, they’re mixing weed seed with God’s seed, so it is no wonder that “*thorns came up and choked it, and it yielded no crop*” (Mark 4:7b). People seeking God under a “Self Help” gospel are “choked” away from the True Gospel because, “we tried that, but it didn’t work for us.” They are always searching for the “elusive” blessings of God in this life because their focus is HERE and NOW instead of eternity. But, Jesus preached, “*If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me*” (Luke 9:23) for “*he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life*” (John 5:24b). We understand “*that our old self was crucified with Him, in order that our body of sin might be done away with, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin*” (Romans 6:6), “*but he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him*” (John 3:36b).

The Cross is not a “I’ll see if this works for me” approach. It is obedience all the way, not a “self-help” plan, for we are to take up our cross and follow Christ’s example Who “*emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross*” (Philippians 2:7-8). Just so, we are to lay our lives down in trust and obedience to God, that HE can raise them up into eternal life. So, “*lay aside the old self, which is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit, and that you be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and put on the new self, which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth*” (Ephesians 4:21-24). Amen.

Thoughts? _____

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Willingly Deluded

“For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen” (Romans 1:25).

We often think delusion comes against someone’s will, don’t we? We see the poor chump caught in a game of shadows and we think, “Poor fellow! He needs someone to clear the air.” We just need to get those poor deceived people to see the truth and then they’ll stop being deluded, right? Well, not often. Man’s hunger for delusion is illustrated in the very first delusion: *“Now the serpent was more crafty than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made. And he said to the woman, ‘Indeed, has God said, “You shall not eat from any tree of the garden”?’”* She replies, “yep.” *“The serpent said to the woman, ‘You surely will not die! For God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.’”* Eve bought it, and *“she took from its fruit and ate; and she gave also to her husband with her, and he ate”* (Genesis 3:1-6). Why? Why was this first lie successful in deluding Adam and Eve? Scripture says that the wickedness of false people makes *“the king glad, And the princes with their lies”* (Hosea 7:3).

You see, Adam and Eve were “glad” in the promise of the Serpent’s lie, because his promise was Lucifer’s hope: *“I will make myself like the Most High”* (Isaiah 14:14b). No one could have dissuaded them—they wanted to live that lie. The only problem was it required disobeying God, and fear of responsibility to His judgment had kept them from attempting disobedience. But then a

false teacher came along in the form of the Serpent who gave them what they needed—a “biblical” teaching from another “authority” that offered them cover. How? Eve willingly let herself come under his authority, not arguing with the Serpent’s answer. She chose his “covering” for her deeds over God’s, denying her responsibility to God. Adam on the other hand was not deceived. He knew there were consequences regardless of the Serpent’s teaching, but perhaps he thought he could get out of his responsibility to them by blaming God for giving him a helper who “led him astray” - getting what he wanted while escaping punishment because, “it wasn’t his fault.”

Adam and Eve obviously wanted what the Serpent offered, so when the opportunity came to get it “without consequences,” they took it, because the promise of sin made them “glad” while accountability was shifted elsewhere. So, they ate the fruit, and when God asked, *“‘Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?’ The man said, ‘The woman whom You gave to be with me, she gave me from the tree, and I ate.’ Then the LORD God said to the woman, ‘What is this you have done?’ And the woman said, ‘The serpent deceived me, and I ate’”* (Genesis 3:11-13). Eve, realizing she had been tricked, pointed her finger at the trickster, hoping her desire for the lie’s promise went unnoticed, while Adam shifted responsibility onto God for giving him a “helper” who “led him astray,” just as many “Christians” intend to do about the “anointed” teacher that they’ve willingly followed into sin. What neither of them fully understood was no one can side-step their responsibility for their actions to God because *“the Lord searches all hearts, and understands every intent of the thoughts”* (1 Chronicles 28:9) - including the motivations that lead us to fall into deceptions and delusions. In the next Devotional, we’ll look at Delusion in more detail.

Thoughts? _____



Willingly Deluded—Part 2

“Therefore God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false” (2 Thessalonians 2:11 ESV).

In this verse, God doesn’t say He will MAKE people believe a lie—He will ALLOW them to believe a lie, if they want to. We saw last time that it wasn’t because the Serpent’s delusion was overpowering that Adam and Eve sinned but because they really wanted the lie to be true—they just needed a really good excuse. The Serpent’s delusion gave them the “covering” of a “biblical” authority other than God to act on their ungodly desires. This covering wasn’t a real covering, because they were found naked (their lawless deeds exposed), and they bore their individual responsibility before God’s judgment as a forerunner of Judgment Day. Unfortunately, just like Adam and Eve, most people who are under a deluding influence WANT to be there. Why?

Due to sin, the flesh exists in all of us. For Believers, the Holy Spirit restrains our fleshly urges to sin, and God’s work of Sanctification puts the flesh to death. For non-believers, the only thing restraining their fleshly impulses is fear of exposure, because all humanity knows it is “naked” in its sin before God’s judgment, and *“this is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil”* (John 3:19). Darkness “covers” nakedness, right? Well, you can’t be exposed if you’re in the dark, can you? So, you can argue you are covered in darkness, but only so long as you are in darkness. God has allowed darkness to exist (alongside light) so that people can fill it

with their ungodliness, but He has warned many times, *“Your nakedness shall be uncovered, and your disgrace shall be seen”*

(Isaiah 47:3a). How? God has sent Jesus, *“the light of men”* (John 1:4b), to uncover all deeds “covered” under satan’s rule of darkness.

In the Light, darkness is no covering at all. Light exposes all deeds. Unfortunately, people would rather believe they are hidden from responsibility by the “coverage” of darkness, so they can continue in their sinful deeds. This is why people seek an opportunity, authority, or teaching that offers them cover to act on their lusts AND escape responsibility for their sins. Some willingly come under the “authority” of the lie as Eve did, denying God’s authority to judge them, while others, like Adam, believe they have found a “loophole” in their responsibility to their sin before God—fully intending to blame the “helpers” God allowed in their lives (church, pastor, teacher, friend, spouse, leader), while hating any attempt to uncover the darkness that “justifies” the sin they love. They don’t realize *“nothing is hidden, except to be revealed; nor has anything been secret, but that it would come to light”* (Mark 4:22), *“for the word of God is living and active...discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account”*

(Hebrews 4:12), *“for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified [only] as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus”* (Romans 3:23-24).

In this way, Believers are not naked in the Light, for *“blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven and whose sins have been covered”* (Romans 4:7), because as *“we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin”* (1 John 1:7), *“having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him”* (Romans 5:9). Amen.

Thoughts? _____

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Willingly Deluded—Part 3

“You felt secure in your wickedness and said, ‘No one sees me,’ Your wisdom and your knowledge, they have deluded you” (Isaiah 47:10a).

While in college, I met a lot of “good” people and everyone I met told me that people “are generally good.” Why is it then, I wondered, that “good” people do such bad things? The Fall in the Garden opened man’s mind up to evil influences and ever since, *“the intent of man’s heart is evil from his youth”* (Genesis 8:21a). Mankind hasn’t changed in all the millennia. Evil is always boiling in the heart of man, regardless of the “good face” put on the outside, but the restraining power of the Holy Spirit prevents this evil from boiling over into the world all at once, until He is removed and the Tribulation begins (2 Thessalonians 2:7). You see, the Light of Christ is in the world and it shines into the darkness, convicting the world of its sin, by showing it for what it is (John 16:8). Yet, there is still darkness here, and the evil in men’s hearts boils out into it. Jesus will put an end to this when He returns to rule the earth in His Light.

Today, however, this evil “boils over” into the physical world whenever an opportunity to “get away with it” presents itself. Society can restrict the opportunities for evil acts with justice and laws so that the specific sins may be more difficult to execute, but given the right conditions, mankind won’t be able to help themselves. A simple example is that of a thief who breaks in and steals people’s livelihoods at night. Darkness affords him the protection (the cover) he feels he needs so that his crime will not be seen and he will not be

caught. He hides the evidence of his crime and then returns to put on his “normal” and “good” life during the day, so that no one will suspect the evil deeds he has committed under the covering of night. But what if he has no opportunity? Suppose, for example, every home in the town has a guard-dog. This might deter him from stealing for many years, but then when one of the dogs dies, he seizes the opportunity and breaks in and steals, *“for out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, slanders”* (Matthew 15:19). You see, the intent of his heart all those years was to steal, but he did not find an opportunity to do so without getting caught, so he was a “good” man to his family, community, and church, but when the right delusion came along, he showed his true heart: *“the evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth what is evil; for his mouth speaks from that which fills his heart”* (Luke 6:45b). This is why you often hear it said, after someone commits a crime, “I can’t believe he did it! He was such a good neighbor!” Without the Holy Spirit, mankind’s “goodness” is only skin deep. Jesus warned them, *“You are those who justify yourselves in the sight of men, but God knows your hearts”* (Luke 16:15a).

Mankind is always seeking (or at least waiting) for a justification to come along for them to feed their flesh. Any excuse will do. These excuses are delusions. Throughout history we see examples of “good” people using excuses to justify their “evil” actions. From the Nazi soldiers who “just followed orders,” to the Muslim who kills in “God’s” name, to the “Christian” who walks into sin under a false teacher. All of these pour out the lusts stewing in their hearts when they feel the right excuse, the right darkness, comes along for them to be “justified” beneath it. These excuses are the delusions God allows man to fall under to reveal the sin in their hearts (intent is sin— Matthew 5:28) so they are without excuse. Amen.

Thoughts? _____

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Every High Thing

“But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves” (James 1:22).

Few concepts in the Western Church today are more difficult to understand than Idolatry. This may be because most of the Scriptural passages concerning idolatry are in reference to statues made of wood, stone, or gold that people bowed down to and worshiped in temples. As a result many Christians in the west have a tendency to dismiss idolatry as an “old” world problem that only persists with the “old” religions of India, Japan, and Africa.

Yet, physical idols are more than just representations of divinities to be worshiped—they represent world views, enshrine life-teachings, and justify “desirable” practices under the oversight of religious institution. Baal worship, for example, was a promotion of every unclean sexual lust, under the “cover” of a societal institution—child sacrifice being the solution for the “unintended” consequence of this behavior. People honoring Baal, spent their livelihood supporting an organization in order to legitimize the ungodly lusts sanctioned by it. This false teaching was openly mixed with the worship of God, yet Israelites who honored Baal still claimed to be God’s people. God left no room for this “double-mindedness” when He commanded them to “*love the LORD your God with ALL your heart and with ALL your soul and with ALL your might*” (Deuteronomy 6:5). All doesn’t mean “mostly.”

God cares what we are devoting our lives to—what we honor with our time, money, energy,

desires, and thought life. Many Christians hear the words of God, but delude themselves with reasons and excuses to avoid giving up the idols they hold dear in their lives.

What is an idol, then? A life-style, money, a person, a dream—anything in our lives that we prioritize before God and His word. Anything we do or don’t do knowing God says differently is idolatry, for “*insubordination is as iniquity and idolatry*” (1 Samuel 15:23a), including partial compliance with God’s commands. Idolatry is honoring “something” as much or more than God. We honor by giving our time, our money, our energy, and our obedience—by being “alive” to something, “*therefore consider the members of your earthly body as dead to immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed, which amounts to idolatry*” (Colossians 3:5)—death means no longer responsive to the world. This is not always easy for us because we often come alive to old habits and desires as we walk God’s road of sanctification, yet, “*no temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it. Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry*” (1 Corinthians 10:13-14). How do we flee from idolatry? How do we deal with the temptations that try to gain entrance into our hearts and minds? By “*casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ*”

(2 Corinthians 10:5 KJV). We are to hide nothing from Jesus, and our members must be completely alive to Him. Jesus must be our closest friend, always present, to whom we share everything. He must be foremost in our hearts and minds so that whatever we think about, He is there, present with us, and we give it over to Him, so that “*whether, then, you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do it to the glory of God*” (1 Corinthians 10:31). Amen.

Thoughts? _____

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Keep Watch and Pray

“Surely as a woman treacherously departs from her lover, so you have dealt treacherously with me, O house of Israel,’ declares the Lord” (Jeremiah 3:20).

Many people attend Church and take Christ’s name as their own—they go through the motions and may even love Him, but they are not satisfied by His love and secretly long for something different, something more. Over 70% of Americans identified themselves as followers of Jesus in 2012, yet sin pervades our culture. How is that possible if they truly are followers of Him? Christians today treat their relationship with Jesus the same way they treat their marriages. Is it a coincidence that nearly half of the American population has also been divorced? A people faithless in their human relationships cannot be faithful to God. Idolatry is the spiritual equivalent of adultery.

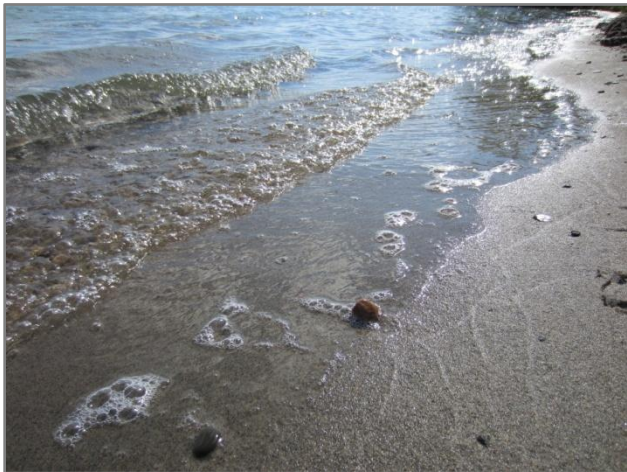
Throughout His Word, God uses the picture of marriage as the picture of His relationship with Israel, *“for your husband is your Maker...Who is called the God of all the earth”* (Isaiah 54:5). God bound them to Himself in covenant, a *“covenant which they broke, although I was a husband to them,” declares the Lord*” (Jeremiah 31:32). Christ’s relationship to the Church is also illustrated this way (Ephesians 5:25-27). Why did God use marriage as a metaphor for His relationship with each of us? Marriage by its very nature is the most intimate relationship God gave to mankind. It begins in a pledge of faithfulness and love to live as if we are ONE forever—to always be PRESENT for each other regardless of the circumstances. The only thing that can break this bond on earth is death. How does it happen then

that some marriages end before death? Marriage requires faithfulness and presence (time, energy, and love) to survive, let alone thrive. Many things can intervene in a marriage and cause problems by preventing our presence going to our partner. Anything that comes between a husband and wife can threaten their marriage. If this something is someone else, it is called adultery. Jesus said, *“Everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart”* (Matthew 5:28). Intent or even desire to “cheat” is adultery before God.

As in marriage, our relationship with Jesus isn’t healthy and happy just because we once gave ourselves to Him. Just like married couples who have adulterous thoughts about other people or plan a life without their partner, idolatry endangers our relationship with God. Jesus told His disciples to *“keep watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation”* (Matthew 26:41a). In other words, “keep up the relationship, so you don’t get into trouble.” Many Christians today don’t bother keeping a watch on their hearts. Distractions consume their lives. They watch movies and TV, surf the internet, listen to music, go out with “friends,” hang out, drink, etc. Every moment is exercised “Broadband Jamming” God, filling their lives with “business” or “other pleasures” instead of prayer and conversing with Jesus—unsatisfied with His Love. *“You adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God”* (James 4:4), whether you dabble in sins, taking Jesus for granted, or harbor a “secret” life in parallel to their life with Christ. No human marriage would survive this double-mindedness, and it is only by the grace of God that their relationship with Him does not fail. May the love and faithfulness of Jesus be more than satisfying in our lives. Amen.

Thoughts? _____

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You Shall Not Die

“But the serpent said to the woman, ‘You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil’” (Genesis 3:4-5).

Satan, through the serpent, promised that the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (the ability to decide what is good and what is evil for yourself) would make Adam and Eve divine and they would not die—they would become like God and would live forever. The serpent guaranteed forbidden knowledge would make them “godlike.” He put their destiny into their own hands—“you can make yourselves like God.” Adam and Eve discovered the hard way that the serpent’s promise was not one he could keep. They learned that they could not make themselves like God, and they suffered the consequences of falling from Eden and earning death—the exact opposite of what they hoped to achieve.

How sad today that the devil is convincing an ever growing percent of the world that through their increasing knowledge and wisdom, they will not die, and they will become like God. This great delusion is growing in many sectors of the scientific community and culture. Collectively it has come to be known as Transhumanism—the endeavor to transcend the limits of what makes us human to become godlike with the knowledge and technology we acquire, extending life-spans, overcoming death, and empowering ourselves with superhuman enhancements. It is the promise of “superman”—to become a god like in classic mythology and maybe even “the god.” Sound

familiar? In essence it is the same promise the serpent gave Adam and Eve, just packaged a little differently.

The truth is that the serpent’s promise was not his to make, but God’s. The great irony is that God’s plan all along has been that mankind should not die and that they should be “like” Him. The difference is in the “how” of the matter. Rather than leave mankind toiling to overcome death in futility, *“God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him **should not perish but have eternal life**”* (John 3:16). Only God can overcome death. His promise of eternal life comes from Eternity—therefore, it alone is justifiable. He sent His Son from eternity to accomplish on earth what we can never do, and then He offered it to us as a free gift if we but acknowledge His power alone to save us and accept Him as Lord of our lives (our obligation). What is more, if we believe on Him, *“we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when He appears **we shall be like Him** because we shall see Him as He is”* (1 John 3:2). Through Jesus, God offers us adoption as His children to be joint heirs with Jesus. We will be like Him, not because of anything we have done, but because He loved us and saved us from death in sin, and He will glorify us even as He is glorified (Romans 8:17).

So the choice before mankind is simple: repeat history by trusting in the promises of the devil that we can make ourselves like God, or trust in the promise of God through Jesus Christ that God will make us like Him, if we acknowledge our inability to save ourselves and put our faith in Him to accomplish what we cannot. Unfortunately, mankind seems dead set on falling for the same con that cost us Eden in the first place—this time losing life for eternity. We who are Believers can rest secure in the promise of Almighty God that through His Son, we will receive eternal life and be where He is. Even so, Amen.

Thoughts? _____

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Wait Not for the Human Spirit

“But as for me, I will watch expectantly for the Lord; I will wait for the God of my salvation. My God will hear me” (Micah 7:7).

Someone who doesn’t wait on the Spirit of God for Salvation waits on some other spirit—perhaps the spirit of Allah, Krishna, Buddha, or even Humanity. Those who wait on the “human spirit” are called humanists, and so Humanism is the “religion of humanity,” as the humanist Thomas Paine put it. They long for the human spirit to overcome its circumstances, celebrating human triumph and accomplishment “without” the aid of any god. Or as humanist George Elliot put it, “the idea of God...is the ideal of goodness, entirely human (i.e., an exultation of the human).” God then to them is a symbol of what humanity at its best aspires to be, and worship of God is a yearning for what we will one day make ourselves. This is why many humanists “tolerate” generic faith and may even practice a religion, though they oppose faith that is “exclusive.”

Our world has always had humanists, but the reality of death and the uncertainty beyond has kept their triumph in check. As death ends each human life, the only benefit humanists get out of life is to encourage humanity in its sad estate and work tirelessly for it to survive and thrive “as a species”—thereby its unquenchable collective “spirit” continues. This is a pretty glum outlook on life, but still they pour their energies into the sciences and the arts to give meaning to that life. Death, however, ends each individual’s quest, and they will not admit Solomon’s conclusion that a life dedicated to the human spirit is a life of vain futility (Ecclesiastes 2-3). Humanists have only

ever shook their fists at death and dreamed of one day overcoming it—a dream cherished for ages, till the dawn of the 21st Century made it a “real” possibility. Technology has given them what they believe is a fighting chance to realize this dream. This possibility has given rise to “Transhumanism.” With death rescinded, human potential is unlimited, which is why “trans-” means “beyond,” therefore, we see the rise of those who trust in something achievable beyond crippled humanity. They believe mankind’s knowledge will finally accomplish salvation for itself from death and powerlessness (the effects of its own sin).

Transhumanism is the long awaited hope of humanism. Philosopher Zoltan Istvan writes that Transhumanists are to “attempt to do everything possible... to overcome human death and aging within 15-20 years—a goal an increasing number of leading scientists think is possible,” striving “to achieve omnipotence as expediently as possible.” Eternal Life and Omnipotence (all-powerfulness) is God’s sovereign territory, but like Lucifer, Transhumanists believe, “*I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God...I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High*” (Isaiah 14:13-14). Thus the spirit that directs them is the spirit of Lucifer who looked to his own strength to accomplish what he desired: to make himself like God—all-powerful and eternal. Their fall will be like his.

As Believers, we know any attempt to make ourselves like God will only end in great Tribulation—a new Fall of man into eternal separation from the life and power that only comes from God. This is why **we wait on the God of our Salvation**, Jesus Christ, to transform us from our fallen state by His grace through the glory of His resurrection into eternal life to be like Him where He is. All the days of our struggle, we wait on God for our change (Job 14:14-22). Even so. Amen.

Thoughts? _____

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Thankful in ALL Things

“Always giving thanks for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God, even the Father” (Ephesians 5:20).

Giving thanks to God can be a challenge for us in our walk through this life. It’s hard enough to remember to thank Him sometimes for the good things we receive in our lives, but what about the hard and difficult things that are thorns in our flesh? In Ephesians, Paul instructs us to give thanks always for ALL things, not just the good ones. He echoes this later by saying, *“In everything give thanks; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus”* (1 Thessalonians 5:18). This is a hard teaching—all the harder on our “Job days.”

During Job’s terrible ordeal, he looked to God and said, *“Though He slay me, I will hope in Him. Nevertheless I will argue my ways before Him”* (Job 13:15). Job did not turn away from God, but he also wasn’t thankful for the change his life had taken, and he wanted to argue his case to God—who among us wouldn’t? It can be hard to remain thankful to God when we are suffering, because we know He can stop our pain and our suffering—the scrapes, bruises and blood loss of life. Why does God lead us through hellish experiences and then command us to sing His praises? Would we not rather be like Job and bring our frustrated question marks before God, seeking justification and restoration? Yet even in our toughest trials we are commanded to devote ourselves *“to prayer, keeping alert in it with an attitude of thanksgiving”* (Colossians 4:2). Thankfulness in bad times is important to God.

We are taught to give thanks to acknowledge blessings we receive in this life. And we are called to do so throughout Scripture, because thanksgiving for earthly blessings is an acknowledgement of God’s provision, but this thanksgiving lasts only so long as the earthly blessing. It passes away just as the Earth is passing away—we are thankful for food today, which may be gone tomorrow. Will we still pray our prayer of thankfulness at an empty table with no food to eat? If we only thank God when He provides us what we “need,” then our thanksgiving isn’t a sacrifice. A sacrifice is difficult, even painful to make—it costs us something. And so God says, *“He who offers a sacrifice of thanksgiving honors Me”* (Psalm 50:23a). A Believer’s thankfulness needs to reflect the nature they will inherit—eternity. If all else turns sour in our lives, we must joyfully sacrifice thanksgiving for our Salvation from eternal death to eternal life in Jesus Christ. As Paul cries, *“Thanks be to God that though you were slaves of sin, you became obedient from the heart...and having been freed from sin, you became slaves of righteousness”* (Romans 6:17-18).

Slaves know the powerlessness of their situation. They cannot save themselves and they cannot change their situation. They can only be resentful or thankful for their circumstances. If we have our eyes fixed on eternity, then we can be thankful to God, always and forever, regardless of our condition. This is a thankfulness that can bear the weight of our prayers over everyday pains, wretchedness, and sorrow, even if they are unanswered all our lives. In this way we can say, *“though He slay me, yet will I hope in Him”* without arguing our ways to Him. So often we think too little of our salvation, but this is the sum of everything we are now and forever; therefore, *“I will give You thanks forever, because **You have done it**, and I will wait on Your name, for it is good, in the presence of Your godly ones”* (Psalm 52:9). Let us be forever thankful to God, for HE HAS DONE IT! Amen.

Thoughts? _____

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Trust God, Test the Spirits

“Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: when His mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 1:18).

We often brush over the immense weight of this verse at Christmas time. Mary, a young woman in occupied Israel, began to show that she was pregnant before she was married. To the Jews this meant she could only have violated God’s Law by committing immorality, and she deserved death. If Mary’s situation had come before an Elder, he would have likely taken her outside the city to be stoned. Any Jew would have been “justified” to carry out this sentence on her for the intolerable sin of violating God’s Word.

Mary would have grown up having this Law drilled into her, so she was perplexed when *“the angel said to her, ‘Do not be afraid, Mary; for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name Him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David; and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and His kingdom will have no end’”* (Luke 1:30-33). Was God’s messenger asking Mary to break God’s Law, for she was not yet married? So, *“Mary said to the angel, ‘How can this be, since I am a virgin?’”* (Luke 1:34). Like the Apostle John, she knew she should *“not believe every spirit, but [she should] test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out*

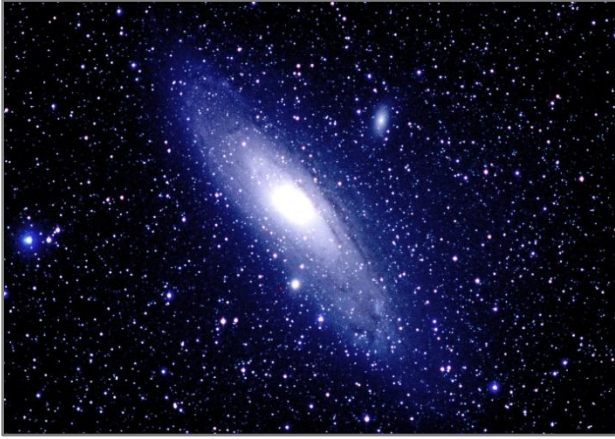
into the world” (1 John 4:1). Before she agreed to do anything in the name of God, she wanted to know how the angel’s words lined up with GOD’S WORD. People readily take the words of church “gurus” as God’s Word on a whim today without an angel’s encouragement. Mary showed discernment by testing an angel’s word against God’s Word. *“The angel answered and said to her, ‘The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for that reason the holy Child shall be called the Son of God’”* (Luke 1:35). Mary had likely heard these very words preached in her synagogue from the Prophet Isaiah: *“The Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she will call His name Immanuel”* (Isaiah 7:14). This put her mind at ease that the angel was from God and that this divine pregnancy would not break God’s Word but actually confirm it.

Unfortunately, no one else heard the angel, so Mary’s family, friends, and neighbors could only assume she had broken God’s Word as her pregnancy showed. Who would believe her defense that the child she carried was God’s own Son? Think of the fear and worry Mary could have had at this prospect. Even if she avoided death, she would be seen as a sinner and a shameful woman. She would lose her reputation in her community, and her family would be devastated. Mary, knowing how the world would see her, accepted the Lord’s plan and trusted Him. It would have been easier to tell the angel, “That’s God’s plan? No thanks! I’ll lose my reputation, family, and betrothed over this! Has God thought this out? I’d be killed as a sinner!” Instead, Mary put her reputation and life unreservedly in God’s hands, trusting Him with her whole self. *“And Mary said, ‘Behold, the bondservant of the Lord; may it be done to me according to your word’”*

(Luke 1:38a). May we also test the things we see and hear by God’s Word, and may we trust God with our whole selves. Amen.

Thoughts? _____

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Believe the Word of the Lord

“Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what had been spoken to her by the Lord” (Luke 1:45).

When we hear the word of the Lord, do we believe? Do we hold fast the promises God has given us? After Mary committed herself to God’s will, she could have become afraid about the possible suffering that lay before an unwed, pregnant woman in Nazareth.

But clearly the promises of God were nearer her heart, just as He had said to Israel, *“Do not fear, for I am with you; do not anxiously look about you, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, surely I will help you, surely I will uphold you with My righteous right hand”* (Isaiah 41:10). Mary believed God would fulfill His Word. His promises must have encouraged her to face the trials ahead—what trials they would be! She was the bearer of the savior of the world, yet treated as a wicked woman by “righteous” people—what a miscarriage of justice! Little did she know that God’s Son inside her would bear this same injustice in a way she could not imagine. Though He had no sin in Himself, Jesus would die wrongly accused of being a sinner, criminal, and blasphemer—all to save the “righteous” from their sins. Before His death and resurrection, Jesus warned His disciples that obeying God’s Word would mean distress at the hands of people believing they did God a service (John 16:2).

Mary obeyed God, calling herself the “bondslave” of the Lord (Luke 1:38), emptying herself (her ambition, desires, will) all her life for God’s will, even if it meant distress or death. She did not yet know that in doing so, she was imitating

God’s Son inside her who *“emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross”*

(Philippians 2:6-8); *“therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children; and walk in love, just as Christ also loved you and gave Himself up for us”* (Ephesians 5:1-2a). Yet, in this walk, we often need support, and God knows this. He has provided the Body of Believers to encourage and support one another in His Church (1 Corinthians 12). Mary needed encouragement, but no one around her yet believed God’s Word. She left her family and friends in a hurry to visit her cousin Elizabeth—the only other person she knew who was encountering the power of God in their life. She probably went hoping to find a fellow “bondslave” of God—a Believer of His Word. Was Mary uneasy? If she told Elizabeth about the Word she had received from God, would Elizabeth believe or would she doubt?

As soon as Mary said hello, Elizabeth cried by the Holy Spirit, *“how has it happened to me that the mother of my Lord would come to me?”* (Luke 1:43) What support for Mary! She had found the encouragement she needed in the fellowship of a Believer. Perhaps in this little miracle, she recalled God’s promise to Israel: *“The Lord is the one who goes ahead of you; He will be with you. He will not fail you or forsake you. Do not fear or be dismayed”* (Deuteronomy 31:8). God had gone ahead of Mary and prepared His way. Mary cried, *“My spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior...The Mighty One has done great things for me”* (Luke 1:47, 49).

May we, like Mary, believe that there will be a fulfillment of the Word of God that He has given us. Let us hold fast the promises of God, none more than our salvation in Jesus Christ and His imminent return to remove us from a world destined for God’s wrath. Amen.

Thoughts? _____

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Communion with God

“Since the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same, that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil” (Hebrews 2:14).

Communion is “a close relationship with someone or something - an act of **sharing**” - Merriam Webster. God took communion with man’s suffering in the birth, life, and death of Jesus; we have communion in Jesus’ suffering as His Church; and we long for our future communion with Christ in His glory.

The Son of God, Jesus Christ, left the eternal realm of His Heavenly Father, and entered our sin stricken world as an infant. As God, Jesus had no sin inside Himself – no unrighteousness to add to the sins of the world; as man, He experienced the terrible effects of sin from a fallen, sinful world. In Isaiah, we see the Messiah was prophesied to be a man of sorrows and suffering—one who endures the full weight of sin in the world: cold, heat, hunger, thirst, sickness, injury, abuse, age, and death. In becoming a man, Jesus shared in the sufferings we experience because of sin. He bore the same burden we bear. As Emmanuel (God among us), God took communion with man’s fallen estate, though He Himself produced no sin to add to it, and He died in the place of all men for their sins: *“For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin. Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need”* (Hebrews

4:15-16). At the Last Supper, Jesus acknowledged the communion of God with men in the sharing of the bread and the cup—in remembrance of God’s share in the sufferings of man in the flesh and blood of man and sacrificing that very flesh and blood for the Salvation of everyone who believes and obeys Jesus as Lord.

Communion is also our coming together as a Body of Believers to acknowledge our share in Christ’s sufferings while in the world. He came to partake in man’s sufferings, and as Believers, we take part in His sufferings, for as Jesus was without sin, so we have turned away from a life of sin to follow Him. So, in this life, we share in His betrayal, persecution, abandonment, and all manner of wrath that the world poured on Him in its hatred of Him. We endure the same for our communion with Him. As He suffered for our sakes, so we suffer for His name’s sake: *“Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of His glory you may rejoice with exultation. If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you”* (1 Peter 4:12-14), *“that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead”* (Philippians 3:10-11).

A final aspect of our communion with Christ is to rejoice in our future share of His glory and power, through the promise of His resurrection and rapture, that in like manner we too will rise into the heavens when He comes again and we will be in communion with Him where He is for all eternity as *“heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him”* (Romans 8:13). May we be *“found in Him”* (Philippians 3:8-9). Amen.

Thoughts? _____

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Ownership of the Truth?

“Be devoted to one another in brotherly love; give preference to one another in honor” (Romans 12:10).

Jesus is the Truth. In Him alone is all the knowledge of God. Some Christians not only believe the truth can be fully known here on earth, but that they have ownership of it. Correct doctrine is important, but what happens when people believe their doctrine is *the* truth to the point they withhold brotherly love to Believers who do not fully agree with them?

Paul declared we are known by the Truth, but we do not fully know Him yet, for “*we know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge makes arrogant, but love edifies. If anyone supposes that he knows anything, he has not yet known as he ought to know; but if anyone loves God, he is known by Him*” (1 Corinthians 8:1b-3), “*for we know in part and we prophesy in part; but when the perfect comes, the partial will be done away. When I was a child, I used to speak like a child, think like a child, reason like a child; when I became a man, I did away with childish things. For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I will know fully just as I also have been fully known*” (1 Corinthians 13:9-12). Here Paul compares a Believer’s reasoning to a child’s understanding.

Does this mean we should sacrifice all doctrine or accept any doctrine for the sake of “love?” Of course not! There is no room for doctrine that perverts the Word of God, the Gospel of Jesus Christ, for Paul says, “*if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to*

what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed!” (Galatians 1:8) and this is the Gospel: “*He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him*” (John 3:36), for “*if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation*” (Romans 10:9-10).

Paul warns against complicating the simplicity of the Gospel (2 Corinthians 11:3-4), but we vain mortals try to take ownership of the truth by promoting our piece of the “truth”—doctrines that create divisions across the Church. It is this pride that is wounded by other Believers who, like us, believe they also have ownership of truth, when in fact it is God who has ownership of all Believers in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. If we lose love for our Brother over this, we risk a greater sin: “*Anyone who does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor the one who does not love his brother*” (1 John 3:10b), for “***If I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. Love is patient, love is kind and is not jealous; love does not brag and is not arrogant, does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered, does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails; but if there are gifts of prophecy, they will be done away; if there are tongues, they will cease; if there is knowledge, it will be done away...But now faith, hope, love, abide these three; but the greatest of these is love***” (1 Corinthians 13:2-9; 13). Let us defend the simplicity of the Gospel with all diligence, devoting ourselves to brotherly love towards all Believers in all humility. Amen.

Thoughts? _____

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Standing for the Truth

“Those who continue in sin, rebuke in the presence of all, so that the rest also will be fearful of sinning” (1 Timothy 5:20).

There are times when we must confront a sibling in Christ and rebuke them. But when is that? When is it right to take a Brother aside and correct them? Perhaps when they use a “different” translation, hold a different Biblical doctrine, or don’t wear their Sunday best?

No, Scripture tells us that action should be taken when a Brother lives in **sin** and does not repent of it. Perhaps a Brother has treated someone badly, cheated, or lied without repenting. Maybe they contradict the Gospel, leading others astray with false teaching *“to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin”* (Hebrews 11:25b). False gospels are a curse (Galatians 1:8) and unrepentant sin must be addressed.

All humanity sins, but only Believers repent. When someone sins, they are laboring for their own death (Romans 6:23). If they do not repent, they prove their service to sin as its slave and are declaring themselves an enemy of God (James 4:4). *“Do you not know that when you present yourselves to someone as slaves for obedience, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin resulting in death, or of obedience resulting in righteousness?”* (Romans 6:16). Believers repent of sin because we have sacrificed our lives to be *“slaves of righteousness”* (Romans 6:18) to our master, Jesus Christ—no longer *“presenting the members of your body to sin as instruments of unrighteousness; but present yourselves to God as those alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God”* (Romans 6:13).

This is why Jesus said, *“Pay attention to yourselves! If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him, and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive him”* (Luke 17:2-5). *“If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector”* (Matthew 18:15-17). While God wants us to forgive, He does not want us to lay aside His Truth for the sake of getting along. Jesus said, *“Whoever does the will of My Father who is in heaven, he is My brother and sister and mother”* (Matthew 12:50) - “unity” is not worth more than Jesus.

Before we rebuke a Brother’s sin, what should be our attitude? The Love of God. Correction, reproof, or rebuke in the Church must occur from a place of love, respect, and patience for our Family and not from frustration, jealousy, irritation, displeasure, annoyance, or any other reason. Jesus tells us, *“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another”* (John 13:34-35). Love must be the reason we intervene. We are to *“put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony”* (Colossians 3:12-14). Even so, Amen.

Thoughts? _____

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Meditation?

“I will meditate on your precepts and fix my eyes on your ways” (Psalm 119:15).

Contemplative prayer and meditation is becoming more popular in the Church every day it seems. These teachings are dangerous because they are unbiblical: Scripture does not teach us to “hear” God’s voice through mantra-induced “mind voiding” that alters consciousness to bring understanding like eastern religions practice. Instead, Believers are to be wholly focused on Jesus and His Word with an active mind, body, and soul, “*continually devoting themselves to prayer*” (Acts 1:14). But the Bible talks about meditation, doesn’t it?

True scriptural meditation means simply to think on God’s Word and God’s nature. Often times, Scriptural meditation reminds people about Who God is—like Asaph: “*In the day of my trouble I sought the Lord...My soul refused to be comforted. When I remember God, then I am disturbed...I am so troubled that I cannot speak. I have considered the days of old, The years of long ago...I will meditate with my heart, And my spirit ponders: Will the Lord reject forever? And will He never be favorable again? Has His lovingkindness ceased forever? Has His promise come to an end forever? Has God forgotten to be gracious, Or has He in anger withdrawn His compassion?*” (Psalm 77:2-9).

Bad things were happening in Asaph’s life and he was questioning if God really is Who He says He is. Then Asaph remembered, “*the deeds of the LORD; Surely I will remember Your wonders of old. I will meditate on all Your work And muse on Your*

deeds. Your way, O God, is holy; What god is great like our God? You are the God who works wonders” (Psalm 77:12-14). Thinking of God’s true nature in the Word brought Asaph back to a correct understanding and back into prayer as he transitions from speaking about God to speaking to Him.

In another way, Paul advised the Philippians to meditate on the attributes of God because they were “*in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation*” (Philippians 2:15b). Immersed in the filth of their community, the Philippians may have found themselves distracted and relationally distant from Jesus, so Paul instructed them to “*think on*” His attributes: “*whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise*” (Philippians 4:8). Scriptural meditation is by no means a replacement for prayer, but an aspect of it. Christian prayer is not purely a mental nor emotional petition, but an intimate and personal “heart-to heart” conversation with God through His love.

As Believers, we have a deep, personal relationship with Jesus Christ, which Paul likened to two betrothed lovers preparing for marriage (2 Corinthians 11:2). The love of lovers is the deepest of all human relationships—it is a “giving” to each other of your whole self. We are not to keep anything back or hidden for ourselves—we bare our lives to each other. We adore, desire (long for), meditate on (think about), confess to, and petition our lover. Just so, prayer moves effortlessly between adoration, meditation, confession, petition, and desire. It comes from Love and “*we love because He first loved us*” (1 John 4:19b). Prayer is our personal “betrothal” conversation with Jesus, and He speaks to us through the Holy Spirit, filling us with the “*joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control*” (Galatians 5:22b-23a) of His love (Romans 5:5). Amen.

Thoughts? _____

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Seeing the Crown in the Struggle

“Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ’s sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Corinthians 12:10).

I’m sure there were a lot of healthy, wealthy, and “wise” teachers that people were comparing to weak, distressed, and difficulty-prone Paul. There is a tendency in the Church for us to view Believers who are struggling through difficulties as “problem” Christians or weak Believers. And those who struggle cannot help but look at their difficulties as failings when faced with their “potential.” We can be made to feel inferior to Christians who seem to have their act together when we reflect on what we “could be” or “could have been,” or how we “derailed” God’s plan in our lives.

Many Christians seem to feel that a life without difficulty equates to spiritual maturity while a life with difficulties means they’ve “got problems.” Perhaps their spouse is not a Believer, perhaps they struggle with something (an addiction, a difficulty), or maybe they have a health issue. Maybe they just need help and it makes them feel like second-class citizens in the Kingdom of Heaven. This is dangerously unhealthy as it pushes Believers to seek self-help, making no room for Sanctification—God’s process of molding and maturing us.

Just like Eliphaz, these Christians would join him in chiding Job that the innocent DO NOT suffer (Job 4), and they would have also shaken their heads at that Jesus from Nazareth who was

obviously “*stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted*” (Isaiah 53:4b). How dangerous this attitude is in the Church! In looking down on Believers who have struggles, they say “things would have been different if you only had made different decisions.” We should understand that a LACK of difficulties, trials, or “weaknesses” in someone’s life is entirely due to God’s purpose and is through no effort of their own. Trials are for our good in Christ (1 Peter 1:7). As Paul explained, it is the very struggles we go through as Believers in life that give glory to God through His sanctifying power at work in us by His Holy Spirit, molding us into an image of His Son.

In the molding process, there is friction between the hands of the potter (God) and the clay (ourselves) - if there was no pressure, the clay would not be shaped. We are the work of His hands (Isaiah 64:8). No matter our original shape, God uses everything we are to make us a vessel fit for the purpose He has for us. We are not to continue in sin but to reflect that the difficulties and struggles we go through are for God’s glory to be manifest in us through His Holy Spirit: “*We have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves; we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. For we who live are constantly being delivered over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh*” (2 Corinthians 4: 7-11). May we reflect that the very rewards and crowns Christ will give Believers are forged in the difficulties and trials we endure in life: “*It is a trustworthy statement: For if we died with Him, we will also live with Him; If we **endure**, we will also reign with Him*” (2 Timothy 2:11-12a). “*For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us*” (Romans 8:18). Amen.

Thoughts? _____

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Pride of the Early Morning Laborer

“Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with what is my own? Or is your eye envious because I am generous?” (Matthew 20:15)

Here, Jesus is sharing His parable about the Laborers in the Vineyard. Recall that the Master of the Vineyard hires some people early in the morning for a day’s wages. Later in the day, the Master hires more laborers for the same wages, even though they will only be in the field for a few hours compared to the others. This can be interpreted as a teaching about Believers who become Christians earlier in life than others—those that labor longer for the Faith. They may feel they have (or deserve) a better inheritance than a more recent convert, and they may contend at the end of the day that *“these last men have worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the scorching heat of the day”* (Matthew 20:12).

Similarly some Christians hold on to their “spiritual heritage” like it’s a pure-bred pedigree. Maybe they’ve been in the “Field” all their life, maybe their parents worked in the “Field” before them, or maybe all their children and grandchildren are Believers. Sometimes this creates a prideful sense of “ownership” and an attitude that the Church is “their house.” This attitude can make them look down on people who have come to Christ later in life, don’t come from Believing families, have unbelieving children, are married to non-believing spouses, or have just recently joined the Church. This condescension can cause us to scorn their testimony and not value their “labor,” while encouraging them to have a sense they are

“less worthy” in God’s House and not due respect from their “nobler” Brothers. This attitude is the flip-side of the coin to the young or immature Believer who spurns the labor of his “elders” as weakness or failure and thinks he can do a better job. How easily we all forget our complete reliance on Jesus for our Salvation! He alone through the Holy Spirit is what makes us grow, as Paul stresses when he says, *“I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth. So then neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but God who causes the growth. Now he who plants and he who waters are one; but each will receive his own reward according to his own labor. For we are God’s fellow workers; you are God’s field, God’s building”* (1 Corinthians 3:6-9).

The rewards are apportioned to labor, not time in the field or “heritage,” so just because a Believer was saved at 12 years old or comes from a long line of Believing relatives, he does not have a better standing than the Believer who accepted Christ in their 70’s. The labor’s value is determined by God, not by man. *“Now if any man builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each man’s work will become evident; for the day will show it because it is to be revealed with fire, and the fire itself will test the quality of each man’s work. If any man’s work which he has built on it remains, he will receive a reward. If any man’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire”* (1 Corinthians 3:12-15). And if God judges the labor, *“why do you judge your brother? Or you again, why do you regard your brother with contempt? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God”* (Romans 14:10), *“so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad”* (2 Corinthians 5:12b). May we look forward to that Day! Amen.

Thoughts? _____

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Differing in Gifts and Struggles

“But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ’s gift” (Ephesians 4:7).

All Believers inherit spiritual gifts, and we also all suffer in this life. This should not take us by surprise, for *“the Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him”* (Romans 8:16-17). For the Believer, the struggles we go through shape us. God is working our “clay” into a vessel for His use, *“for we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them”* (Ephesians 2:10). This working is part of the process of Sanctification. As Believers being sanctified, our lives become increasingly shaped for God’s specific purpose. His purpose correlates to our spiritual gifts, which differ greatly from one Believer to the next: *“Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, each of us is to exercise them accordingly”* (Romans 12:6a).

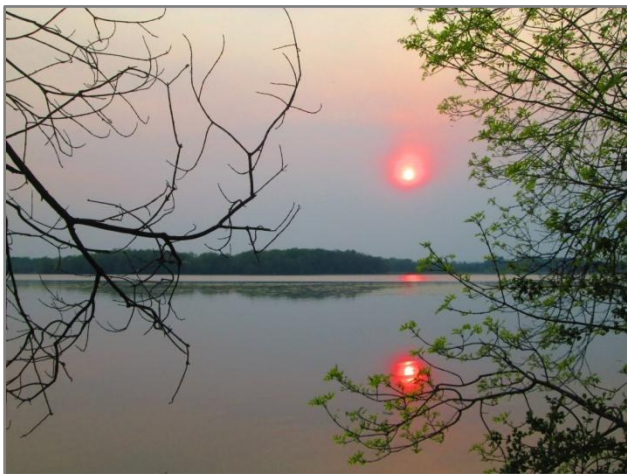
Therefore, when we employ our gifts and when we endure struggles and suffering, it is for God’s purpose (both now and for eternity). Our struggling and suffering can differ greatly from Believer to Believer, for God’s measure of grace in our Sanctification differs according to His purpose in our lives. We are not all given the same gifts and our vocations differ one from another, but we know *“from everyone who has been given much, much will be required”* (Luke 12:48b). Paul was given much and *“because of the surpassing*

greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me—to keep me from exalting myself! Concerning this I implored the Lord three times that it might leave me. And He has said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.’ Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me” (2 Corinthians 12:7-9). This is ENDURANCE. Now God alone knows the purpose He has for you in your life. The gifts you receive from Him and the struggles you go through complete His work in the world through you and prepare you for the work He has for you in eternity. None of us can know now what that is—it is in God’s mind, but just as we perform His good works now, we will also reign with Christ on the Earth: *“It is a trustworthy statement: For if we died with Him, we will also live with Him; If we endure, we will also reign with Him”* (2 Timothy 2:11-12a), for Jesus purchased *“men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation...to be a kingdom and priests to our God; and they will reign upon the earth”* (Revelation 5:9-10).

Our Sanctification involves our enduring the unique molding process God works in each of us for His purpose now and in eternity, as well as the application of our gifts as He would employ them in our lives. In this way, one person’s gift may be prophecy and they struggle with pride, while another may be gifted in mercy, and they struggle with their temper. One may never suffer loss in life, but another sees the funerals of their children. God’s work is His own, *“therefore do not go on passing judgment before the time, but wait until the Lord comes who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men’s hearts; and then each man’s praise will come to him from God”* (1 Corinthians 4:5). Amen.

Thoughts? _____

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Evil Came When I Expected Good

“When I expected good, then evil came; When I waited for light, then darkness came. I am seething within and cannot relax; days of affliction confront me” (Job 30:26-27).

In our lives, we all encounter affliction in the violence of events and illness and the actions and words of people. Job was afflicted by his physical ordeal, the pain of losing everything he had, and the words of his friends which wounded him. David also cried, *“I am afflicted and needy, and my heart is wounded within me”* (Psalm 109:22). Affliction can cause us to fear, not just during the affliction, but long afterwards. Past afflictions can cause our present behaviors in ways we may not even realize, because in our heart we fear future trauma (Greek. injury, wound), future death.

Trauma is caused by violence. Some people are more sensitive than others and can be injured by “simple” acts of violence (careless words, accusations, judgments, etc), especially when they are young, especially by people close to them. No matter what form of violence we fear for the future (embarrassment, judgment, betrayal, abuse, pain, or physical death), it is all sin. Sin is violence against God’s Law, devouring and destroying lives (Ezekiel 22:25-27). Our sin injures ourselves and others. All the works of sin bring forth death (Romans 6:23), both in those that sin in the flesh and those who are sinned against (wounded); *“therefore, since the children share in flesh and blood, [Jesus] Himself likewise also partook of the same, that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and might free those who through fear of*

death were subject to slavery all their lives” (Hebrews 2:14-15). Fear of injury and death makes us slaves in satan’s kingdom. He perpetuates his bondage in every generation through traumas, attacking our understanding of God’s Grace and God’s Love by trying to bring us evil when we expect good and confounding us with darkness when we expect the light, wounding us with unexpected “punishment” (like Job), making us fear future “judgment.” In this way, satan’s death can be woven into the Believer’s heart, making us doubt that *“we have come to know and have believed the love which God has for us. God is love, and the one who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him. By this, love is perfected with us, so that we may have confidence in the day of judgment; because as He is, so also are we in this world. There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves punishment, and the one who fears is not perfected in love. We love, because He first loved us”* (1 John 4:16-19).

Satan would have us question God’s nature. He wants us to be confused about the Truth: we are the beloved Children of God, freed from our bondage to the fear of death, *“for all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God. For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, ‘Abba! Father!’ The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God”* (Romans 8:14-16). *“See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!”* (1 John 3:1a). You and I need to KNOW in our hearts that ***“the Lord is for me; I will not fear; What can man do to me?”*** (Psalm 118:6) Jesus says to you and to me, *“peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid”* (John 14:27). Even so, Amen!

Thoughts? _____

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Viewing the World in the Spirit

“...the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God” (2 Corinthians 4:4b).

The Church today is highly secularized. Its view of the world around it has become less spiritual and more physical. In this way, it glances ever more frequently away from Jesus when looking for a reason for what is happening or for a solution to “real world problems.” The mantra of “God and Country” has confused many minds with dominionist teaching (Christ’s physical government on earth is being established by the Church). This is a lie—Christ is the one who will establish His Kingdom, we can do nothing. Yet, the Church labors to “change the world for Christ.” This is precisely how satan would have the Church behave. He has successfully distracted many Christians from coming to terms with the fact that the world is ruled by him, and no one but Jesus Himself is going to defeat him.

Satan is the god of this world who showed Jesus “*all the kingdoms of the world and their glory; and he said to Him, ‘All these things I will give You, if You fall down and worship me’*” (Matthew 4:8-9). Do we live our lives knowing that the world institutions are ruled by satan, until the time of his judgment? Jesus even told the church in Pergamum that they were living “*where Satan’s throne is*” (Revelation 2:13a). Do we understand that men are not our enemies, “*for our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places*” (Ephesians 6:12)? Satan’s government is not always easy to discern because it currently rules from the shadows. Why? Jesus

forced satan’s openly pagan rule underground (occult - secret, hidden, covered) with the Light of the Gospel. And the Holy Spirit restrains his evil intentions today like the governor on an engine. Satan cannot “throttle up” until the Church and Holy Spirit are removed in the Rapture. Yet, even at half throttle, he still runs the engines of government. God is in control, but He has allowed satan to rule the world during the Church age of His witness.

The point? We are to respect the authorities, for God has allowed them to rule, but we should not look to them for answers. Paul in his letter to the Galatians reminds them they once “*were slaves to those which by nature are no gods. But now that you have come to know God...how is it that you turn back again to the weak and worthless elemental things, to which you desire to be enslaved all over again?*” (Galatians 4:8-9) Paul here is comparing the Jewish ceremonial law to satan’s government, which ruled the Galatians before they became Christians. Similarly, we must realize we are turning back to slavery when we look to the world to solve our problems.

How do we respond to this reality? Should we be afraid? No. Jesus’ response was “*Go, Satan! For it is written, ‘YOU SHALL WORSHIP THE LORD YOUR GOD, AND SERVE HIM ONLY’*” (Matthew 4:10-11a). Jesus will defeat satan when He returns. In the meantime, we may suffer for serving Christ only, “*but in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord*” (Romans 8:37-39). Amen.

Thoughts? _____

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Including Christ in Your Everything

“Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:5 KJV).

It isn't always easy for us to include Jesus in our thought-lives, is it? Sacrifices of time and energy are demanded by everyone around us, but what about Christ? Paul tells us to *“present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect”* (Romans 12:1b-2).

Through the sanctifying, renewing of our minds, the Holy Spirit convicts us of thoughts and intents we must sacrifice to Christ. Many thoughts we have, however, can seem harmless and completely unrelated to Jesus, but they push Him out of our minds and distract us (things like daily “to-do” lists and spreadsheets detailing income and expenditures), and the eyes of the Church are secularized. Sometimes even things “biblical” can distract us from a pure devotion to Christ (perhaps a Biblical teaching we want to “get out there”). Each of us has different challenges submitting our thoughts to Christ, but we are to give Him “EVERY” thought. How often should we be *“fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God”* (Hebrews 12:2)? Always. “Fixing” doesn't mean “glancing,” it means “unwavering”—everything concerns God.

Some of us are immersed in countless “worldly” things we need to do daily, and our challenge may

be to even get a glimpse of Jesus when we are spending long hours at our studies, interacting with customers, managing our children's activities, or performing the daily work the world requires of us.

For others who spend time dwelling on God's Word and working things out, we may look in His direction, but is our vision in focus? Are our eyes fixed on Him? Do we lay down thoughts and ideas that move us out of a pure devotion to Christ and His Word? No matter our challenge, in everything we must endeavor to keep our focus on Christ and practice bringing Him our every thought—daily, hourly, and hopefully by the minute. How?

A dear loved one is always in the presence of our thoughts—always before our waking eyes, even as we are busy about our work. Just so, Paul would remind us, as he told the Corinthians, that he has *“betrothed you to one husband, so that to Christ I might present you as a pure virgin”* (2 Corinthians 11:2b). Here, Paul uses the analogy of marriage to help us understand the significance of our relationship with Jesus. Do we love Him? Maybe? Yes? No marriage is healthy where the spouses won't give themselves to each other in purity. Jesus has given His all to us, is it so much that we give Him what He desires?

When we hold things back from Him because they “don't have anything to do with Him,” we deceive ourselves—all things belong to Him! If we include His Word in our daily moments, our sight will be purified by the Holy Spirit: *“To the pure, all things are pure [and we come to see things from Eternity] but to those who are defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure, but both their mind and their conscience are defiled”* (Titus 1:15). May we labor to give Christ our “everything” because we love Him. He desires it of us. Amen.

Thoughts? _____

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The Accuser

“For the accuser of our brethren has been thrown down, he who accuses them before our God day and night” (Revelation 12:10b).

Just as satan accuses Believers before God day and night, he also accuses God before each of us: *“Now the serpent...said to the woman, ‘Indeed, has God said, “You shall not eat from any tree of the garden”?’”* (Genesis 3:1) From the beginning, satan has been accusing God before men: “Is God’s Word true?” - “Is God really good?” The devil is trying to get us to make ourselves God’s judge and declare Him guilty in our own minds. So many people today believe these lies and judge God unfaithful, unholy, and insincere, accusing Him before man. We’ve heard them say: “if there is a God, he wouldn’t cast anyone in hell” - “I want nothing to do with a judging God” - “how could a good God allow suffering?”

When God mentioned to satan how faithful Job was, *“Satan answered the LORD and said, ‘Skin for skin! Yes, all that a man has he will give for his life. However, put forth Your hand now, and touch his bone and his flesh; he will curse You to Your face’”* (Job 2:4-5). Satan accused Job before God of being insincere in his faith, and he asked permission to falsely accuse God before Job. He’s saying, “Let me give Job a reason to doubt You are a Holy God, incapable of evil, and he will reject Your name.” We see another example with David. All his life, God had protected him and given him His Word as a promise, but once he became king, *“Satan stood up against Israel and moved David to number Israel”* (1 Chronicles 21:1). David began to doubt God’s Word and took the protection and command

of the kingdom into his own hands by ordering a census.

Satan also accused God before Jesus: *“Then the devil...had Him stand on the pinnacle of the temple, and said to Him, ‘If You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down; for it is written “HE WILL COMMAND HIS ANGELS CONCERNING YOU”; and “ON their HANDS THEY WILL BEAR YOU UP, SO THAT YOU WILL NOT STRIKE YOUR FOOT AGAINST A STONE.”’* Jesus said to him, *‘On the other hand, it is written, “YOU SHALL NOT PUT THE LORD YOUR GOD TO THE TEST”’*” (Matthew 4:5-7). The devil was trying to twist God’s own Word to get Jesus to doubt God’s character and test Him. Jesus used God’s Word to defend God’s character, just as we must do in our lives.

We must continually acknowledge God’s true nature when we are faced with false teachings about His character, and also when the devil uses our struggles, illnesses, tragedies, losses, and pain to accuse God of “bringing us evil when He promised us good” and of “afflicting us for no reason.” In all situations, we must turn to God’s Word and listen to the Spirit who tells us that *“no one is good except God alone”* (Mark 10:18b), *“for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure,”* *“and we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose”* (Romans 8:28). For through Christ, we *“have tasted of the heavenly gift and have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come”* (Hebrews 4b-5). In this way, Believers *“overcame him [satan] because of the blood of the Lamb and because of the word of their testimony, and they did not love their life even when faced with death”* (Revelation 12:11). May we imitate Jesus and not doubt that God is who He says He is when we are tempted by the devil to question Him. Amen.

Thoughts? _____

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Who Decides What's Right and Wrong?

“Every man’s way is right in his own eyes, But the Lord weighs the hearts” (Proverbs 21:2).

In the Garden of Eden, satan (by the serpent) told Adam and Eve that if they but ate of the forbidden fruit, they would *“be like God, knowing good and evil”* (Genesis 3:5b). How would this knowledge make them like God?

In all creation, God was judge. He measured between the good and evil, right and wrong, light and dark—He determined what you could and couldn’t do. His judgments were to be obeyed without question, because He had made judgment. The temptation for Adam and Eve was the opportunity to “sit in God’s seat” and make their own decisions about what was right and what was wrong in their lives. They wanted to see as God sees and decide for themselves if they agreed with Him or not. They took the fruit and their eyes were unnaturally opened to see good and evil as “shuffle-able” quantities. Now Adam and Eve could *“call evil good, and good evil,”* and try to *“substitute darkness for light and light for darkness,”* and *“bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter!”* (Isaiah 5:20) What freedom, right?

But there were two problems with satan’s “gift” to mankind. First, “knowledge” without the ability to discern what is good means you just make bad judgments—your choices are evil. Neither Adam nor Eve were capable of judging good, because *“no one is good except God alone”* (Mark 10:18). The second problem was that “knowledge” without power is pointless. What good is it to say, “This is good,” if you don’t have the power to make it good? Evil is still evil. Only God could discern

“the light was good” and wield the power that *“separated the light from the darkness”* (Genesis 1:4). He alone has the power to hold everyone accountable to His judgment: *“He it is who reduces rulers to nothing, Who makes the judges of the earth meaningless”* (Isaiah 40:23), *“for God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil”* (Ecclesiastes 12:14). It was because they came under the power of God’s judgment that Adam and Eve hid themselves.

Just like Adam and Eve, their descendants today hate the idea of accountability to God. Like Adam and Eve, they want to decide what is “good” for themselves and be accountable to no one. How fitting that modern Satanism’s motto is “There is no law beyond do what you will”—this was satan’s booby-trapped “gift” to mankind. Now in this life, God *“sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous”* (Matthew 5:45b), so that if people desire to do evil, they can make it seem right in their own eyes, but after death *“comes judgment”* (Hebrews 9:27b) — God’s judgment. It is precisely because God claims the final word on what is good and evil that people don’t want to accept accountability to Him, because they love their “shuffle-able” ways (what God calls sin). This is why non-believers want anything other than God to judge what is right and wrong in their lives (science, government, political parties, social movements, themselves).

But Believers know that Christ alone *“will judge the world in righteousness; He will execute judgment for the peoples with equity”* (Psalm 9:8). When Believers repent of their sins and put their trust in Jesus, they acknowledge *“the Lord is our judge, The Lord is our lawgiver, The Lord is our king; He will save us”* (Isaiah 33:2). Jesus warned that *“he who rejects Me and does not receive My sayings, has one who judges him; the word I spoke is what will judge him at the last day”* (John 12:48). The Word of God judges all. Amen.

Thoughts? _____

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Desire Prophecy

“Pursue love, yet desire earnestly spiritual gifts, but especially that you may prophesy” (1 Corinthians 14:1).

Prophets were men and women upon which a spirit rested and gave them knowledge about the nature of things, whether past, present, or future. True prophets were inspired only by God’s Spirit while false prophets got their information or knowledge from deceiving spirits, demons, or themselves (Jeremiah 14:14).

Under the New Covenant of Christ’s blood, God’s Holy Spirit is poured out upon every person who believes and obeys Jesus (John 3:36 and 2 Corinthians 1:22). This is the same Spirit that God poured out upon individual prophets of old. While not every Believer is given prophecy as a gift of the Spirit, Paul earnestly encourages Believers to desire the gift of prophecy. Unfortunately, many Believers think prophecy is only visions of future events, and it is perhaps the most misunderstood gift of all the gifts of the Spirit. Paul says the *“one who prophesies speaks to men for edification and exhortation and consolation...one who prophesies edifies the church”* (1 Corinthians 14:3-4) and he stresses that *“prophecy is for a sign, not to unbelievers but to those who believe”* (1 Corinthians 14:22b). Biblical prophecy is for the building up of the Church by Holy-Spirit inspired edification, exhortation, and consolation through the Word of God. Peter tells us that Believers should pay attention to Biblical prophecy *“as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star arises in your hearts. But know this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture*

is a matter of one’s own interpretation, for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God” (2 Peter 1:19-21). God speaks in His Word, but it cannot be properly understood or applied to the situations in life without the Holy Spirit’s inspiration.

The gift of prophecy includes the mysteries and knowledge of God (1 Corinthians 13:2), which today are in His Word and revealed to Believers by the Holy Spirit. A large part of prophecy is the application of the Word of God through the Holy Spirit to any situation in life, for there is no “new” revelation outside of God’s Word. In this way, we too say, *“hear the Word of the Lord”* (Isaiah 66:5a) when we open the scriptures and apply His Word to the needs of the Church. This is different from teaching, because a teacher is passing on only what he has been taught without necessarily exhorting or consoling the Church under inspiration from the Holy Spirit.

Part of the knowledge God shares by the prophecies in Scripture is about future events. We would do well to pay attention to what He tells us about these things, which are for our edification, exhortation, and consolation NOW. It is a tragedy how many Believers avoid God’s knowledge of the mysteries to come, just as many in the modern Church also avoid the knowledge and mysteries He has revealed to us in His Word for our lives today.

Now *“Love never fails; but if there are gifts of prophecy, they will be done away”* (1 Corinthians 13:8a), for today *“we know in part and we prophesy in part; but when the perfect comes, the partial will be done away”* (1 Corinthians 13:9-10). Prophecy will cease when Jesus returns, for God will give us “all things” as a possession (Romans 8:32). For now, however, *“many false prophets have gone out into the world”* (1 John 4:1) and true prophets are needed in the Church to speak the Word of God in every situation, inspired by the Holy Spirit. Even so, Amen.

Thoughts? _____

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Speaking the Words of God

“I do nothing on My own initiative, but I speak these things as the Father taught Me” (John 8:28b NASB).

Jesus patiently explained that each and every word He spoke came from His Father and not Himself: *“He whom God has sent speaks the words of God; for He gives the Spirit without measure”* (John 3:34), *“for I did not speak on My own initiative, but the Father Himself who sent Me has given Me a commandment as to what to say and what to speak. I know that His commandment is eternal life; therefore the things I speak, I speak just as the Father has told Me.”* (John 12:49-50).

We who believe in Jesus and call Him Lord are to imitate Him (Ephesians 5:1-2), and we too have been given God’s commandment as to what to say and what to speak: *“Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may know the things freely given to us by God, which things we also speak, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, combining spiritual thoughts with spiritual words”* (1 Corinthians 2:12-13).

Have you ever stopped to consider how little of your speech is His Word and how much comes from yourself or other influences? This isn’t just preaching or teaching, this is all speech, and it isn’t just what we speak to others, it is what we tell ourselves as well. I find many of the words I harbor in my heart or speak aloud are my own—words of my own desires or of the world, not of Christ. What does that say about me? What is our testimony if the words we speak are not God’s Words? This is why Jesus asked the Pharisees

“how can you, being evil, speak what is good? For the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart” (Matthew 12:34b). The Pharisees claimed to be believers in God, but the words they spoke were not the Words of God and they revealed in words the sin they harbored in their hearts. We are to pay attention to what comes from our mouths, for it reveals the condition of our hearts. If people feel our speech is scornful, prideful, worldly, or abusive, we may be revealing these influences from the refuge we have given them in our hearts.

When confronted about our speech or behavior, our first instinct is often to “justify” ourselves. We may use experiences or stories to justify our actions, and as Believers, we may even go as far as stretching and bending the Words of God to “approve” our human thoughts and actions. In this way we serve ourselves instead of others, and we speak for our benefit, not for God’s glory. Peter went as far as to say, *“if anyone speaks, they should do so as one who speaks the very words of God”* (1 Peter 4:11a NIV). What a command! Do you speak your thoughts, instead?

This is our Testimony: *“having the same spirit of faith, according to what is written, ‘I believed, therefore I spoke,’ we also believe, therefore we also speak”* (2 Corinthians 4:13). Do you speak because you believe in Jesus and His Word or do you speak to justify and serve yourself? Our command: *“just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not as pleasing men, but God who examines our hearts.”* (1 Thessalonians 3:4). How aware are you of the words you speak (whether in your heart or aloud)? God is aware of all.

In everything, we should imitate Christ and His Apostles who said, *“we cannot stop speaking about what we have seen and heard”* (Acts 4:20). Can you? Let us pray that we are taught by the Holy Spirit to speak the Words of God whenever we speak. Even so, Amen.

Thoughts? _____

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There Are No Careless Words with God

“But I tell you that every careless word that people speak, they shall give an accounting for it in the day of judgment” (Matthew 12:36 NASB).

Many of us grew up on the maxim: “sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me.” Many Christians underestimate words, but the truth of the matter is that words do great good and they do great harm. As Believers, we know it is by words that the heavens and the earth sprang into existence from the mind of God—*“Then God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light”* (Genesis 1:3), for *“in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God”* (John 1:1). It is because of God’s Word that you are alive today and the earth orbits the sun. This Word was Jesus Himself and *“all things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being. In Him was life, and the life was the Light of men”* (John 1:3-4).

It was also by words that Adam and Eve were tempted and brought sin and death into creation: *“the serpent said to the woman, ‘You surely will not die!’”* (Genesis 3:4a). And it is by words that eternal salvation through the blood of Jesus Christ comes to all Mankind: *“faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ”* (Romans 10:17). Do you still think words are of little consequence? There is no such thing as a careless or thoughtless word with God—every word is purposeful for good to those who hear. Why do we who are the children of God give way to careless words, then? The answer of course is our sinful flesh nature, which causes us to seek our own good

at the expense of all else: *“he who speaks from himself seeks his own glory”* (John 7:18a) - glory at the expense of others. “Careless” is defined as “not giving sufficient attention or thought to avoiding harm or errors” (Google Dictionary). We can take other people’s needs and interests lightly when advancing our own interests or focusing on our own needs, *“for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also”* (Matthew 6:21). If we’re focused on ourselves, our interests come first in everything, even when we’re trying to help someone by giving them advice—who are we serving, then? If people feed and nurture their own interests, they become *“grumblers, finding fault, following after their own lusts; they speak arrogantly, flattering people for the sake of gaining an advantage”* (Jude 1:16) with no thought to the harm and errors they’re causing to people around them. What a contrast to Jesus who said, *“I do nothing on My own initiative, but I speak these things as the Father taught Me”* (John 8:28b).

Jesus never spoke a careless word. He never spoke to gain an advantage nor did He seek His own glory. In imitating Him, you are to make sure your *“speech always be with grace, as though seasoned with salt, so that you will know how you should respond to each person”* (Colossians 4:6), for *“the building up of one another”* (Romans 14:19), not ourselves. As Believers, we are to remember that *“whoever speaks, is to do so as one who is speaking the utterances of God”* (1 Peter 4:11a). How? - through the Holy Spirit Who speaks God’s Word to us (John 16:13). Therefore, before you speak, *“let the **word** of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God. **Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father”*** (Colossians 3:16-17). Amen.

Thoughts? _____

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What Seasoning Is in Your Speech?

“Let your speech always be with grace, as though seasoned with salt, so that you will know how you should respond to each person” (Colossians 4:6 NASB).

Everyone has different issues and needs that only God knows. We all have different joys, struggles, and traumas. God knows this. He created each of us and knows us better than we know ourselves. This is why we ought to only season our speech with the Words of God, which bring Life. Unfortunately, we often season our speech with our flesh (pride, skeptic-ism, judgment, frustration, correction, etc).

God did not leave Believers to themselves to understand the Words that He spoke by His Son, Jesus. He gave us the Holy Spirit, and it is only by the Spirit that each of us comes to the Truth. Jesus said God’s Truth was *“eternal life; therefore the things I speak, I speak just as the Father has told Me”* (John 12:50b), and He told His disciples *“I have many more things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth; for He will not speak on His own initiative, but whatever He hears, He will speak... He will glorify Me, for He will take of Mine and will disclose it to you”* (John 16:12-14). The Holy Spirit guides Believers into God’s Words—into His Truth. Yet, no man knows God as he is known by God—no one “owns” God’s Truth, *“for we know in part and we prophesy in part; but when the perfect comes, the partial will be done away...for now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I will know fully just as I also have*

been fully known” (1 Corinthians 13:9, 12). When we think we “own” God’s Truth, we don’t wait on the Holy Spirit—we respond to each person indiscriminately in our imperfect understanding of God’s Truth. Our pride in this imperfect knowledge puffs us up, for *“knowledge makes arrogant, but love edifies. If anyone supposes that he knows anything, he has not yet known as he ought to know; but if anyone loves God, he is known by Him”* (1 Corinthians 8:1b-3). The point of being a Believer is not to “own” God’s Truth, but to be known by Him and to wait on His Spirit. The goal of our speech is not to gain influence over people, nor to defend or justify ourselves, but to speak as the Spirit directs us the Words of God, *“furthering the administration of God which is by faith”* (1 Timothy 1:4b). If God knows you, you are not to *“worry about how or what you are to speak in your defense, or what you are to say; for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say”* (Luke 12:11-13). If we don’t wait on His Spirit, we’ll get tangled in “strange doctrines,” “mere speculation,” and “fruitless discussion” (1 Timothy 1:3-7).

Jesus said, *“I can do nothing on My own initiative. As I hear, I judge; and My judgment is just, because I do not seek My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me”* (John 5:30). We are not to judge things according to our knowledge, but according to what we hear from God, for even Jesus said to the Pharisees, *“I have many things to speak and to judge concerning you, but He who sent Me is true; and the things which I heard from Him, these I speak to the world”* (John 8:26). Jesus did not speak everything that He had a right to speak—He restricted Himself to the exact Words God gave Him to speak, so they would minister to the hearers exactly as God wanted them to.

May the Holy Spirit season our speech with grace, for only He knows how to respond to each person. *“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches”* (Revelation 2:29). That’s you and me! Amen!

Thoughts? _____

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How Do You Know?

“O Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to you, avoiding worldly *and* empty chatter *and* the opposing arguments of what is falsely called ‘knowledge’” (1 Timothy 6:20 NASB).

Have you ever stopped to consider just how much of what you “know” comes from what you hear? Are you aware of where your doctrines come from? There is very little in life that we know first-hand—the vast majority of what occupies our minds comes from others. For example, someone might ask you why the Sun rises, why it rains, or how a light bulb works, and you would likely say you “know,” but where did your knowledge come from? Have you toured space, hugged a cloud, or built a light bulb from scratch? Most likely not—you trust other people who claim to have done just that, and what they say to you seems believable. We take men’s words on faith, but out of the same men’s hearts come “*evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, slanders*” (Matthew 15:19) - not the most charming result from a background check, is it? Much of what we “know” about life is taken entirely on faith from what men of the world say, because we believe no one could get away with lying to us. For Believers, however, the only knowledge we TRULY know comes from God’s Word under the instruction of the Holy Spirit, for God “*cannot lie*” (Titus 1:2).

We should remember this when listening to news about things happening in Washington DC, China, or the Middle East—few of us can verify this testimony. We take it on faith, believing it is true because we are told they are “trustworthy”

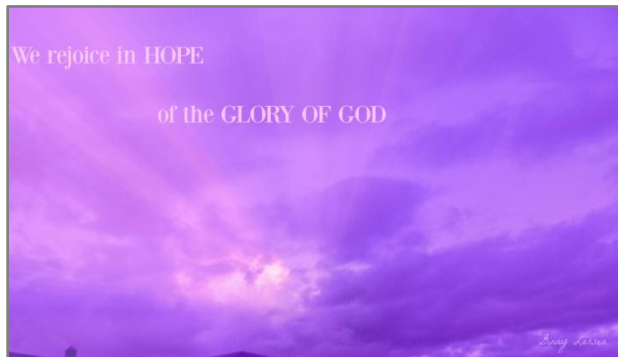
sources and how could they lie to so many people? How trusting of us! Throughout history conspiracies large and small have provided false knowledge to sway individuals and nations to certain actions.

As Believers, we need to look no further than the conspiracy in the Garden of Eden—here, the Serpent gave Adam and Eve false knowledge to bring a desired outcome. Adam and Eve believed what they heard because he seemed like a trustworthy source, and he told them something that seemed believable. The same spirit that spoke through the Serpent is speaking today through microphones, speakers, newspapers, internet, and TVs in the world he rules (John 12:31). Is he content with that? No, he even infiltrates the Church and speaks from the pulpit itself: “*From among your own selves men will arise, **speaking perverse things**, to draw away the disciples after them*” (Acts 20:30) —“*beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves*” (Matthew 7:15). A prophet is supposed to bear news from a trustworthy source, but what if that source isn’t trustworthy? —“*such men are false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. No wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light*” (2 Corinthians 11:13-14) — swaying people to act by their “knowledge.”

But true Believers are entrusted with knowledge from God having “*received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may know the things freely given to us by God, which things we also speak, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, combining spiritual thoughts with spiritual words*” (1 Corinthians 2:12-13). May we guard God’s Word and pay attention to what we open our ears to, testing “*the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world*” (1 John 4:1). Even so, Amen.

Thoughts? _____

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God Cannot Lie

“Into Your hand I commit my spirit; You have ransomed me, O Lord, God of truth” (Psalm 31:5).

As a child, there comes a moment when we realize the power of deception to shape the perception of reality to benefit ourselves. When people believe us, we shape their “reality”, influencing their actions to get what we want—*“he who utters lies is treacherous”* (Proverbs 14:25b). Every human being (scientist, politician, hairdresser) has lied in this life. We have all been treacherous and there is always a hint of doubt with what we say, regardless of what our credentials are.

Not so with God, for He cannot lie. He says He is *“the God of Truth”* (Isaiah 65:16). The wicked prophet Balam learned this when he asked God to undo His promise to Israel: *“God is not a man, that He should lie, Nor a son of man, that He should repent; Has He said, and will He not do it? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good?”* (Numbers 23:19) God will do what He promises, and He made promises to Israel and the Church, swearing by Himself, *“for men swear by one greater than themselves, and with them an oath given as confirmation is an end of every dispute. In the same way God, desiring even more to show to the heirs of the promise the unchangeableness of His purpose, interposed with an oath, so that by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have taken refuge would have strong encouragement to take hold of the hope set before us. This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, a hope both sure and steadfast and one which enters within the veil, where Jesus has entered as a forerunner for us, having become a high priest forever”* (Hebrews 6:16-20a).

Those who take refuge in God’s unbreakable

promise have *“the hope of eternal life, which God, who cannot lie, promised long ages ago”* (Titus 1:2-3a). And though time may drag on, God does not forget His promises, for *“the Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance”* (2 Peter 3:9). God is patient for those whose *“iniquities have made a separation between you and your God”* (Isaiah 59:2a). These are the unrepentant, separated from His truth, whom He desires to have *“truth in the innermost being”* (Psalm 51:6a). But we are all incapable of redeeming ourselves to God (compensating for our treachery), so God promised a redeemer, even Himself (Isaiah 59:20), who would compensate for those who turn from their iniquity. Jesus is that Redeemer—*“I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me”* (John 14:6).

But not everyone believes Jesus is the way to redeem themselves. They do not like Him because His truth convicts them of their sinful lusts and their wicked plans. They make Him their enemy: *“Have I become your enemy by telling you the truth?”* (Galatians 4:16) Paul asked the Galatians, echoing Jesus who said to the Pharisees, *“You are seeking to kill Me, a man who has told you the truth, which I heard from God”* (John 8:40a).

Jesus is *“the faithful witness”* (Revelation 1:5) to mankind. *“A truthful witness saves lives”* (Proverbs 14:25a) by telling it like it is. Jesus told mankind they were separated from God, and He showed them the way back to Him: *“Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life”* (John 5:24). Believe Him. He cannot lie. Amen.

Thoughts? _____

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Renouncing Underhanded Ways

“But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God’s word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone’s conscience in the sight of God” (2 Cor. 4:2 ESV).

While the angels in Heaven do nothing but the will of the Father, we fallen creatures have willful desires that wrestle against the will of God. God has a will and He has a plan: *“For the Lord of hosts has planned, and who can frustrate it? And as for His stretched-out hand, who can turn it back?”* (Isaiah 14:27). We also have wills that set plans in motion: *“Then the Pharisees went and plotted together how they might trap [Jesus] in what He said”*

(Matthew 22:15). Like the Pharisees, Believers sometimes dress up their will to look like God’s will, and they set it in motion using the disgraceful, underhanded tactics of satan himself, for he was the first of creation to set *his* will in motion (Isaiah 14:14). Just so, *“the scribes and the Pharisees were watching [Jesus] closely to see if He healed on the Sabbath, so that they might find reason to accuse Him”* (Matthew 26:59). Why? Because they had convinced themselves that He was a problem, and they were going to “deal with Him” to protect their “ministry”

It is our flesh nature to see “problems” around us. We easily see the “faults” or “needs” of other people, their families, or their churches, but rather than trust God’s sufficiency to deal with it, we often see in ourselves “God’s solution” to the “problem.” This appeals to our pride. “I know how to fix this,” we might think, like a young Pharisee named Saul who made himself believe he

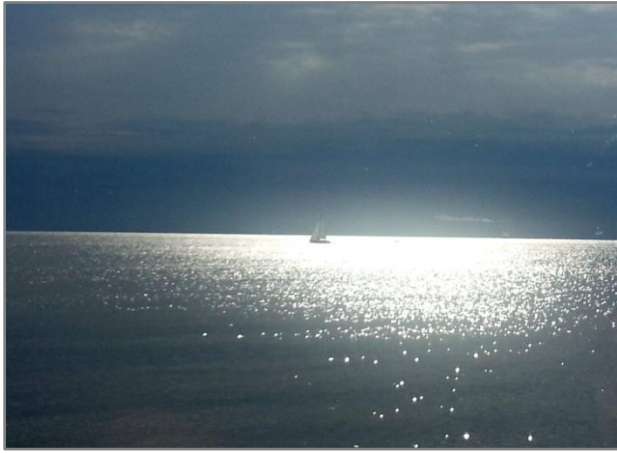
was doing God’s will, when he was really fighting Him.

There can be a danger when the labor of our witness or ministry feels fruitless or endangered and we feel we need to “do something about it.” But this presumes we know God’s plans in the situation. We so easily presume that what we want is what God wants—that the peace, strife, success, or abundance we want is His will. The danger is greatest here, because we act in our flesh when we should wait in the spirit, and vice versa. In so doing, we put satan’s methods into motion, and like him, we believe we are competent and sufficient for the task. This is an all-to-present temptation in the Church today, and almost daily we see churches falling into sin because people employ disgraceful, underhanded ways to get to the goals they tell themselves are God’s.

When we feel things aren’t how they should be, our approach should be that *“having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart”* (2 Corinthians 4:1), because it is God’s ministry through us and not our own—and He is sufficient where we can never be. This was Paul’s approach when he felt His mission to Troas was “unfruitful”, but he saw the sufficiency of God through the Holy Spirit: *“thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of Him everywhere...Who is sufficient for these things? For we are not, like so many, peddlers of God’s word, but as men of sincerity, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God we speak in Christ”* (2 Corinthians 2:14-17). Paul is saying no one could have planned it better. What people might have thought was a disastrous missions trip was exactly what God planned to spread the Gospel: *“Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God”* (2 Corinthians 3:4-5). Even so, Amen.

Thoughts? _____

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Take Heart in Discipline

“It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline?” (Hebrews 12:7 NASB)

Who can honestly say that they enjoy discipline? As children, we tried to get out of it as much as possible, because it was painful and “unpleasant.” People universally shun discipline because it is the result of doing something perceived as bad, wrong, or shameful. When we are not being disciplined, we think we are “good,” and if we deny the authority’s right to discipline us, then we are never “wrong.” This breeds self-righteousness and pride because we perceive ourselves as “not guilty” and “in the right.” This is why mankind has a tendency to hate discipline because it contradicts the self-serving impulses of the flesh and the boastful pride of life: *“To the wicked God says, ‘What right have you to tell of My statutes And to take My covenant in your mouth? For you hate discipline, And you cast My words behind you’”* (Psalm 50:16-17).

Opposing God’s discipline appeals to man’s pride because they don’t want to acknowledge that they answer to His judgment. The truth, however, is *“all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”* (Romans 3:23) *“as it is written, ‘There is none righteous, not even one; there is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God; all have turned aside, together they have become useless; there is none who does good, there is not even one’”* (Romans 3:10-12), *“and we know that the judgment of God rightly falls upon those who practice such things”* (Romans 2:2). The only way out from under God’s judgment is through Jesus Christ, who said, *“he who hears My word, and*

believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life (John 5:24) —*“to them He gave the right to become children of God”* (John 1:12a). The redeeming blood of Jesus adopts us into God’s family as His Children, but just like in parenting, it is His correction daily that matures us ever more to be like Him: *“For just as you presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness, resulting in further lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness, resulting in sanctification”* (Romans 6:19).

Unfortunately, we Believers tend to prefer appearing “good” over enduring God’s correction to make us more like His good Son. So often, we shun the discipline of the Lord because it “tortures” our flesh, reminding us that we are not righteous in ourselves. But when we do this, we are really hiding from His love: *“My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor faint when you are reprov’d by Him; for those whom the Lord loves He disciplines, and he scourges every son whom he receives”* (Hebrews 12:5b-6). This correction is between you and God the Father, not for us Children to “dish” out to one another.

Now, *“if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Furthermore, we had earthly fathers to discipline us, and we respected them; shall we not much rather be subject to the Father of spirits, and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but He disciplines us for our good, so that we may share His holiness. All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness”* (Hebrews 12:8-11). A Body disciplined in God’s holiness gives glory to Him because it imitates Him rather than seeking its own desires. Amen.

Thoughts? _____

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Are People Generally Good?

“For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23).

I was in college when God began to show me the truth of the Gospel that even if people seem to be living a good life *“both Jews and Greeks are all under sin; as it is written, ‘there is none righteous, not even one’”* (Romans 3:9b-10), *“for whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all”* (James 2:10). *“And we know that the judgment of God rightly falls upon those who practice such things”* (Romans 2:2).

Even if you have sinned only once in your life, or transgressed only “a little,” you are guilty of breaking the whole of God’s Law. So when people say, “I think I’ll go to Heaven because I’m a pretty good person and I’ve done more good than I have bad,” how do you respond to this? Well, a heart surgeon who’s saved the lives of hundreds of people will still be sentenced to death if he murders a homeless man. A just judge will not let him off if he says, “But Judge, I’ve done so much good in my life, doesn’t that outweigh the bad? My life is far more valuable than that man’s life!” He bears the guilt regardless. How much more then is our guilt in our sin before the truly Holy, sinless justice of God! Because He is infinitely righteous, no amount of limited righteous living can draw us near Him—we are always separated by an unbridgeable gap.

Sometimes, however, we may feel that there are people who are “better” than others, right? We put Adolf Hitler in the category of “really bad people,” and the unbelieving girl down the street who

you’ve never seen do anything bad as a “pretty good person.” Shouldn’t God make allowances? How can He sentence both to the same place of judgment in hell? Well, the capacity or potential for the worst kinds of sin are in us all. The difference between a deranged serial killer and a chronic cereal eater can be boiled down to three things: the Holy Spirit’s restraint in the world, fear of justice, and opportunity. Given the right opportunity, a blind eye by the law, and the Holy Spirit allowing you to do what you want, people everywhere would spiral into the same horrific crimes, driven by the same sin nature inside them. This is why “normal” people can suddenly do horrific things when the right circumstances align. This is also why when the Holy Spirit is removed, the Great Tribulation will begin, *“such as has not occurred since the beginning of the world until now”* (Matthew 24:21)—the heart of man will be unfettered.

God cares about what’s going on in the eternal spaces of the heart. So, if you entertain wickedness but never have an opportunity to bring it into reality, you are still guilty, because He knows that given the right conditions, you would do that evil—you cannot help yourself, and no man has interceded for you (Isaiah 59:16). God does not let people off of His Judgment if they “avoid” sin, because the potential to do that sin is always there. This is what Adam and Eve proved—given the right opportunity, they revealed in deed what was already in their heart. It is not in our nature to keep ourselves from sin (this is what the Old Testament Law proved through Israel).

God is the only one who can save us from our sin nature because He is the only one Who can intercede for us. He did just that in the form of Jesus Christ, bearing the guilt and judgment for our sin nature. Only through turning to Jesus and putting your full trust in His ability to save you are you made a Child of God, to be raised by the Holy Spirit and the Word of God to *“share His Holiness”* (Hebrews 12:10). Even so, Amen.

Thoughts? _____

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Is God Good?

“And Jesus said to him, ‘Why do you call Me good? No one is good except God alone’” (Mark 10:18 NASB).

Increasing numbers of people doubt or deny that God is good. We have all encountered people who point to things out of context in Scripture as evidence that God did vengeful, cruel, or sadistic things to people. In doing this, they make God in man’s image—flawed. Others argue that bad things happening in the world are evidence God doesn’t exist, because if He did exist and He was good (as Believers say), then bad things couldn’t happen to “good” people—they forget that the bad things that happen around us are our burden, for *“all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”* (Romans 3:23), and *“there is none who does good, there is not even one”* (Romans 3:12). The real reason they judge God is to justify themselves, bringing Him down to their level so they can reject Him, just as the Israelites said of Moses, *“who made you a ruler and a judge over us!”* (Acts 7:27)—this they also did to Christ, as men continue to do today. God answers, *“Will the faultfinder contend with the Almighty?...Will you really annul My judgment? Will you condemn Me that you may be justified?”* (Job 40:2a, 8) As Paul said, *“Who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us”* (Romans 8:24). Amen!

Unfortunately, judging God unfaithful in His character is not limited to unbelievers. Many Christians are not committed to the truth of God’s unchanging nature. Many of us have probably felt

at one time or another that God did something we don’t understand—things some insinuate as cruel, harsh, or judgmental. The danger is to allow this to develop into questioning God’s nature like some who say, “God is no better than man; therefore, I am justified in my behavior.” Others might think, “This verse is so unlike the God I know, so I’ll just ignore it.” These people are condemning God’s character in His Word and in how He works in their lives. We do this because our sin-nature causes us to “judge” good and evil for ourselves, and we invariably fall into the trap of thinking we can judge better than God, but in doing so, we judge Him unfaithful and untruthful, which He cannot be: *“I am the LORD who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the LORD”* (Jeremiah 9:24b). These Christians may not realize that God’s unchanging character is so foundational a truth in Scripture that if you don’t FULLY believe it, you can’t understand the Gospel, for as Paul pointed out, *“God who inflicts wrath is not unrighteous, is He? (I am speaking in human terms.) May it never be! For otherwise, how will God judge the world?”* (Romans 3:5-6)

God IS good. He is righteous, just, holy, and merciful, to name a few of His attributes, which are never put on hold, *“for I, the LORD, do not change; therefore you, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed”* (Malachi 3:6). His character is eternal and infinite, not partial or inconsistent. God doesn’t do anything halfway: *“Truly I have spoken; truly I will bring it to pass. I have planned it, surely I will do it”* (Isaiah 46:11). What God says about His nature in His Word is unquestionable, for *“it is impossible for Him to lie”* (Hebrews 6:18b), and He is unchanging: *“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever”* (Hebrews 13:8). Believe Him fully. Do not doubt Him in your heart, *“for all His ways are just; A God of faithfulness and without injustice, Righteous and upright is He!”* (Deut. 32:3-5) Amen.

Thoughts? _____

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Foundations Assailed

“If the foundations are destroyed, What can the righteous do?” (Psalm 11:3)

We’re living in a time when the world is trying to change the context of what it means to be alive in a way we have never seen before. Man is steadily working to bury the foundational understanding of the way things are, so that there are fewer obstacles to the evil he desires to commit: *“For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, deeds of coveting and wickedness, as well as deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride and foolishness. All these evil things proceed from within and defile the man”* (Mark 7:21-23). Man’s first step is to *“suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them”* (Romans 1:18b-19). Man does this by misapplying science and perverting education (to suppress the knowledge of the existence of God), spurning natural behavior, and passing unnatural laws (to reward behavior that is contrary to Him and punish those who obey God). The result is that people everywhere *“do not know nor do they understand; They walk about in darkness; All the foundations of the earth are shaken”* (Psalm 82:5).

In short, no one knows which way is up and which way is down. Everyone does “what is right in his own eyes.” In this environment, you cannot get people to understand the truth, because they cannot see the foundation you are talking about. Where do we start when people everywhere are saying, “There is no God, there is no sin, there is no

judgment”? In assailing the foundations, people are showing that they do *“not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, [so] God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do those things which are not proper, being filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, evil; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice; they are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, arrogant, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, without understanding, untrustworthy, unloving, unmerciful; and although they know the ordinance of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not only do the same, but also give hearty approval to those who practice them”* (Romans 1:28-32). This only ends in destruction, *“for the wages of sin is death”* (Romans 6:23a) as *“the one who has heard and has not acted accordingly, is like a man who built a house on the ground without any foundation; and the torrent burst against it and immediately it collapsed, and the ruin of that house was great”* (Luke 6:49). But no one is forced to build their lives on weak ground, for God has built us a sure Foundation: *“Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a tested stone, A costly cornerstone for the foundation, firmly placed. He who believes in it will not be disturbed”* (Isaiah 28:16), *“for no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ”* (1 Corinthians 13:11), so that *“when the whirlwind passes, the wicked is no more, But the righteous has an everlasting foundation”* (Proverbs 10:25).

Momentarily the foundation may look overwhelmed, but it is established for Eternity, and just as Jesus’ toil was not in vain when the foundations of righteousness and justice were suppressed by the Pharisees, we too are to *“Continue in the faith firmly established and steadfast, and not moved away from the hope of the gospel that you have heard”* (Colossians 1:23a), *“knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord”* (1 Corinthians 15:58b). That toil is to take up your cross daily *“and follow Me”* (Luke 9:23). Amen.

Thoughts? _____

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Jesus Christ Is Our Foundation

“For You are my rock and my fortress; For Your name’s sake You will lead me and guide me” (Psalm 31:3 NASB).

So often we think, “What is God doing for me?” but life isn’t about us, it’s about Him. Yet, in God’s love and mercy, He has said He does everything for our good (Romans 8:28). Do we think this way in our everyday trials?

David was elevated by God overnight from a shepherd boy to Saul’s right hand man. Neither David nor Saul did this, God did it, and He did it for His glory. While David had been promised the throne, he was now serving a government deteriorating beneath the weight of Saul’s lawless impulses. It was at this time that someone gave David advice to *“flee as a bird to your mountain; For, behold, the wicked bend the bow, They make ready their arrow upon the string To shoot in darkness at the upright in heart. If the foundations are destroyed, What can the righteous do?”* (Psalm 11:1b-3)

The rule of law meant little while Saul’s government was under the influence of evil spirits, and David walked in increasing danger as Saul began setting snares and traps for him. What was David to do? How could he hope to survive when the very government he served was plotting his ruin? The rule of law was stretched to shield evildoers, and those who obeyed God became targets for mistreatment. David’s counselors were in effect saying, “If you don’t stoop to their level, the ground will fall out from under you in a snare. There is no solid ground for the upright to stand on,

so you cannot hope to accomplish anything—you must flee, or your life will be meaningless.”

But David understood that his life was about God’s glory, and he realized that in this trial, God was actually testing Saul—Saul was on trial, and he was entrapping himself before God by setting worldly snares for David. Perhaps the words of Joseph came to him then: *“As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good”* (Genesis 50:20a).

David knew it lay in God’s hand *“to make great and to strengthen everyone”* (1 Chronicles 29:12b), so he could say, *“In God, whose word I praise, In God I have put my trust; I shall not be afraid. What can mere man do to me?”* (Psalm 56:4). David was looking past his life to Eternity to remind himself that God is in control, His patience tests the heart of man, and His throne is untouchable by man: *“The Lord is in His holy temple; the Lord’s throne is in heaven; His eyes behold, His eyelids test the sons of men. The Lord tests the righteous and the wicked...Upon the wicked He will rain snares...For the Lord is righteous, He loves righteousness; The upright will behold His face”* (Psalm 11:4-7). God is in control, and we are to continue obeying Him faithfully in all things, no matter how bad it looks for us, remembering to *“be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord”* (1 Corinthians 15:58). Every little thing you do in faithfulness to Jesus is not in vain because God’s foundations cannot be destroyed! Our works for the Lord will stand for all eternity.

The righteous are never powerless, because in all circumstances, they are taking up their crosses to follow Jesus (Matthew 16:24), *“who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart”* (Hebrews 12:2b-3). Therefore, just as David turned to God when things looked bad, let us now fix *“our eyes on Jesus”* (Hebrews 12:2a). Even so, Amen.

Thoughts? _____

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Agents of Change?

“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever” (Hebrews 13:8).

“Change” is the hot buzzword of our time. Everywhere we turn people are offering it, pushing it, and promising it. We see “change agents” transforming the world around us in politics, government, churches, and lifestyles. Everywhere we look, people are telling us we need change to be a better person, more fulfilled, more acceptable, more lovable, more desirable. The pressure to allow, support, or seek change often comes from judgment or fear of some sort of punishment. Is the Believer under judgment or punishment? Not from God, for we have been changed by Christ into God’s children, no longer coming “into judgment” (John 5:24), *“so that we may have confidence in the day of judgment; because as He is, so also are we in this world. There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves punishment, and the one who fears is not perfected in love. We love, because He first loved us”* (1 John 4:17b-19).

But the judgment of God *“rightly falls”* (Romans 2:2) on unbelievers because they *“loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil”* (John 3:19b). The unbeliever senses he’s under God’s judgment, because of his sin, which makes him feel lacking, inadequate, and in need of something to make him “acceptable.” God intends this to lead sinners to repentance. But the devil and his world twists this motivation to lead people astray by offering more “palatable” alternatives to repentance that will “change” them without requiring accountability to God. Millions

of people take satan’s “change,” because it is *“a way which seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death”* (Proverbs 14:12).

In the same way, the devil tries to make Believers feel judgment from God and in need of change—and that it is our responsibility to make ourselves better. Then he offers remedy: “Just read this book, follow these steps, follow this teacher, do this, do that.” His promise is that you’ll be a better YOU, more in line with how you should be living, a more “righteous” person, closer to God, your life will be easier, etc. And if it isn’t working for you, “well, you didn’t do it right,” or “maybe that program just isn’t for you, so here’s another one that will fit you.” We think we’re getting closer to what God wants us to be, all the while wandering away from His green pastures like sheep—the grass always seems “greener” elsewhere, but in truth, there is no place better than where God wants us to be, regardless of whether we like it. The focus of our lives is not on us and what we can do, but on God and what He has done. *“Do not associate with those who are given to change”* (Proverbs 24:21), who doubt God and are unstable in all their ways (James 1:6-7), for just as Jesus does not change, but waits on His Father’s will, we are to imitate Him *“as beloved children”* (Ephesians 5:1).

May we trust God and wait on His sanctifying change in our lives through the working of His Holy Spirit, *“who is given as a pledge of our inheritance, with a view to the redemption of God’s own possession, to the praise of His glory”* (Ephesians 1:14). This is God’s work, not ours, and calls for our obedience, endurance, and discipline as His children. Remember Abraham: *“having patiently waited, he obtained the promise”* (Hebrews 6:15), so also our attitude should be that *“all the days of my struggle I will wait until my change comes”* (Job 14:14b). God is working His change in His children, to be completed at the appearing of His Son (Titus 2:13), when *“we will all be changed”* (1 Corinthians 15:51b). Amen.

Thoughts? _____

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Fearless Child of God

“There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves punishment, and the one who fears is not perfected in love” (1 John 4:18).

Many of us struggle with fear of judgment, even after becoming Believers. We may be afraid God will punish us, because we still have problems, we still sin, and we don’t look like “saints.” We may feel something is wrong with us and it is our fault (we feel unworthy and under judgment), and we are not “good enough.” Satan thrives on making Believers feel this way, because if they feel insecure in their adoption, they will seek ways to make themselves more “acceptable” to God, emphasizing their work, not God’s, and they are prey for Satan’s promise of “I will change myself.”

It IS true we are unworthy of God’s love, but it is also true that He loves us regardless with a perfect love. For by the blood of Jesus we receive **Justification** and are saved from God’s wrath (Romans 5:9)—born again and adopted out from our spiritual slavery to the world into God’s household as His children, for “*unless you are converted and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven*” (Matthew 18:3). Now, God’s **Sanctification** process begins working in us. We are nurtured by His Word and Spirit in our earthly lives, growing up in His Household, raised to inherit in His Son’s future Kingdom (James 2:5). By this, God is parenting us to be like His first-born, Jesus (1 John 3:2), “*whom He appointed heir of all things*” (Hebrews 1:2). Our **Glorification** in the Resurrection or Rapture is the end of God’s sanctifying work in us—our “coming of age” into an inheritance to rule with Christ

(Revelation 20:6; 22:5), “*according to His own purpose and grace which was granted us in Christ Jesus from all eternity*” (2 Timothy 1:9b).

Of Sanctification, Paul says, “*as long as the heir is a child, he does not differ at all from a slave although he is owner of everything, but he is under guardians and managers until the date set by the father. So also we, while we were children, were held in bondage under the elemental things of the world. But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, so that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons. Because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’ Therefore you are no longer a slave, but a son; and if a son, then an heir through God*” (Galatians 4:1-7), yet, presenting “*your members as slaves to righteousness, resulting in sanctification*” (Romans 6:19b).

Sometimes we may mistake the process of Sanctification as judgment or punishment, but you are not to “*faint when you are reproved by Him; for those whom the Lord loves He disciplines, and he scourges every son whom he receives*” (Hebrews 12:5b-6), for “*if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Furthermore, we had earthly fathers to discipline us, and we respected them; shall we not much rather be subject to the Father of spirits, and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but He disciplines us for our good, so that we may share His holiness. All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness*” (Hebrews 12:8-11), growing “*up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ*” (Ephesians 4:15). May we trust and not fear God’s parenting of us. Amen.

Thoughts? _____

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Child of God, Bride of Christ

“Let us rejoice and be glad and give the glory to Him, for the marriage of the Lamb has come and His bride has made herself ready” (Revelation 19:7).

God uses many metaphors to describe the Believer, including “sheep.” Now, we aren’t actually sheep, but we can gain insights from this analogy. However, when God calls us His adopted children, this is not a metaphor, but a fact. We really are the adopted children of God. This foundation provides context for many complex spiritual concepts, such as Justification, Sanctification, Glorification, etc. Without this context, there can be confusion about what these concepts mean and how we relate to them. Another very important thing God calls us is the BRIDE of Christ (the collective Church in relation to His Son).

In Hebrew culture, a young woman would be betrothed to a husband. The actual Jewish word for the betrothal period (Kiddushin) means “sanctification.” Often, this happened while the woman was still quite young. Although now legally husband and wife, they could not yet live together until the wedding day. Between her betrothal and her wedding could be years of patiently waiting and enduring while her bridegroom was preparing a place for them to live, and she prepared herself to be his wife. Only once the girl’s father approved of the bridegroom’s preparations, did he set the date for the wedding, and the bridegroom could plan to come for his bride to take her away. Unlike today’s “engagement,” a betrothal was only annulled

through divorce, and divorce is never God’s plan (Matthew 19:3-9).

Paul speaks of “betrothal” when explaining to the Corinthians the sacred nature of their church’s relationship to Christ: *“For I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy; for I betrothed you to one husband, so that to Christ I might present you as a pure virgin”* (2 Corinthians 11:2). Later, in Ephesians, He admonishes, *“Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her, so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless”* (Ephesians 5:25-27).

Paralleling Ezekiel 16 a little in its reference to how God saw Israel, we can perhaps gain some insight into how God sees us as both Children of God and the Bride of Christ. Prior to being saved, the Church was a child enslaved to the world and sin (Galatians 4:3; Romans 6:15-23). God sent His Son Jesus Christ to redeem and **justify** the Church (Titus 2:14, Romans 3:24), freeing her from attachment to the world and exempting her from God’s wrath (Romans 5:9), which will destroy her enslavers (Romans 2:5). Rather than making the Church His servant, God the Father adopted her as His own beloved child to be loved, brought up, and parented by His Holy Spirit (Galatians 4:1-7). But God wasn’t finished—He betrothed the unworthy Church to His worthy Son, Who loves her and **sanctifies** her by His Word. The Church is now enduring her betrothal period, waiting for her Bridegroom to return for her, and they will be united in marriage (Revelation 19:7), sharing His inheritance and **glory**. Jesus will take the Church away to the place He has prepared for her (John 14:3), that wherever He is, she will be also, and she will rule and reign with her Lord over the earth (Revelation 20:6). The wedding date is known only by her Father (Matthew 24:36). *“Therefore be on the alert, for you do not know which day your Lord is coming”* (Matthew 24:42). Come, Lord Jesus!

Thoughts? _____

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Enduring Our Betrothal

“For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart” (Hebrews 12:3).

God knew the Church would have need of encouragement during her betrothal (or sanctification) period, while she is still separated from Jesus until the date set for their uniting. While it is difficult enough to be separated from the one you love, especially in hostile surroundings, there is also so much to prepare for in marriage. How does one prepare for the Lord Jesus? What must the Bride do to make herself ready? If it was up to her, the list would be as far as the east is from the west, because she knows she can never prepare herself enough for Him. Thankfully, the Bride is not left to her own devices. She is not left to figure out how she will prepare herself for her wedding day. Jesus does that for her through His Holy Spirit and the Word that He has left for her while He is preparing a place for them.

Jesus sanctifies His own Church. He changes her, for He *“loved the church and gave Himself up for her, so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless”* (Ephesians 5:25-27). Her responsibility in her betrothal period is to submit herself to endure this change—the sanctifying work her Lord does in her through the instruction and discipline of the Word and the Holy Spirit. She is His new creation, and she is made for Him to be acceptable and united as one with Him.

Lucifer was also made for God. He was created to be God’s servant, and as the highest of angels, we can know that God gave him great authority and respect. But he was not content with what God had made him, and he would not abide God’s plan for him. Instead of saying with the Bride, *“all the days of my struggle I will wait until my change comes”*

(Job 14:14b), Lucifer rebelled, deciding that God had not made him right. Rather than endure God’s plan in his life, he decided to try and change himself. In Isaiah, he proudly declares, *“I will make myself like the Most High”* (Isaiah 14:14b). Lucifer is saying, “I will change myself, and I will make myself acceptable to God on my own terms.”

Today also, so many people are discontent with who and what they are. They are frustrated with who God has made them (and what He requires of them), and they want to force Him to accept them on their terms. There are also so many voices in the world telling us we can (or must) change ourselves, and many deceivers offer to change us, if we but submit to them. But only God can change us to be acceptable to Himself, according to His will.

The Church is changed at the Cross, born again, saved from God’s wrath, and betrothed to Jesus, given the Spirit as a pledge (2 Cor. 1:22). Now, during her betrothal she daily gives her life (desires, expectations, plans) over to Him to be changed by Him, for Him, to be like Him. She suffers with Him, and He makes her glorious (Romans 8:17) and worthy (2 Thess. 1:5). She gives up everything, being crucified with Him (Galatians 2:20), and He gives her all things in Himself (John 16:15). Satan hates and persecutes the Church, because Jesus gave Himself for her, He is preparing her for Himself, and she endures His preparation which makes her truly holy, blameless, and glorious for when her Bridegroom returns for her. May we look to Jesus and not lose heart while we await His return! Come, Lord Jesus!

Thoughts? _____

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“May we remember to offer acceptable worship to God and live life with a reverence and awe at the unshakable future we have stored up for us in Heaven. We need to recall this in the worries of our daily lives. May the Holy Spirit testify in us and through us a simple and pure devotion to Christ, that we would worship Him in reverence and awe for His wonderful salvation. May He inspire us to a deeper love and understanding of His Gospel and a deeper commitment in our witness to the world as His lights.”

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