

**Collected Sunday School Lessons
2014 - 2018**

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Soli Deo Gloria

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JAMES 4:1-10

After discussing the subject of words in chapter 3, James now moves on to talk about conflict:

James 4:1: "From whence come wars and fightings among you? come they not hence, even of your lusts that war in your members?"

This may seem like a new topic, but James is actually building on something he said earlier. In the first chapter of his letter he explained where temptation comes from:

James 1:13: "Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God: for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man:
14 But every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed.
15 Then when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin: and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death."

The source of temptation is *desire*. The reason we can be tempted is because we want things. Satan uses that against us by tempting us to sin in order to get the thing that we desire. As it turns out, conflict comes from this very same source. Just as temptation stems from desire, conflict also stems from desire. James is very clear about this: wars and fightings stem from *our own desires*. In other words, the reason we fight with people is to get the things that we want (which is very true, if you stop and think about it).

One of the key themes of the Bible is the idea of controlling our desires. Not all desire is evil, but there are many desires that do not come from God. Jesus made it plain that we can either serve Him or serve the world:

Matthew 6:24: "No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon."

If we desire the things of God then we will be about the Father's business. We will seek *His* will, *His* Word, and *His* decrees. Then we will have godly desires. That doesn't mean that we cannot be tempted, but it does mean that Satan's opportunity to tempt us is much more limited. If all we want to do is honor and glorify God then there are many things that will not appeal to us.

The apostle John warned us that we can either love God or love the world – but not both:

I John 2:15: "Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him.
16 For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world.
17 And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever."

These verses should make us pause and re-evaluate our life. What are our priorities? What

things do we desire in our life? Does our heart belong to God, or does it belong to the world? Are we about the Father's business or are we about our own business? What things really matter to us? If we were to make a list of all the things that we want in life, what sort of things would we find on that list? There are so many things that people desire – and so few of them have anything to do with God or His Kingdom.

Our desire for things that don't really matter can get us into all kinds of trouble:

James 4:2: “Ye lust, and have not: ye kill, and desire to have, and cannot obtain: ye fight and war, yet ye have not, because ye ask not.”

Here it may seem like James is going a bit overboard. What child of God would ever murder someone in order to get the object of their heart's desire? It may seem unthinkable (and perhaps it ought to be unthinkable), but it has happened. Do you remember what King David did when he wanted to hide his sin with Bathsheba? He arranged for the murder of her husband:

2 Samuel 11:14: “And it came to pass in the morning, that David wrote a letter to Joab, and sent it by the hand of Uriah.

15 And he wrote in the letter, saying, Set ye Uriah in the forefront of the hottest battle, and retire ye from him, that he may be smitten, and die.

16 And it came to pass, when Joab observed the city, that he assigned Uriah unto a place where he knew that valiant men were.

17 And the men of the city went out, and fought with Joab: and there fell some of the people of the servants of David; and Uriah the Hittite died also.”

David – a man after God's own heart! – actually *murdered* someone in order to hide his sin. David was drawn away by his own lusts and enticed, and that lust brought forth sin – and sin led him to murder one of his own servants. That is the terrible power of sin! Not only does it tempt those who do *not* know God, but it also tempts those who *do* know God. We may think that we are above such things and we would never stoop to such a terrible act, but the truth is that the only difference between us and David is the grace of God. David sought God with all his heart; he loved the Lord and served him with passion. Yet sin still found its way into David's life and caused great destruction. After his sin with Bathsheba his life was never the same: his own son Absalom led a rebellion against him and tried to kill him.

Do not think that you are immune to sin, or that you are somehow above being tempted! Many pastors have seen their careers ruined by sin. Temptation is a very real thing and it is something we should take seriously. If we do not get the better of sin then sin will get the better of us. Sin has led men as great as King David to murder.

Why do we lack things? Because we do not ask for them. Jesus Himself said that if we want something we should ask for it:

Matthew 7:7: “Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you:

8 For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened.

9 Or what man is there of you, whom if his son ask bread, will he give him a stone?

10 Or if he ask a fish, will he give him a serpent?

11 If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father which is in heaven give good things to them that ask him?”

There were a number of times in the wilderness when Israel found themselves without food or water. Instead of asking God, however, they complained. They could have asked God to supply their needs, but instead they chose to yell at Moses:

Exodus 16:2: “And the whole congregation of the children of Israel murmured against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness:

3 And the children of Israel said unto them, Would to God we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the flesh pots, and when we did eat bread to the full; for ye have brought us forth into this wilderness, to kill this whole assembly with hunger.”

All Israel had to do was cry out to God and He would have supplied their need. God had just delivered Israel out of Egypt with a mighty hand. He had punished their enemies and shown His great power. He had amply demonstrated His love and care for them. But instead of doing that, they accused Moses of trying to kill them. They didn't ask; instead they complained.

James said that wars and fightings come from our lusts – and here we can see that in action. Israel wanted food, but instead of asking for it they went straight to fighting. Their desire (which was not evil in and of itself) led to conflict. Instead of asking, they attacked. Instead of seeking God, they murmured against Moses.

We need to remember that God knows what we need before we even ask for it. God is not cruel or heartless. As Jesus said, even human beings (who can be very wicked) know better than to give their children a poisonous viper when they ask for some fish to eat. Do we really think that God is going to rain down fire from Heaven and consume us all when we humbly ask Him for our daily bread? Why do we doubt the Father's ability to bless us with good things?

Yes, it is true that God does not always grant our requests. There was a time when the apostle Paul begged God for something, and God turned him down. But God did not reject him because He was heartless or because He secretly enjoyed seeing Paul suffer. He had a good reason for it:

2 Corinthians 12:7: “And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure.

8 For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me.

9 And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

10 Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong.”

God gave Paul a tremendous amount of divine revelation – so much that Paul risked being exalted above measure. In order to keep Paul humble God gave Paul a thorn in the flesh. When Paul asked God to remove it, He refused – but He didn't leave Paul empty-handed. Instead He did something else: He gave Paul the grace to endure.

The thorn in the flesh was not given out of malice; it was a blessing. Yes, it was a hard blessing,

but it was a blessing all the same. Jesus told us that everyone who asks receives, and we see that illustrated here. Paul did not receive what he asked for, but he didn't go away empty-handed either. Instead God gave him *grace*. After this incident Paul said that he would actually *rejoice* in his infirmities so that the power of Christ could rest upon him!

If you ask you *will* receive. You may not receive what you expect to receive, but never doubt the goodness or love of God. He knows far better than we do how to give good gifts to those who ask Him!

Sometimes, though, our requests are simply bad:

James 4:3: “Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts.”

When we ask God to fulfill our sinful desires, we should not be surprised when He tells us no. If King David had asked God to kill Uriah to hide his sin with Bathsheba, do you think God would have listened to him? Of course not! God isn't going to honor that kind of request. That whole idea seems ridiculous – but how many of our prayers are along those lines? How many times do we ask God to glorify ourselves, or further our own kingdom, or fulfill our sinful desires? How many times are our requests about God, and how many times are they about ourselves?

God is not a genie who will grant anything that you request. If you ask amiss then you will most certainly *not* receive. God has no desire to fulfill your sinful desires or to turn your heart away from Him:

James 4:4: “Ye adulterers and adulteresses, know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God.”

There is more going on in this verse than it seems. As you may recall, James wrote this book to “the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad” (James 1:1) – in other words, to Israel. Israel had a long history of disobedience. God sent them prophets to turn them back to Him, but they did not listen. They would not stop serving false gods or stop burning incense to idols. Because of this God promised to send terrible judgment against them:

Ezekiel 6:13: “Then shall ye know that I am the Lord, when their slain men shall be among their idols round about their altars, upon every high hill, in all the tops of the mountains, and under every green tree, and under every thick oak, the place where they did offer sweet savour to all their idols.”

Since Israel had worshiped idols on every high hill and under every green tree, God said He would pile up their dead bodies in those very same places. In God's eyes Israel was guilty of adultery because they had forsaken their love for Lord and had given their heart to false gods. God condemned them for committing adultery with their idols on every high hill and green tree:

Jeremiah 13:27: “I have seen thine adulteries, and thy neighings, the lewdness of thy whoredom, and thine abominations on the hills in the fields. Woe unto thee, O Jerusalem! wilt thou not be made clean? when shall it once be?”

Jeremiah 2:20: “For of old time I have broken thy yoke, and burst thy bands; and thou saidst, I will not transgress; when upon every high hill and under every green tree thou wanderest, playing the harlot.”

Jeremiah 3:6: “The Lord said also unto me in the days of Josiah the king, Hast thou seen that which backsliding Israel hath done? she is gone up upon every high mountain and under every green tree, and there hath played the harlot.”

What did Israel do upon every high mountain and under every green tree? She served idols and worshiped false gods. That was the adultery that she committed.

James is pointing out that by seeking after the things of the world, believers are also guilty of adultery. They have given their heart to a false god and are just as guilty as ancient Israel. We are faced with a choice: we can be friends with God or we can be friends with the world. We can love God or we can love the world. *But we cannot have both.*

The people that James were writing to had chosen to side with the world. Their desires tempted them to sin, and in order to get what they wanted they fought with each other. They abandoned God and lusted after the things of the world, and that led to a great deal of trouble in the church. James is reminding them that lusting after the things of the world is a form of adultery against God, and God takes that very seriously.

In our time the call of the world is strong. There are many people who have decided to abandon God in order to become friends with the world. We may fail to take a stance because of what it will cost us, or we may side with sin because we want people to think highly of us. We are willing to compromise what the Bible says because we know that people don't like it. In our time doctrine is not loved; people seek to distance themselves from it and instead embrace the idea that “it's all good”. Rather than standing up for the Word, they stand up and defend sin. That may win them the friendship of the world, but it also earns them the enmity of God.

Jesus Himself said that if you follow Him the world will hate you:

John 15:19: “If ye were of the world, the world would love his own: but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you.”

That is the choice that we must make. Whose side are we going to be on? It is impossible to be neutral. If you stand up for what is right then the world will hate you – there is no getting around it. You may win a lot of friends and admirers through compromise, but the cost is very high. Is it really worth losing your soul? Do you really want to be God's enemy?

Yes, it is true that we have a natural inclination to desire the things of the world:

James 4:5: “Do ye think that the scripture saith in vain, The spirit that dwelleth in us lusteth to envy?”

It is true that we have a sin nature. But it is also true that the power of God is far greater. God has not left us helpless in our struggle against the flesh. He has given us a powerful weapon – the weapon of His grace:

James 4:6: “But he giveth more grace. Wherefore he saith, God resisteth the proud,

but giveth grace unto the humble.”

This echoes what the apostle Paul said when he talked about our struggle with sin:

Romans 5:20: “Moreover the law entered, that the offence might abound. But where sin abounded, grace did much more abound:

21 That as sin hath reigned unto death, even so might grace reign through righteousness unto eternal life by Jesus Christ our Lord.”

Notice what Paul says! Where sin abounded, grace abounded *even more*. Where sin reigned to death, grace reigns *through righteousness* unto eternal life. God has not left us defenseless against the enemy. He has not entered us into a contest that we cannot possibly win. He has given us His grace, and His grace *is* powerful.

God does not give His grace to everyone, though. James points out that while God gives grace to the humble, He resists the proud. You see, God hates pride:

Psalm 12:3: “The Lord shall cut off all flattering lips, and the tongue that speaketh proud things:”

Psalm 119:21: “Thou hast rebuked the proud that are cursed, which do err from thy commandments.”

Psalm 138:6: “Though the Lord be high, yet hath he respect unto the lowly: but the proud he knoweth afar off.”

Proverbs 15:25: “The Lord will destroy the house of the proud: but he will establish the border of the widow.”

Proverbs 16:5: “Every one that is proud in heart is an abomination to the Lord: though hand join in hand, he shall not be unpunished.”

Proverbs 21:4: “An high look, and a proud heart, and the plowing of the wicked, is sin.”

Do you see how much the Lord hates pride? A proud heart is sin; it is an abomination to the Lord. God hates the proud so much that He has cursed them, and said He will destroy them and their house. God doesn't even want to get near the proud; we are told that He knows them “afar off” – in other words, He keeps His distance from them. If you want to have a relationship with God then you *cannot* be proud. You must humble yourself and be lowly. You must come to God as a bankrupt sinner and beg Him for His forgiveness and grace.

In other words, you must submit to God:

James 4:7: “Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.”

That is the difference between the proud and the humble. The proud make much of themselves;

the humble make much of God. The proud praise and honor themselves; the humble praise and honor God. The proud look to their own strength; the humble look to God for strength. The proud look to themselves for deliverance; the humble look to God for salvation. The proud do as they please; the humble obey God.

If you want to please God then you must obey Him. You must submit yourself to Him. We live in a generation of people who care very little for the Word of God. The culture around us has no interest in obeying the Scriptures or following its commands. They think nothing of committing adultery. They approve of all sorts of immorality. Lies, deception, and cheating do not bother them. They love themselves, not their neighbors. They have thrown out God's commands and have decided to do that which is right in their own eyes. All of this is an abomination to God! We *must* humble ourselves before Him. We *must* obey Him. We *must* submit ourselves to His commands. We must be about *His* will, not ours.

How do you overcome evil? By resisting it. How do you make the devil flee? By resisting him. In other words, you *fight back*. You refuse to submit yourself to sin. You refuse to give sin free reign in your life. You refuse to follow the lusts of the flesh. You refuse to seek your own will. If you fight the devil, he will flee. If you draw near to God then He will draw near to you:

James 4:8: "Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you. Cleanse your hands, ye sinners; and purify your hearts, ye double minded."

The question is, do you *want* to draw near to God – or are you too busy trying to make friends with the world? Do you *want* to glorify God – or are you too busy trying to glorify yourself? Do you *want* the things of God – or do you instead want the things of the world? If you truly want to draw near to God then cleanse your hands and purify your hearts. Repent of your sins and ask forgiveness for them. Stop being double-minded; stop seeking the things of the world and the things of God. Become single-minded in the pursuit of God's glory and in the service of God's kingdom. Take advantage of the grace of God and serve righteousness instead of sin. If you draw near to God then He *will* draw near to you. That is a promise. If you humble yourself before God and seek Him then He will lift you up:

James 4:9: "Be afflicted, and mourn, and weep: let your laughter be turned to mourning, and your joy to heaviness.
10 Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and he shall lift you up."

If you turn from your pride and seek the Lord then He will lift you up. God will humble those who exalt themselves, but He will exalt those who humble themselves. If you weep over your sins and pride and cry out to God for forgiveness and grace then you will find it.

If you do this then things will change. You will find yourself closer to God, and temptation will not seem as enticing as it once did. You will find a love for righteousness and a love for God's Word. You will find less conflict and more love. If you truly want to change and find a better way, this is the only way to do it. God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble.

JOHN 5

John 5:1: “After this there was a feast of the Jews; and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.”

According to commentators, the “feast of the Jews” that this verse mentions is most likely the Passover. The reasons for this are complex and are well outside the scope of this paper, so I'm not going to address them here. The point is that after the feast (whatever the feast may have been), Jesus went to Jerusalem.

John 5:2: “Now there is at Jerusalem by the sheep market a pool, which is called in the Hebrew tongue Bethesda, having five porches.”

The sheep market was near the Temple. According to Coffman's Commentary, in 1931-32 excavators discovered a pool 100 yards north of the Temple that is believed to be the long-lost pool of Bethesda. The word “bethesda” means “house of mercy”. The “five porches” were decorative places where people could take refuge from the sun or the rain.

John 5:3: “In these lay a great multitude of impotent folk, of blind, halt, withered, waiting for the moving of the water.”

This pool was a popular place – but not for the reason you would expect. This is not a place where people came to escape the heat and relax. It was not a beach or a resort. Instead people came to be healed. Those who had infirmities came to look for healing. The next verse explains why:

John 5:4: “For an angel went down at a certain season into the pool, and troubled the water: whosoever then first after the troubling of the water stepped in was made whole of whatsoever disease he had.”

This verse has been under tremendous attack. Commentators dislike it and scholars deride it. Many go so far as to say that the verse shouldn't be there at all. In most modern versions of the Bible the verse is either flagged as being questionable or is omitted altogether!

However, all of these attacks are wrong. This verse is an integral part of the passage. If this verse is removed then the rest of the chapter makes no sense. This verse explains why the man waited by the pool for so many years. It explains why the sick and the injured huddled around the pool and waited. When this verse is removed, the entire passage falls apart.

There are very good reasons for believing that the few ancient manuscripts which omit this verse are actually questionable and should not be believed, but that is a discussion well outside the scope of this paper. All I will say here is that this verse is *not* a forgery; it is a key part of the text, and it should be taken seriously and believed.

With that being said, we can now take a look at what the verse actually says. The reason people gathered around this pool is because from time to time an angel came and stirred the waters. The first person who made it to the pool after the waters were stirred was healed of whatever disease they had.

Since the pool offered a cure that was otherwise impossible to obtain, desperate people gathered around the pool hoping to be the first one to reach it. The pool was their only hope for healing.

People like to attack this verse and say that God would never do such a thing, because it's just not fair. But God never promised to be fair. Is it "fair" that one person is born blind while another person is born with sight? Is it "fair" that there are evil people who lead happy lives, and godly people who lead lives full of sorrow and pain? Is it "fair" that some people who are dying are miraculously cured and go on to lead a long life, while others fail to be healed and die? How is any of that "fair"?

While Jesus was on Earth He healed many people – but He did not heal everyone. This chapter is a great example of that. As we will see, there were many sick people lying here – but Jesus only healed *one* of them. There is no indication that He healed everyone and sent them all home. When the angel came and stirred the waters, only one person was healed – and when Jesus came in person He healed just one man. He did the same thing the angel did! Many people had needs – but only one person's needs were met.

The truth is that God did not owe any of these people anything. None of them could stand up and say "God owes me healing." God, in His mercy, sent an angel to heal one of them. He was not required to do that, but He did it anyway. However, instead of showing gratitude that God would heal anyone, people instead stand up and say that God was unfair because He did not provide healing for everyone who was there. God's generosity is suddenly turned into a liability, and that is wrong. We should be grateful for what God does give us (for God does not owe us anything), not angry because He has not given us more.

John 5:5: "And a certain man was there, which had an infirmity thirty and eight years."

This verse tells us that he had been ill for 38 years. It does *not* say that he had been at the pool for 38 years (although the next verse implies he had been there a long time). The reason he was at the pool was the same reason everyone else was at the pool – he desperately wanted to be healed. He had been suffering for a long time, and the pool was his only hope for healing. It was all he had.

John 5:6: "When Jesus saw him lie, and knew that he had been now a long time in that case, he saith unto him, Wilt thou be made whole?"

Here we can see that the man had apparently been lying at the pool a long time. The verse doesn't tell us how long, but the point is the same. The man had come to the pool looking for healing and he had not found it.

Jesus saw him lying there and knew he had been suffering for a long time. He knew that the man wanted to be healed but had only found disappointment and pain. Jesus had compassion on him and asked him if he wanted to be healed.

John 5:7: "The impotent man answered him, Sir, I have no man, when the water is troubled, to put me into the pool: but while I am coming, another steppeth down before me."

Notice that the man apparently didn't know who Jesus is. He has no idea that Jesus could heal him, or that Jesus was anything more than just another man. By this point in His career Jesus had done a number of notable miracles, but this man had either not heard about them or did not know that the man he was talking to was Jesus.

Yet Jesus still had compassion on him. This man did not know who Jesus was, but Jesus knew who he was and Jesus offered him healing. The man, though, didn't realize that. He thought that Jesus was talking about the pool, and explained to Jesus that he would love to be healed but his condition makes it impossible for him to reach the pool before other people. He longed for healing but he was unable to be healed. His strength and power was just not enough. The condition that had to be met – the requirement for being healed – was too high for him.

John 5:8: “Jesus saith unto him, Rise, take up thy bed, and walk.
9 And immediately the man was made whole, and took up his bed, and walked: and on the same day was the sabbath.”

Since the man wanted to be healed, Jesus simply healed him. He told the man to rise up and walk, and that is exactly what the man did. He was healed on the spot. He then did what Jesus told him to do – he took up his bed and walked.

However, that created a problem. According to Jewish tradition it was illegal to carry your bed on the Sabbath. Jesus had not only healed a man on the Sabbath (which is something the Pharisees despised), but he told a man to carry his bed on the Sabbath!

Now, neither of those things were against God's law. God did not prohibit people from being healed on the Sabbath, nor did He forbid them from carrying their beds. But the religious leaders of the day did forbid it, and since Jesus violated that tradition He angered some people.

John 5:10: “The Jews therefore said unto him that was cured, It is the sabbath day: it is not lawful for thee to carry thy bed.”

Notice how hard-hearted these people are! No one was saying “Oh look – he's cured!” No one cared that this man's suffering had been relieved after 38 long and painful years. No, all they cared about was that he was carrying his bed on the Sabbath, and they didn't like that. They were utterly devoid of compassion. As soon as this man started walking they immediately yelled at him for violating their made-up, godless traditions!

John 5:11: “He answered them, He that made me whole, the same said unto me, Take up thy bed, and walk.”

Here the man explained why he was carrying his bed: the man who healed him told him to do so. This was a direct and honest answer. Jesus told him to take up his bed, and so he took up his bed.

John 5:12: “Then asked they him, What man is that which said unto thee, Take up thy bed, and walk?”

Of course, the Jews wanted to find out who dared to violate their godless traditions and tell someone to carry their bed on the Sabbath. They were not happy about this and they wanted to make sure that this criminal was brought to justice.

John 5:13: “And he that was healed wist not who it was: for Jesus had conveyed himself away, a multitude being in that place.”

This is very interesting. First, we can see that the man had no idea who healed him. Jesus didn't identify himself, and He didn't stick around after He healed the man. Instead He slipped away into the crowd and disappeared. The man knew he had been healed but he didn't know who was responsible.

This verse also tells us that Jesus did not heal anyone else at the pool. He did not go around to each person who was there, one at a time, and heal them. Instead He healed this one man and then vanished. In other words, *He acted exactly like the angel who troubled the waters!* The angel healed one person and then left, and Jesus healed one person and left.

You also cannot argue that the area was deserted and there was only one man there. The verse clearly says that there was “a multitude” in that place. There were other people there, but Jesus only healed one of them.

John 5:14: “Afterward Jesus findeth him in the temple, and said unto him, Behold, thou art made whole: sin no more, lest a worse thing come unto thee.”

The man did not find Jesus, but Jesus found him. Jesus came to him at the pool, and Jesus came to him at the Temple. The first time Jesus came He healed his illness; the second time Jesus came He warned him to repent of his sins and turn from them, lest he face the eternal wrath of God. Jesus warned him – in person – to flee his sins.

John 5:15: “The man departed, and told the Jews that it was Jesus, which had made him whole.”

Notice that the passage does *not* say “The man was grateful” or “The man followed Jesus” or anything along those lines. Instead he immediately went straight to the Jews and told them who had been going around breaking their traditions. Even though Jesus had healed him, he showed no signs of gratitude! Instead he turned around and told the Jews. He deliberately went and got Jesus into trouble. He didn't try to project Jesus, or defend Him, or speak up on His behalf (as the blind man did later in the book of John), nor did he believe in Jesus or abandon His sins. Instead he sold Jesus out to His enemies, much like Judas would do later! The Jews wanted to know who was breaking their laws, and this man was only too happy to help them.

John 5:16: “And therefore did the Jews persecute Jesus, and sought to slay him, because he had done these things on the sabbath day.”

Do you see the parallels? This man sold Jesus out to people who wanted to kill him – just as Judas later sold Jesus out to people who wanted to kill him. There is no gratitude to be seen in this story. Jesus reached out and healed someone who then *immediately* turned Jesus over to people who wanted to murder Him. That is the thanks that Jesus got for curing a crippling disease that had troubled that man for *38 years*.

The Jews, in turn, were not at all impressed at Jesus' miracle. They didn't care that He had miraculously healed this man, demonstrating the same power as the angel from Heaven who troubled the waters. All they knew was that He had violated their godless traditions, and for that He had to die.

Notice that Jesus could have avoided this entire situation by healing on a different day. However, He refused to do so. The reason He healed on the Sabbath was to teach people that doing good on the Sabbath was *not* a violation of the Law. He pointed out that they were hypocrites because they were willing to feed and help their own animals on the Sabbath, and yet they demanded that people suffer and not be healed on that day. By healing on the Sabbath Jesus was pointing out that they were hard-hearted hypocrites, and they hated that. Rather than repent, they decided to kill the messenger.

John 5:17: “But Jesus answered them, My Father worketh hitherto, and I work.”

There are some people who claim that Jesus never said He was God. That is an error! The Gospels are filled with references like this, where Jesus makes claim to divinity. Here we see that Jesus called God “Father”. This was the right thing for Him to do, because He was God the Son, and His Father was God the Father. Jesus was absolutely right – His Father worked, and He worked.

This, though, was a claim to divinity. If God is your Father then you are claiming to be divine. The Jews realized what Jesus was claiming and they were not happy about it.

John 5:18: “Therefore the Jews sought the more to kill him, because he not only had broken the sabbath, but said also that God was his Father, making himself equal with God.”

Through His miracles Jesus clearly demonstrated that He really *was* God. He showed divine power time and time again. Not only did He heal staggering numbers of people, but He raised the dead *three times*. He cast out demons, He healed people who were born blind, and He did staggering miracles. Yet the people still would not believe! They rejected His holiness, His power, and His words. Instead they persisted in unbelief and decided to kill the Messiah.

It is true that Jesus had to die; there was no getting around that. However, the Jews did not have to reject Jesus. They could have accepted Him as their Messiah, but they did not. Instead they told Pilate that “we have no king but Caesar”. They were not interested in the Messiah, and that brought very serious consequences. Since this generation rejected Jesus, God severely punished them (Luke 11:50-51) – but that is a discussion for another time.

John 5:19: “Then answered Jesus and said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, The Son can do nothing of himself, but what he seeth the Father do: for what things soever he doeth, these also doeth the Son likewise.”

This is a recurring theme in the Bible. Jesus does not have His own agenda! He does what the Father does, He says what the Father says, and He glorifies the Father. Jesus does not do His own will, but the will of the Father. Whatever the Father does, that's what Jesus does.

How different that is from us! Instead of seeking God's will, we often seek our own will. Instead of glorifying God we glorify ourselves. Instead of following in God's footsteps we strike out on our own path. We want to do what *we* want, not what God wants. We want to be independent and in charge. We are rebellious and stubborn.

When will we give up our will, and our desires, and follow God instead? When will we stop living for ourselves and start living for God? When will we stop caring about what *we* want and start caring about what God wants?

John 5:20: “For the Father loveth the Son, and sheweth him all things that himself doeth: and he will shew him greater works than these, that ye may marvel.”

The Father loves the Son, and the Son loves the Father. There is no animosity or competition between them; instead there is perfect harmony. The Father shows the Son everything that He does – and what the Father does, the Son does. You might say that Jesus spends His time copying or imitating the Father. That is why Jesus told His disciples that since they had seen Him, they had seen the Father – because Jesus is a perfect copy of the Father.

Here Jesus told the Jews that they would see Him do even greater miracles. Jesus had just healed a man who had been crippled for 38 years, but as great as that was, something greater was coming. He was going to do something that would truly make them marvel.

John 5:21: “For as the Father raiseth up the dead, and quickeneth them; even so the Son quickeneth whom he will.”

It is true that Jesus raised the dead (on three recorded occasions), but that is not what Jesus is talking about here. As we will see in a few verses, Jesus is talking about those who are dead in their sins. He is talking about salvation and forgiveness.

Yes, it is a great thing to go into a graveyard and raise a dead man back to life – but one day he will die again. Yes, it is a great thing to heal a man who had been crippled for 38 years – but one day he will still die. The reason people die is because of sin; sin is the real problem that faces mankind. To forgive sins and give men everlasting life – to give them a way to escape the eternal wrath of God – is a far greater thing than any miracle that cures any physical ailment. There is nothing else that can compare to that! It is one thing to heal a blind man; it is quite another thing to forgive a man's sins and give him everlasting life.

The Son was going to start bringing people back to life – not from the grave (although He would do that as well), but from their sins. Those who were dead in trespasses and sins were about to be raised back to life – a life that would never end!

(How do we know that this is not talking about raising people from the dead? Because it says that Jesus “quickeneth whom he will” - but later on Jesus says He will raise *everyone* from the dead. Everyone will be raised, some to everlasting life and some to everlasting shame and contempt, but not everyone will believe and be saved.)

John 5:22: “For the Father judgeth no man, but hath committed all judgment unto the Son:

23 That all men should honour the Son, even as they honour the Father. He that honoureth not the Son honoureth not the Father which hath sent him.”

God the Son – Jesus Christ – is the one who will judge mankind for their sins. This is an awesome thing, for Jesus Christ is *also* the one who *died to give men forgiveness*. The one who will judge us is also the one who died to save us! As we can see, Jesus is not a heartless judge; He loves us and shed His own blood to atone for our sins. Those who repent and believe on Him will not find condemnation, but life. However, those who reject His sacrifice will find condemnation and the eternal wrath of God.

Those who honor Jesus honor God the Father; those who do not honor Jesus do not honor God the Father. Those who accept Jesus accept the Father; those who reject Jesus reject the Father. There is no getting around this.

John 5:24: “Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life.”

As you can see, those who hear the words of Jesus and believe them will find everlasting life. They will be forgiven. Jesus preached a gospel of repentance; He commanded men to repent of their sins and believe on Him. Those who do so will find everlasting life and will not be condemned. Jesus can say this because *He is the judge*. He is the one who will condemn those who do not believe! When He says that they have passed from death to life, He means it.

This is the only way to be saved from the wrath of God; this is the only way to defeat death and inherit everlasting life. Jesus is the only path to salvation! There is no other way.

John 5:25: “Verily, verily, I say unto you, The hour is coming, and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God: and they that hear shall live.”

Yes, it is true that in a few chapters Jesus will raise Lazarus from the dead. In that story the dead did hear the voice of the Son of God, and he did live again. However, notice the context of this phrase. Jesus is talking about *everlasting life*, as we saw in the previous verse. Jesus did raise Lazarus from the dead, but He did not give him everlasting life. This verse is talking about salvation; it is talking about the forgiveness of sins. Jesus is not talking about the upcoming resurrection of Lazarus, but the upcoming resurrection of all those who are dead in their sins. Jesus is about to take them and bring them back to life; He is about to give them forgiveness and grace. Like Lazarus, Jesus is going to call out to those who are dead in their sins, and like Lazarus, they will hear Him and come to life again.

(Since verse 21 is clearly talking about salvation and not resurrection, it seems likely that this verse is building upon what Jesus said earlier and is still addressing salvation. Notice it says that “they that hear shall live” - implying that some will hear and some will not. Since everyone will be resurrected, that seems to indicate that Jesus is talking about something else.)

John 5:26: “For as the Father hath life in himself; so hath he given to the Son to have life in himself;”

One of the unique aspects of God is that He has “life in himself”. That means that He does not need anything in order to stay alive; He has always existed and will always exist. He has no needs. He is self-existent. Theologians refer to this as His “aseity”.

All members of the Trinity – the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit – have this quality. Men require a great deal to stay alive (food, water, oxygen, etc.), but God does not. He is self-existent.

John 5:27: “And hath given him authority to execute judgment also, because he is the Son of man.”

Notice the boldness of Christ! The Jews had judged him for daring to break their tradition, and Jesus turned around and told them that *He* was the Judge and *He* would be judging *them*. They were not the ones in charge; He was! Jesus, by His divine position as the Son, was given the authority to execute judgment. The Jews had no right to judge Him, but He had every right to judge them. On top of that, this authority came straight from God Himself.

John 5:28: “Marvel not at this: for the hour is coming, in the which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice,
29 And shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation.”

Here Jesus switches gears and talks about the upcoming resurrection. One day Jesus will return and raise *everyone* back to life. The timing of when this happens, and who is resurrected at what times (because there will be multiple resurrections), is well beyond the scope of this paper. It is enough to say that eventually *everyone* will be raised from the dead. Those who are righteous will be raised to live forever with God, and those who are unrighteous will be raised to be cast alive in a place of fire and brimstone, where they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.

How will this be done? By the power of Jesus Christ. Later on in the book of John He will demonstrate that power by calling out to Lazarus and raising him from the dead. One day He will return and call out to the graves, and then *everyone* will be raised back to life. This time it will not just be Lazarus.

John 5:30: “I can of mine own self do nothing: as I hear, I judge: and my judgment is just; because I seek not mine own will, but the will of the Father which hath sent me.”

Here Jesus is repeating the point that He made earlier. Jesus does not do His own will; instead He does the will of the Father. He does what the Father does, He wants what the Father wants, and He seeks what the Father seeks. As I said earlier, Jesus spends His time copying the Father. He does

nothing of His own volition; instead He does whatever the Father does. He judges justly because He judges exactly the way the Father judges.

In other words, Jesus is telling the Jews that their judgment (it is wrong to carry your bed on the Sabbath) is wrong because His judgment is perfect – and His judgment is perfect because He perfectly copies the Father. Jesus' judgment in this matter is just and can be trusted. They are the ones who are in error.

John 5:31: “If I bear witness of myself, my witness is not true.

32 There is another that beareth witness of me; and I know that the witness which he witnesseth of me is true.

33 Ye sent unto John, and he bare witness unto the truth.”

The one who was sent to bear witness of Jesus was John the Baptist. He spent a great deal of time and effort telling people that the Messiah was coming – and when the Messiah came John identified Him and pointed Him out. John left no question about who Jesus was. He explicitly identified Jesus as the Lamb of God. As Jesus pointed out, John bore witness of the truth.

(How do we know that Jesus is talking about John, and not something else? Because in verse 33 Jesus explicitly identifies what witness He is talking about.)

John 5:34: “But I receive not testimony from man: but these things I say, that ye might be saved.”

Jesus is giving these people a reality check. He is correcting the error of their ways and telling them the truth, so that they might be saved. They were lost in their own traditions and made-up laws, and had gone so far astray that they had lost sight of the truth. Jesus is telling them that He really is the Son of God, that He really is a perfect imitation (or copy, or image) of the Father, and they really do need to listen to Him because His judgment is perfect. Listening to Him is their only hope of being saved.

John 5:35: “He was a burning and a shining light: and ye were willing for a season to rejoice in his light.”

John the Baptist was a light in a dark world, pointing men to the truth. He pointed men to the true light of the world, Jesus Christ. Jesus is reminding the crowd that John's ministry was not an end of itself; the reason he came was to point men to Christ – and now that Christ was here they needed to follow Him and listen to Him.

John 5:36: “But I have greater witness than that of John: for the works which the Father hath given me to finish, the same works that I do, bear witness of me, that the Father hath sent me.”

John the Baptist witnessed of Christ – and that was a powerful and effective witness. He left no

doubt about who Jesus was; he boldly proclaimed the truth. However, that was not the only witness that Jesus had. He had a greater witness, and that was the many mighty miracles that Jesus performed. The fact that Jesus could heal this man was proof that He also had the right to tell him to carry his bed. The fact that Jesus could heal the lame, and the blind, and even raise the dead was further proof that He really was from God and He really was the Messiah. These works – these mighty miracles – bore witness of Christ. They testified that Jesus really did come from God.

John 5:37: “And the Father himself, which hath sent me, hath borne witness of me. Ye have neither heard his voice at any time, nor seen his shape.”

John the Baptist bore witness, Jesus' miracles bore witness, and God the Father Himself bore witness. The Jews had never seen the Father, but they knew His words because they were written down in the Scriptures. The Scriptures – which are the very words of God – testified of Jesus Christ. God testified long in advance about who Jesus was and what He would do. The Jews had no excuse for not recognizing Him.

Have there been times when God has spoken from Heaven? Yes there have been, and there are accounts of this in the gospels, but apparently none of the people Jesus was speaking to had been there when those events took place. God spoke in an audible voice when Jesus was baptized (Matthew 3:17), but it seems that this group was not there when that happened. Even though these people had neither seen God nor heard Him, they should still know the truth; there was no excuse for not knowing.

John 5:38: “And ye have not his word abiding in you: for whom he hath sent, him ye believe not.”

God sent His Word, but they did not accept it. God testified to them, but they did not receive God's testimony. God sent His Son, but they refused to receive Him. The Son of God was standing right there in their midst, testified by an abundance of evidence, and yet they still refused to believe.

John 5:39: “Search the scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and they are they which testify of me.”

The Jews believed that they were saved simply because they were Jews (and they still believe that to this day). They thought that, by virtue of being a Jew, their sins were automatically forgiven and they had earned God's favor. Jesus is warning them that their belief is wrong. The Scriptures that the Jews thought promised them salvation instead promised them a Messiah. They had misunderstood the Scriptures. Instead of seeing their need for a Savior, all they could see is their own self-righteousness. The Scriptures plainly taught that a Messiah was coming who would save them from their sins, but they would not listen. The Old Testament had a great deal to say about Jesus, but they were not interested in hearing it.

Jesus is telling them – in very clear and direct terms – that He is the Messiah and that they need to bow down to Him and listen to Him. But they would not hear.

John 5:40: “And ye will not come to me, that ye might have life.
41 I receive not honour from men.
42 But I know you, that ye have not the love of God in you.”

Jesus called to them, but they would not come. He told them, but they would not believe. He reasoned with them, but they would not be persuaded. John spoke to them, the miracles spoke to them, and the Scriptures spoke to them, but they would not hear. Jesus offered them forgiveness, salvation, and life, but they would not take it.

Because of this, they were lost. Because of this, they did not have the love of God in them. Because of this, they were the children of the devil, not the children of God. Because of this, they were in darkness. Because of this, they were facing the wrath of God.

John 5:43: “I am come in my Father's name, and ye receive me not: if another shall come in his own name, him ye will receive.”

This is a reference to the Antichrist. When Jesus came He came to them in the name of the Father, in the power of the Father, and by the witness of the Father, and the Jews refused to hear him. When the Antichrist comes he will come to the Jews in his own name, and with the power of the devil – and the Jews will receive him and listen to him. They refused the true Messiah but will embrace the false Messiah.

John 5:44: “How can ye believe, which receive honour one of another, and seek not the honour that cometh from God only?”

These people cared about the praise of men; they were not interested in the praise of God. They wanted men to think well of them; what God thought of them was not a concern, because they had convinced themselves that they had God's favor already just because they were Jews. They did not seek the honor that comes from God, or the forgiveness that comes from God, or the salvation that comes from God. That was a fatal mistake! When they had to choose between God and man, they chose man.

That is a choice that each of us must make. Who will we honor? Who will we serve? Who will we follow? We will have to make a choice. When that time comes, what choice will we make?

John 5:45: “Do not think that I will accuse you to the Father: there is one that accuseth you, even Moses, in whom ye trust.
46 For had ye believed Moses, ye would have believed me; for he wrote of me.
47 But if ye believe not his writings, how shall ye believe my words?”

The Jews were convinced that Moses taught that they were all saved just because they were Jews – but that is not what Moses taught at all. Moses pointed them to Christ, but they would not listen. Jesus is pointing out that He doesn't have to accuse them of anything, because they are already guilty of not listening to Moses! Moses – the man they supposedly held in such high esteem – was actually being ignored. They claimed to hear him, but they didn't. Instead of believing his writings they misused them to their own ends. Instead of hearing Moses' words, they rejected them and believed whatever

they wanted to believe. Moses wrote of Christ, but they refused to hear him. They would not listen to Christ or to Moses – and so they did not find salvation.

ROMANS 6:8-18

Romans 6:8: “Now if we be dead with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him:

9 Knowing that Christ being raised from the dead dieth no more; death hath no more dominion over him.”

In this passage Paul begins by talking about a very precious promise that has been given to Christians – the promise of everlasting life. The topic of the resurrection and everlasting life is a tremendously important one, and is worth spending some time on.

First of all, it is important to realize that this promise has *only* been given to those who are Christians. Jesus has promised everlasting *life* to those who believe on Him, and everlasting *wrath* upon those who do not. Those who trust Him will find mercy and forgiveness; those who reject Him will find judgment and condemnation.

If we have put our trust in Christ then there are two possible outcomes. If the Lord tarries and does not return in our lifetime, then the day will come when we will die. When that happens our body will be put in the ground, but our spirit will return to God. The Bible is clear about this:

2 Corinthians 5:6: “Therefore we are always confident, knowing that, whilst we are at home in the body, we are absent from the Lord:

7 (For we walk by faith, not by sight:)

8 We are confident, I say, and willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord.”

Some people teach the idea of “soul sleep”, which says that when you die you simply stay dead until the Lord returns. That belief is false! As you can see, when we die we go to be with the Lord. Our body may be dead, but we are not; instead we will be with our Savior.

However, this is not the end. The day will come when the Lord will return for His Church. When that day comes, all of the saints who are still alive will be transformed; they will become immortal, incorruptible, and perfect:

I Corinthians 15:51: “Behold, I shew you a mystery; We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed,

52 In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed.

53 For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality.

54 So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory.”

As you can see, God will raise all of the righteous dead. Their bodies will be brought back to life and they will live again. Just as Jesus' dead body was raised from the dead and made more glorious, so our bodies will also be raised from the dead. There will be a grand resurrection! Right now our

bodies are corruptible and are prone to disease, but one day they will be incorruptible. Right now we are mortal, but one day we will be immortal. That day is coming, and every day that passes brings it closer:

Romans 13:11: “And that, knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep: for now is our salvation nearer than when we believed.”

As Paul pointed out, if we are dead with Christ then we believe that we will also live with Him. In this life our bodies are subject to aging, disease, and death, but that will not always be the case. After the Lord returns He will change our bodies, and we will become very different from what we are now. While it is true that one day we will die (unless the Lord returns and raptures us), when Christ raises us from the dead we will no longer be faced with disease or death. Death will no longer have any sort of dominion over us.

There is something else that should not have dominion over us either, and that is sin:

Romans 6:10: “For in that he died, he died unto sin once: but in that he liveth, he liveth unto God.

11 Likewise reckon ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

Here the apostle Paul commands us to consider ourselves to be dead unto sin but alive unto God. To understand what that means, let's stop and think for a moment. How does a dead person respond to a situation? If you tell a dead person a joke, will he laugh? If you tell a dead person some bad news, will he cry? If you insult a dead person, will he become angry? If you threaten a dead person, will he become afraid? Of course not! After all, he's *dead*. He is beyond caring about anything you might do. Because he is dead he will not respond to you in any way. It is *impossible* to entice a dead person to do anything. After all, *he is dead*.

Paul tells us that we should treat temptations the same way a dead person treats temptations. If you tempt a dead person to sin, he isn't going to do anything. He is not going to find the temptation enticing. There will be no response from him whatsoever. When it comes to sin, we should consider ourselves to be dead men. Sin should mean absolutely nothing to us. There should be nothing tempting or desirable about it. Just as a dead man would never even consider giving in to sin (because he's *dead*), we should be the same way.

You see, Christians are called to pursue holiness. This is repeated throughout the Bible:

2 Corinthians 7:1: “Having therefore these promises, dearly beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.”

1 Thessalonians 4:7: “For God hath not called us unto uncleanness, but unto holiness.”

Hebrews 12:14: “Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord:”

God could not possibly have been any more clear about this: we are called *to holiness*. Christ

did not save us so that we could dive into sin and do whatever we want; instead He saved us so that we could do whatever *He* wants. Earlier in Romans 6 the apostle Paul attacked those who said “Well, since I'm a Christian God will forgive me, so I can do whatever I want and it doesn't matter”. The truth is that it *does* matter. God's grace *is not a license to sin*, and those who treat it as such are not Christians at all:

I John 2:3: “And hereby we do know that we know him, if we keep his commandments.

4 He that saith, I know him, and keepeth not his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him.

5 But whoso keepeth his word, in him verily is the love of God perfected: hereby know we that we are in him.”

As Christians we should have a deep and abiding hatred for sin:

Jude 1:23: “And others save with fear, pulling them out of the fire; hating even the garment spotted by the flesh.”

Christians should have no tolerance for sin in their lives; they should fight it and consider themselves to be dead to it. In other words, we should be at war with the sin in our lives. We ought to be dead to sin – not just to some sins, but to *all* sins. We should not allow sin to have its way with us:

Romans 6:12: “Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, that ye should obey it in the lusts thereof.”

Notice how Paul says *do not let sin reign over you*. Do not allow sin to do as it pleases. Do not give in to temptation. Paul commands us to fight sin.

Over and over the Bible calls Christians to a life of holiness. Many people today don't really care very much about holiness; they figure that since they're saved they can live as they please and there won't be any consequences. People simply don't take sin very seriously anymore. A lot of people in the church don't even feel the need to *read* their Bibles, let alone obey them. But the truth is that holiness is not optional. While we are not saved by our works, God *does* call us to give our lives to Him:

Romans 12:1: “I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service.

2 And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.”

God has commanded us to give our lives to Him – to offer ourselves not only as a living sacrifice, but as a *holy* sacrifice. Jesus Christ said the same thing. If we love Christ then we should demonstrate that love through obedience:

John 14:15: “If ye love me, keep my commandments.”

John 14:21: “He that hath my commandments, and keepeth them, he it is that loveth me: and he that loveth me shall be loved of my Father, and I will love him, and will manifest myself to him.”

I John 5:2: “By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God, and keep his commandments.

3 For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments: and his commandments are not grievous.”

It is true that Christians still struggle with sin in their lives, and it is also true that Christians do commit sin. However, there is a tremendous difference between a person who is trying to obey God, and one who *refuses* to obey God! There is a big difference between someone who has submitted themselves to God and is trying to serve Him, and someone who has refused to submit and is doing whatever they please. God has called us to *keep His commandments*, and He is very serious about that. If we refuse to keep His commandments (as many who claim to be Christians have done today) then we do not love Him and may not actually be Christians at all.

Another thing to notice is that Paul says we should not *let sin reign over us*. In other words, we should not give sin permission to do as it pleases in our life. Notice that Paul does *not* say “Oh, don't worry about your sins; God will fix them in time. Just live your life and let God deal with it.” The apostle talks as if our sin is something that *we can control* and is something that we are supposed to be fighting:

1 Corinthians 9:27: “But I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection: lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway.”

Hebrews 12:1: “Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us,”

Notice how Paul says that he *works hard* to keep his body under subjection. He urges men to *lay aside* their sins and run with patience. Nowhere does Paul say “Your sin is God's problem, not your problem; don't even give your sin a second thought!” Instead Paul tells us that we need to be *fighting* the sin in our life. We should be at war with it, striving against it and seeking to live a holy life.

Do you remember what Jesus told people after He did a miracle in their lives?

John 8:11: “She said, No man, Lord. And Jesus said unto her, Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more.”

John 5:14: “Afterward Jesus findeth him in the temple, and said unto him, Behold, thou art made whole: sin no more, lest a worse thing come unto thee.”

Notice that Jesus *never* said “I have removed all sin from your life; you will never sin again. You're good to go.” Instead Jesus commands them to *stop sinning* – as if they had a choice to make, and He wanted them to make the right choice. The truth is that as Christians we *do* have a choice to make.

You see, before we became Christians we truly were slaves to sin. There was no way we could

overcome the sin in our lives. However, now that we are saved the situation is very different. Now we really *do* have a choice. We can fight sin, *if we want to*. We can overcome sin, if we wish. Since we are no longer slaves to sin we can defeat sin. The temptations will still come, but we can overcome them. We will never face a temptation that is impossible to defeat:

1 Corinthians 10:13: “There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it.”

Let me repeat that: the temptations in our life *can be defeated*. God Himself promised us that every temptation we will ever face is one that we can overcome. The real question is, are we willing to fight against our sin, or would we rather take the easy road and give in?

Paul tells us that we do have a choice, and he commands us to choose to serve God:

Romans 6:13: “Neither yield ye your members as instruments of unrighteousness unto sin: but yield yourselves unto God, as those that are alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness unto God.”

Notice the stark terms that Paul uses! *We have a choice* – we can yield ourselves unto God, or we can yield ourselves unto sin. We can choose to do good or we can choose to do evil. *We have a choice*. Paul is clear about what we must do: we must choose to do right. We must yield to God and not to sin. We must choose righteousness.

You see, our lives do not belong to us. The truth is that they belong to Someone else:

I Corinthians 6:19: “What? know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own?

20 For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's.”

We have been bought with a price – a very high price. We were purchased by the blood of Jesus, who died to save us:

I Peter 1:18: “Forasmuch as ye know that ye were not redeemed with corruptible things, as silver and gold, from your vain conversation received by tradition from your fathers;

19 But with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot:”

Our life *is no longer our own*. We now belong to Jesus, and *He* is our master! Since we are His servants we ought to serve Him instead of ourselves. Our body is *not* our own, and we are *not* free to do with it as we please.

This is a big deal. There are many people today who call themselves Christians but who would never even dream of obeying God. They think that they can do whatever they please, whenever they please, and there will never be any consequences. They think that you don't have to give control of your life to God in order to be saved; as long as you ask God to keep you from going to Hell you will

be just fine.

But that is not what Christ taught. He was clear that in order to be saved we *must* repent of our sins:

Matthew 4:17: “From that time Jesus began to preach, and to say, Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

Matthew 9:13: “But go ye and learn what that meaneth, I will have mercy, and not sacrifice: for I am not come to call the righteous, but sinner to repentance.”

Matthew 11:20: “Then began he to upbraid the cities wherein most of his mighty works were done, because they repented not.”

Mark 1:14: “Now after that John was put in prison, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God,
15 And saying, The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe the gospel.”

Luke 13:3: “I tell you, Nay: but, except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish.”

Notice how clear Jesus was! If you do not repent, *you will perish*. A person who says “God, I’m not sorry about my sins and I am never going to stop sinning” is *not* a Christian. It doesn’t matter if that person believes that Jesus is the Son of God and died and rose back to life again. It is true that you *do* have to believe that in order to be saved, but guess what? Even *demons* believe that! You have to do more than just believe, *you must repent*.

It all comes down to an issue of authority. People today don’t want to go to Hell, but they also don’t want to give God control over their lives. They foolishly think that they can be saved without repenting of their sin and without ever seeking forgiveness for it. They think that they can be saved without giving God control over their lives. They believe that as long as they’ve asked God to take them to Heaven, they are covered and they can go back into the world and continue living like the devil. People are convinced they can be saved without giving up their sins.

But they are badly wrong. In order to be saved Jesus must be our Savior *and* our Lord. If we refuse to make Him our Lord then He will not be our Savior either. If we tell Jesus “I will never, ever obey you; your commands mean nothing to me” then we are lost. Those who mock the words of God and refuse to obey Him *are lost*. The Bible is very clear about this:

1 John 2:4: “He that saith, I know him, and keepeth not his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him.”

Now, this does *not* mean that we are saved by our works, or that we have to maintain our salvation through obedience. Our salvation has been purchased for us by the blood of Christ; it was bought by His works and imputed to us. We are saved (and will forever remain saved) by His death, not by our works:

Galatians 2:16: “Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be

justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law: for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified.”

However, true salvation *always* results in a changed heart and a changed life. It creates people who love God and want to obey Him. Anyone who mocks the commands of God is not a Christian at all.

In order to become a Christian you *must* submit yourself to God's authority. If you will not do that then you cannot be saved. Either God is your master or He isn't. You cannot have it both ways.

The apostle Paul makes it clear that God requires Christians to fight the sin in their life and choose to serve God instead of their own fleshly lusts. We have a choice, and He commands us to choose righteousness. The reason we have the power to choose righteousness is because sin no longer has dominion over us:

Romans 6:14: “For sin shall not have dominion over you: for ye are not under the law, but under grace.”

We are no longer slaves to sin, so we should not act like we are slaves to sin. Since sin is no longer our master, we should not serve sin. Instead we should consider ourselves to be dead to sin and we should serve God with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength.

Verse 14 has another powerful truth: we are no longer under the Mosaic Law. Before Christ died the Law of Moses reigned supreme. Men were bound by its decrees – to its laws of purification, to its system of sacrifices, and to its many commands. This Law proved to be a heavy weight that no one could carry. No one could keep the Law, so all men were condemned by it. Since no one could keep the Law perfectly, it was impossible to be saved by it. Instead men constantly fell short.

But that does not mean that the Law was pointless. Paul tells us that the Law was intended to show us our need for Christ:

Galatians 3:24: “Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith.”

You see, since we could not keep the Law, that meant we could not obtain salvation by the Law. Therefore we had to look for salvation from another source – and that source is Christ. Jesus *was* able to keep the Law perfectly. Since He was sinless (and therefore had no sins of His own to suffer for), He could suffer in our place and die for our sins. He – and He alone – could be our Savior. Since we are saved by Him we are no longer under the Law; instead we are under His grace. Instead of trusting in our own righteousness to save us, we trust in *His* righteousness. Since His righteousness is perfect and spotless, our salvation is assured. (This is why we no longer have to obey the Law of Moses; since we are not under the Law its decrees are not binding to us.)

However, this does *not* mean we have a license to sin:

Romans 6:15: “What then? shall we sin, because we are not under the law, but under grace? God forbid.”

This goes back to what was said earlier: there are some people who use God's grace as an excuse to indulge in sin. They say “Well, since God will forgive me, I can do whatever I please and all will be well”. There are others who say “Well, since I'm not under the Law anymore that means that

everything is just fine. God no longer has any commands He expects me to follow”. Both of those thoughts are utter foolishness. God gave us His grace to save us *from* sin, not save us *to* sin! God did not free us from the Mosaic Law so that we could be lawless; instead He freed us so that we might obey Him! While it is true that we are no longer bound by the Law of Moses, it is *not* true that God has freed us from all commands. The New Testament is full of commands that *are* binding on the Church, and God commands us to obey them. Sin is still sin and it is still wrong. We are *not* free to sin. No man can serve two masters:

Romans 6:16: “Know ye not, that to whom ye yield yourselves servants to obey, his servants ye are to whom ye obey; whether of sin unto death, or of obedience unto righteousness?”

Sin is not harmless, nor is it a “victimless crime”. Sin leads to *death*. It is fatal. We can choose to serve sin or we can choose to serve righteousness, but we *cannot* choose both. Do we want to be the servants of God or the servants of the devil? Our choices have very real consequences! In the past, before we became Christians, we were the servants of sin – but God saved us from that:

Romans 6:17: “But God be thanked, that ye were the servants of sin, but ye have obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine which was delivered you.
18 Being then made free from sin, ye became the servants of righteousness.”

God has freed us from our sin. We are now the servants of righteousness – so we should seek righteousness. If we refuse to seek righteousness and instead seek to live a life of sin then we are not Christians at all.

EZEKIEL 8:1 – 14:23

At this point in history Judah was facing the judgment of God. Although they pretended to serve God, their heart really belonged to idols. God was angry with His people for their disobedience. When God gave them the land of Canaan He told them that if they served Him He would bless them, but if they abandoned Him He would curse them. He warned them that if they disobeyed He would evict them from the land and they would go into exile.

God raised up the prophet Ezekiel to warn the people that God's judgment was coming. He had already sent prophet after prophet to warn them, but they refused to hear. The time of warning was almost over; exile was just around the corner.

When Idols Multiply: Ezekiel 8:1-9:11

Ezekiel 8:1: “And it came to pass in the sixth year, in the sixth month, in the fifth day of the month, as I sat in mine house, and the elders of Judah sat before me, that the hand of the Lord God fell there upon me.”

The leaders of Judah came to talk to the prophet Ezekiel, but God wasn't interested in hearing what they had to say. Instead God had a message for them. The Lord had a serious problem with the way the elders were living their lives. They were hypocrites, and God was about to expose them for who they really were.

Ezekiel 8:2: “Then I beheld, and lo a likeness as the appearance of fire: from the appearance of his loins even downward, fire; and from his loins even upward, as the appearance of brightness, as the colour of amber.

3 And he put forth the form of an hand, and took me by a lock of mine head; and the spirit lifted me up between the earth and the heaven, and brought me in the visions of God to Jerusalem, to the door of the inner gate that looketh toward the north; where was the seat of the image of jealousy, which provoketh to jealousy.

4 And, behold, the glory of the God of Israel was there, according to the vision that I saw in the plain.

5 Then said he unto me, Son of man, lift up thine eyes now the way toward the north. So I lifted up mine eyes the way toward the north, and behold northward at the gate of the altar this image of jealousy in the entry.

6 He said furthermore unto me, Son of man, seest thou what they do? even the great abominations that the house of Israel committeth here, that I should go far off from my sanctuary? but turn thee yet again, and thou shalt see greater abominations.”

God used His power to show Ezekiel a vision of Jerusalem – a city that was full of idols. The people there were not worshipping God with a pure heart, for they had erected an idol – the “image of

jealousy”. The very first commandment God gave Israel was to have no other gods before Him, and yet the people had disobeyed and turned away from Him. They thought they could still offer sacrifices in the Temple while serving other gods as well. God rebuked their behavior as a great abomination and warned them that their offenses were driving Him away from the Temple. Israel was about to lose the presence of God.

Ezekiel 8:10: “So I went in and saw; and behold every form of creeping things, and abominable beasts, and all the idols of the house of Israel, portrayed upon the wall round about.

11 And there stood before them seventy men of the ancients of the house of Israel, and in the midst of them stood Jaazaniah the son of Shaphan, with every man his censer in his hand; and a thick cloud of incense went up.

12 Then said he unto me, Son of man, hast thou seen what the ancients of the house of Israel do in the dark, every man in the chambers of his imagery? for they say, the Lord seeth us not; the Lord hath forsaken the earth.”

God revealed to Ezekiel the utter hypocrisy of the elders who were sitting in front of him. In public these men claimed to serve God, but in private they had erected idols in their homes and were serving them. Their public service to God was just a front; in reality they were idolaters, and their hearts were far from God! They thought that God couldn't see through their hypocrisy, and that they could fool both the people of the land and God Himself. However, *they were wrong*. God saw what they were doing in private in their homes and He was not amused. No one can hide their sin from God.

Ezekiel 8:17: “Then he said unto me, Hast thou seen this, O son of man? Is it a light thing to the house of Judah that they commit the abominations which they commit here? for they have filled the land with violence, and have returned to provoke me to anger: and, lo, they put the branch to their nose.

18 Therefore will I also deal in fury: mine eye shall not spare, neither will I have pity: and though they cry in mine ears with a loud voice, yet will I not hear them.”

God told Ezekiel that because of their disobedience – because of the way they were serving false gods and had abandoned Him – He was going to pour out His judgment upon them. He warned them that His eye would not spare them and He would not have pity on them. They were about to receive the full consequences of their rebellion against God. When the day of judgment came, they would cry out to God for mercy but He would not hear them. By then it would be too late.

Ezekiel 9:4: “And the Lord said unto him, Go through the midst of the city, through the midst of Jerusalem, and set a mark upon the foreheads of the men that sigh and that cry for all the abominations that be done in the midst thereof.

5 And to the others he said in mine hearing, Go ye after him through the city, and smite: let not your eye spare, neither have ye pity:

6 Slay utterly old and young, both maids, and little children, and women: but come not near any man upon whom is the mark; and begin at my sanctuary. Then they

began at the ancient men which were before the house.

7 And he said unto them, Defile the house, and fill the courts with the slain: go ye forth. And they went forth, and slew in the city.”

Here God shows Ezekiel a preview of the judgment that is coming. Before God sent judgment upon the land, He had the people who feared God marked. Those who served God and who were appalled at the wickedness that was around them received a protective mark so that they would be spared in the judgment. God then ordered that everyone else be killed without mercy or pity. Only those who served God would be spared; everyone else would die – and judgment would start in God's sanctuary.

God warned the Israelites long ago that there would be serious consequences to idolatry. Although the people took God lightly and ignored His warnings, that did not change what was about to happen. God promised there would be consequences, and there were consequences. God promised to remove them from the land if they disobeyed, and that was what He was going to do. God always keeps His promises.

There are some people who believe that God is some sort of harmless figure who would never punish anyone and who only exists to make all our dreams come true. As we can see, that is not the case. God is a very serious God! Although He will have mercy on all those who repent and who come to Him for forgiveness, He will pour out His judgment upon the rebellious. There are eternal consequences to rejecting the mercy of God and serving other gods.

When God Leaves: Ezekiel 10:1-11:25

Ezekiel 10:4: “Then the glory of the Lord went up from the cherub, and stood over the threshold of the house; and the house was filled with the cloud, and the court was full of the brightness of the Lord's glory. . .

18 Then the glory of the Lord departed from off the threshold of the house, and stood over the cherubims.

19 And the cherubims lifted up their wings, and mounted up from the earth in my sight: when they went out, the wheels also were beside them, and every one stood at the door of the east gate of the Lord's house; and the glory of the God of Israel was over them above.”

What we see in this chapter is that the glory of God was leaving the Temple. In the Old Testament God commanded Israel to build a tabernacle. That was where the nation brought their sacrifices and offerings, which were offered by the priests. Later Solomon built a Temple and the offerings were made there.

The Temple was a special building because God manifested His glory there. Once a year the High Priest would enter the Holy of Holies in order to make atonement for the sins of the nation. When the High Priest entered the Holy of Holies he stepped into a room that was filled with the presence of God and lit by the glory of God.

The Temple was literally the house of God. That is where people approached God for forgiveness. That is where they inquired of God to seek guidance. That is where they offered their fellowship and praise offerings. The Temple was the center of their relationship with God. In order for

there to be a sacrificial system at all, they had to have a Temple and the Temple had to have God's presence in it.

However, the idolatry of the people had offended God. He was angry with them for their hypocrisy. God had warned them time and again to repent, but they refused. Since they were worshipping Him falsely, God decided to leave. In this passage we see God leaving the Temple. He would no longer reside in it. He removed His glory from it, leaving it as an empty house. The people might still come and offer sacrifices, but God would no longer be there to receive them. God had no interest in the hypocritical sacrifices of people whose hearts belonged to another god.

This act of leaving the Temple effectively put an end to the sacrificial system until the next Temple was built. God really had abandoned the nation and no longer had any respect for their offerings. He would not receive them again until after the period of exile was over.

Ezekiel 11:1: "Moreover the spirit lifted me up, and brought me unto the east gate of the Lord's house, which looketh eastward: and behold at the door of the gate five and twenty men; among whom I saw Jaazaniah the son of Azur, and Pelatiah the son of Benaiah, princes of the people.

2 Then said he unto me, Son of man, these are the men that devise mischief, and give wicked counsel in this city:

3 Which say, It is not near; let us build houses: this city is the caldron, and we be the flesh."

Here God condemned the leaders of the people. Even though God had sent prophets to warn the nation that judgment was near, the princes were telling the people otherwise. They said that judgment was not near at all. They urged people to build houses, because nothing bad was about to happen. They compared the city to a choice bowl of meat, claiming that God loved the city and was going to protect it.

In other words, the princes were lying to the people. They were urging them to ignore the warnings of the prophets and to continue living their lives as normal. They were urging people not to repent, not to take God seriously, and not to change their ways. They were giving wicked counsel, and the Lord was angry about it.

Ezekiel 11:8: "Ye have feared the sword; and I will bring a sword upon you, saith the Lord God.

9 And I will bring you out of the midst thereof, and deliver you into the hands of strangers, and will execute judgments among you.

10 Ye shall fall by the sword; I will judge you in the border of Israel; and ye shall know that I am the Lord.

11 This city shall not be your caldron, neither shall ye be the flesh in the midst thereof; but I will judge you in the border of Israel:

12 And ye shall know that I am the Lord: for ye have not walked in my statutes, neither executed my judgments, but have done after the manners of the heathen that are round about you."

God told them that since they had disobeyed Him and lived wickedly as the pagans, He would

bring the sword upon them. Since they refused to listen to Him and instead served other gods, He was going to kill them. They would die by the sword. The judgment that they said was never going to come would come, and it would come soon. The very thing that they feared would happen to them. They would be proven to be liars – and they would die for their sins. They had misled the people, and they would be punished for it.

Ezekiel 11:13: “And it came to pass, when I prophesied, that Pelatiah the son of Benaiah died. Then fell I down upon my face, and cried with a loud voice, and said, Ah Lord God! wilt thou make a full end of the remnant of Israel?”

Pelatiah was one of the princes that God had singled out *by name* as lying to the people and misleading them about the coming judgment. As punishment for what he had done, God struck him dead on the spot. The elders thought that God had not seen their sin, but they were wrong. The elders thought that God was not going to judge them, but they were wrong. God proved to them that He did know what was going on and that His judgment was very real.

Ezekiel 11:16: “Therefore say, Thus saith the Lord God; Although I have cast them far off among the heathen, and although I have scattered them among the countries, yet will I be to them as a little sanctuary in the countries where they shall come.

17 Therefore say, Thus saith the Lord God; I will even gather you from the people, and assemble you out of the countries where ye have been scattered, and I will give you the land of Israel.

18 And they shall come thither, and they shall take away all the detestable things thereof and all the abominations thereof from thence.

19 And I will give them one heart, and I will put a new spirit within you; and I will take the stony heart out of their flesh, and will give them an heart of flesh:

20 That they may walk in my statutes, and keep mine ordinances, and do them: and they shall be my people, and I will be their God.

21 But as for them whose heart walketh after the heart of their detestable things and their abominations, I will recompense their way upon their own heads, saith the Lord God.”

In this passage God addresses two different groups of people. God says to those who walk after the abominations of their heart, and who disobey Him, that He will repay them for the evil they have done. He will be against them. Instead of blessing they will receive cursing. God will watch over them for evil, not for good.

However, God said there would also be a faithful remnant who feared God and walked in His ways. God promised to be with that remnant. He said He would take care of them while they were in exile, and He would bring them back to the land. He promised to give them a new heart and a new spirit. He said that they would be His people and He would be their God. Although they would be in exile for a while, their exile would not last forever. God would remember them and bring them back.

What Exile Is Like: Ezekiel 12:1-28

Ezekiel 12:1: “The word of the Lord also came unto me, saying,
2 Son of man, thou dwellest in the midst of a rebellious house, which have eyes to see, and see not; they have ears to hear, and hear not: for they are a rebellious house.

3 Therefore, thou son of man, prepare thee stuff for removing, and remove by day in their sight; and thou shalt remove from thy place to another place in their sight: it may be they will consider, though they be a rebellious house.

4 Then shalt thou bring forth thy stuff by day in their sight, as stuff for removing: and thou shalt go forth at even in their sight, as they that go forth into captivity.

5 Dig thou through the wall in their sight, and carry out thereby.

6 In their sight shalt thou bear it upon thy shoulders, and carry it forth in the twilight: thou shalt cover thy face, that thou see not the ground: for I have set thee for a sign unto the house of Israel.

7 And I did so as I was commanded: I brought forth my stuff by day, as stuff for captivity, and in the even I digged through the wall with mine hand; I brought it forth in the twilight, and I bare it upon my shoulder in their sight.”

For a long time God sent prophets to warn the people that judgment was coming. Prophet after prophet had warned the people of the coming judgment, but the people refused to listen. Although they had ears, they refused to hear what God was telling them. Although they had eyes, they refused to see. They simply would not listen.

Because of this God decided to use Ezekiel as an object lesson. God commanded Ezekiel to act something out in the sight of the people so that they could have a graphic illustration of what was about to happen to them. God told Ezekiel to gather his stuff, dig through the wall, bring it out at night, and carry it away on his shoulder. When the prophet did this the people would see and ask questions. God then explained what was going on:

Ezekiel 12:9: “Son of man, hath not the house of Israel, the rebellious house, said unto thee, What doest thou?

10 Say thou unto them, Thus saith the Lord God; This burden concerneth the prince in Jerusalem, and all the house of Israel that are among them.

11 Say, I am your sign: like as I have done, so shall it be done unto them: they shall remove and go into captivity.

12 And the prince that is among them shall bear upon his shoulder in the twilight, and shall go forth: they shall dig through the wall to carry out thereby: he shall cover his face, that he see not the ground with his eyes.

13 My net also will I spread upon him, and he shall be taken in my snare: and I will bring him to Babylon to the land of the Chaldeans; yet shall he not see it, though he shall die there.

14 And I will scatter toward every wind all that are about him to help him, and all his bands; and I will draw out the sword after them.

15 And they shall know that I am the Lord, when I shall scatter them among the nations, and disperse them in the countries.

16 But I will leave a few men of them from the sword, from the famine, and from the pestilence; that they may declare all their abominations among the heathen whither they come; and they shall know that I am the Lord.”

Now that the people have seen the object lesson, God told Ezekiel to explain what it meant. God told them that Israel was about to go into captivity. King Zedekiah was going to be blinded and brought to Babylon, and he would die there. The people would be scattered among the nations. The king himself would do what Ezekiel had done.

Incidentally, this is exactly what happened. When King Zedekiah rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian king came and besieged Jerusalem. When the city fell he took King Zedekiah, killed his sons in front of him, put out his eyes, and carried him to Babylon where he died. The very thing that God warned them about came to pass.

Ezekiel 12:17: “Moreover the word of the Lord came to me, saying,
18 Son of man, eat thy bread with quaking, and drink thy water with trembling and with carefulness;
19 And say unto the people of the land, Thus saith the Lord God of the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and of the land of Israel; They shall eat their bread with carefulness, and drink their water with astonishment, that her land may be desolate from all that is therein, because of the violence of all them that dwell therein.
20 And the cities that are inhabited shall be laid waste, and the land shall be desolate; and ye shall know that I am the Lord.”

God was not done with His object lessons. In this demonstration He had Ezekiel eat with great fear and drink with trembling and caution. God then told the people that they were going to do exactly as Ezekiel had done. Their princes had told them that nothing bad was going to happen – that judgment was not near and everything was fine. However, the truth was very different: fear and judgment were coming upon them. God warned them that their cities would be laid waste and the land would be made desolate. What Ezekiel had done, they would do.

Ezekiel 12:26: “Again the word of the Lord came to me, saying.
27 Son of man, behold, they of the house of Israel say, The vision that he seeth is for many days to come, and he prophesieth of the times that are far off.
28 Therefore say unto them, Thus saith the Lord God; There shall none of my words be prolonged any more, but the word which I have spoken shall be done, saith the Lord God.”

When Ezekiel acted out these object lessons the people still refused to hear. They claimed that Ezekiel's prophecies were for a long time from now. They said that the judgment would fall upon someone else, not them. They saw no need to repent or change their ways. They just dismissed Ezekiel's words as not pertaining to them at all!

God was not pleased by this, and commanded Ezekiel to warn them that the judgment was not going to be prolonged and was at hand. He told them that the things He had spoken were going to be done – and that is what happened. These people dismissed God's warnings, and it killed them.

Why False Faith Imperils: Ezekiel 13:1-23

Ezekiel 13:1: “And the word of the Lord came unto me, saying,
2 Son of man, prophesy against the prophets of Israel that prophesy, and say thou unto them that prophesy out of their own hearts, Hear ye the word of the Lord;
3 Thus saith the Lord God; Woe unto the foolish prophets, that follow their own spirit, and have seen nothing!
4 O Israel, thy prophets are like the foxes in the deserts.
5 Ye have not gone up into the gaps, neither made up the hedge for the house of Israel to stand in the battle in the day of the Lord.
6 They have seen vanity and lying divination, saying, The Lord saith: and the Lord hath not sent them: and they have made others to hope that they would confirm the word.
7 Have ye not seen a vain vision, and have ye not spoken a lying divination, whereas ye say, The Lord saith it; albeit I have not spoken?”

Here God is pronouncing judgment upon the false prophets that plagued the land. At the time there were many people who were claiming to have heard a word from the Lord – but they were lying. They said that God had spoken to them, but God had never spoken to them at all. Instead they were claiming to be a prophet so that people would listen to them, and they were proclaiming lies and deceit. They were using the title of prophet to mislead the people.

This was a very serious crime. Under the Mosaic Law, false prophets were to be put to death. Proclaiming lies in the name of the Lord was a terrible offense.

Ezekiel 13:8: “Therefore thus saith the Lord God; Because ye have spoken vanity, and seen lies, therefore, behold, I am against you, saith the Lord God.
9 And mine hand shall be upon the prophets that see vanity, and that divine lies: they shall not be in the assembly of my people, neither shall they be written in the writing of the house of Israel, neither shall they enter into the land of Israel; and ye shall know that I am the Lord God.
10 Because, even because they have seduced my people, saying, Peace; and there was no peace; and one built up a wall, and, lo, others daubed it with untempered mortar:
11 Say unto them which daub it with untempered mortar, that it shall fall: there shall be an overflowing shower; and ye, O great hailstones, shall fall; and a stormy wind shall rend it.”

These prophets were urging people not to repent. They were saying that peace was at hand, judgment would not come, and everything was fine. Because of this – because of their lies and deceit – God was against them. God said He would remove them from His people. He was going to destroy them, and their work, and their lies. The peace that they falsely proclaimed would be destroyed. The lies that they uttered would be exposed. God would judge them for the wickedness they had done.

Ezekiel 13:19: “And will ye pollute me among my people for handfuls of barley and for pieces of bread, to slay the souls that should not die, and to save the souls alive that should not live, by your lying to my people that hear your lies? . . .

22 Because with lies ye have made the heart of the righteous sad, whom I have not made sad; and strengthened the hands of the wicked, that he should not return from his wicked way, by promising him life:

23 Therefore ye shall see no more vanity, nor divine divinations: for I will deliver my people out of your hand: and ye shall know that I am the Lord.”

These were the terrible crimes of these false prophets: they discouraged the righteous and they strengthened the wicked. They made the lives of the righteous more difficult, and they urged the wicked to not repent by saying that things would go well with him. Because of these sins God said He would destroy these false prophets and would deliver the people from these liars.

Where Idolatry Leads: Ezekiel 14:1-23

Ezekiel 14:1: “Then came certain of the elders of Israel unto me, and sat before me.

2 And the word of the Lord came unto me, saying,

3 Son of man, these men have set up their idols in their heart, and put the stumblingblock of their iniquity before their face: should I be enquired of at all by them?

4 Therefore speak unto them, and say unto them, Thus saith the Lord God; Every man of the house of Israel that setteth up his idols in his heart, and putteth the stumblingblock of his iniquity before his face, and cometh to the prophet; I the Lord will answer him that cometh according to the multitude of his idols;

5 That I may take the house of Israel in their own heart, because they are all estranged from me through their idols.”

In this passage we see that the elders of Israel have come to Ezekiel so that they could enquire of God. They wanted God's help – but God was not interested in helping them. They wanted to do things for God, but they had no interest in serving God alone. God had no interest in hearing from them because their hearts belongs to other gods. They were serving idols.

Somehow these people thought that they could worship idols and rebel against God, and yet God would still be there to rescue them whenever they needed Him. But God was not interested in that bargain! God said that He would not hear them because of the idols that were in their hearts. Since they had rebelled against Him and served other gods, they were estranged from Him. Their idols were a stumblingblock and invited God's wrath upon them. God was not their friend and He was not going to aid them.

Ezekiel 14:6: “Therefore say unto the house of Israel, Thus saith the Lord God; Repent, and turn yourselves from your idols; and turn away your faces from all your

abominations.

7 For every one of the house of Israel, or of the stranger that sojourneth in Israel, which separateth himself from me, and setteth up his idols in his heart, and putteth the stumblingblock of his iniquity before his face, and cometh to a prophet to enquire of him concerning me; I the Lord will answer him by myself:

8 And I will set my face against that man, and will make him a sign and a proverb, and I will cut him off from the midst of my people; and ye shall know that I am the Lord.”

God commanded these wicked men to destroy their idols and repent of their sins. He ordered them to serve God alone and stop being hypocrites. He told them to turn away from all of their abominations, and warned them that if they did not then His wrath would be upon them. God said that if they did not repent He would be against them, and would make him “a sign and a proverb”. God's judgment against that person would be so great that he would become *a proverb!* God would cut them off and make it apparent to everyone that He was God and He was not to be trifled with.

Ezekiel 14:13: “Son of man, when the land sinneth against me by trespassing grievously, then will I stretch out mine hand upon it, and will break the staff of the bread thereof, and will send famine upon it, and will cut off man and beast from it:

14 Though these three men, Noah, Daniel, and Job, were in it, they should deliver but their own souls by their righteousness, saith the Lord God.

15 If I cause noisome beasts to pass through the land, and they spoil it, so that it be desolate, that no man may pass through because of the beasts:

16 Though these three men were in it, as I live, saith the Lord God, they shall deliver neither sons nor daughters; they only shall be delivered, but the land shall be desolate.”

There were some who were saying “Oh, God will never judge this land because our ancestors were righteous.” In the time before the crucifixion of Jesus there were many who thought that since Abraham was their father, that alone was enough to get them into Heaven. All they needed in order to win favor with God was a couple righteous ancestors. Those righteous people would then purchase God's favor for everyone else, which mean that the people could live as they pleased.

In this passage God is telling them that they are very much mistaken. The righteousness of their ancestors was only enough to deliver themselves; it had no saving power for anyone else! It didn't matter how good Noah, Daniel, and Job may have been; all that mattered was the righteousness of each individual person. You cannot earn favor with God by the righteousness of your forefathers. God is not going to give you credit for their actions.

God is warning the people that when the nation sins, God will pronounce judgment upon it no matter who used to live in the land. If the nation trespasses then God will send famine upon the land. He will kill both its inhabitants and the animals who lived in it. God takes sin seriously and He judges nations for it.

Ezekiel 14:21: “For thus saith the Lord God; How much more when I send my four sore judgments upon Jerusalem, the sword, and the famine, and the noisome beast,

and the pestilence, to cut off from it man and beast?

22 Yet, behold, therein shall be left a remnant that shall be brought forth, both sons and daughters: behold, they shall come forth unto you, and ye shall see their way and their doings: and ye shall be comforted concerning the evil that I have brought upon Jerusalem, even concerning all that I have brought upon it.

23 And they shall comfort you, when ye see their ways and their doings: and ye shall know that I have not done without cause all that I have done in it, saith the Lord God.”

God warned the people that He was going to send four judgments upon the land: war, invasion, animal attacks, and disease. These four judgments would kill people and make the land desolate. However, God also said that He would not make a full end of the people. Although He was going to judge them, He was not going to kill them all. He would leave a remnant behind.

HEBREWS 1

Who Wrote Hebrews?

There is a great deal of uncertainty about who wrote the book of Hebrews. Most of the other books in the Bible explicitly identify their author – for example, Paul's various letters all state that they were written by Paul himself. This makes it very clear who the letter was coming from.

Hebrews, though, is different. Whoever wrote it did not identify himself anywhere in the letter. Many people throughout history have claimed that Paul wrote the letter, but there are a number of problems with that theory.

First of all, Paul begins every single one of his letters with the word “Paul”. He *always* identifies himself as the author! The reason Paul did this was in order to weed out imposters who might claim to be him:

2 Thessalonians 3:17: “The salutation of Paul with mine own hand, which is the token in every epistle: so I write.”

As you can see, Paul went on record as saying that he *always* signs his letters and identifies himself. That fact alone makes it extremely unlikely that Paul wrote the book of Hebrews: if he had written it *he would have signed it*.

The second problem with Pauline authorship is that the author of Hebrews doesn't claim to have heard the gospel firsthand. Instead he claims to have heard it from the apostles:

Hebrews 2:3: “How shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation; which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed unto us by them that heard him;

4 God also bearing them witness, both with signs and wonders, and with divers miracles, and gifts of the Holy Ghost, according to his own will?”

As you can see, the author claimed to have heard the gospel secondhand, from people who did miracles. Paul, however, not only did miracles himself but said that he heard the gospel firsthand from Jesus Himself:

Galatians 1:12: “For I neither received it of man, neither was I taught it, but by the revelation of Jesus Christ.”

Paul, then, was not in the group of people who heard the gospel secondhand from other people who did miracles. Paul, however, was one of those who heard the gospel *firsthand* from Jesus Himself and who actually did miracles personally! This is extremely strong evidence that the author was not Paul.

On top of those two points, there is the fact that the grammar of Hebrews is completely different from Paul's style of writing. This is not the sort of thing that translates into English, but the differences in the original Greek are stark. The Greek that Paul used in his letters was fairly simple and

straightforward, whereas Hebrews was written in a very complicated way that was more similar to Classical Greek. Also, Hebrews quotes from the Greek translation of the Old Testament whereas Paul quoted straight from the original Hebrew.

If Paul did not write this book then who did? Scholars have suggested a whole list of possibilities: Luke, Barnabas, Peter, Timothy, Silas, Philip, Jude, and Clement of Rome. But there is simply no way to know.

When Was Hebrews Written?

Even though the book of Hebrews doesn't contain a date, we can still approximate its time of writing. Since Clement of Rome quoted from Hebrews in AD 95, it must have existed by then. Since the author didn't mention the destruction of the Temple in AD 70 then it was almost certainly written before that date. After all, one of the key themes of the letter was that the Temple system was passing away, and if the Temple had already been destroyed then that would have been a huge argument in the author's favor. If the Temple had already been destroyed, the author would definitely have mentioned it.

There is also the fact that in the book the author mentions that the audience was being persecuted but had not yet suffered martyrdom:

Hebrews 12:4: “Ye have not yet resisted unto blood, striving against sin.”

Emperor Nero began killing Christians in AD 64. Therefore it seems likely that this letter was written in the early 60s – if not earlier than that.

As far as the *place* of writing goes, the author says he was writing from Italy:

Hebrews 13:24: “Salute all them that have the rule over you, and all the saints. They of Italy salute you.”

However, this doesn't mean the letter was written from Rome. It could have been written from anywhere in Italy.

Who Was The Letter Sent To?

At first glance it seems that the answer to this question is obvious. After all, the letter is called “Hebrews”. However, that title was attached to the book in the late second century and is not actually part of the text.

Since the letter appears to assume that the audience has a good working knowledge of the Levitical sacrificial system, it seems highly likely that the original recipients were Jewish Christians. Only they would have had the background needed to understand all the references to the Mosaic system that the letter makes. Gentile believers would have had a great deal of trouble understanding the links between the Jewish sacrificial system and the death of Christ, because they wouldn't have been familiar with the Mosaic Law. This letter makes a lot more sense if it really was written to Jewish believers.

One thing we don't know is where these recipients lived. People have made all sorts of guesses, but there's simply no way to know. Some people have speculated that this letter may have been written to the believers in Jerusalem, but the text doesn't actually say that.

The Themes Of The Book

The book of Hebrews has a number of key points:

1. Jesus, God's Son and His Ultimate Word, is superior to the prophets, angels, and Moses.
2. Believers must not neglect their salvation
3. Jesus shared our humanity and provided the means for our atonement
4. God's Word is living, effective, and discerning
5. Christ's priesthood is superior to Aaron's priesthood
6. Believers must avoid the peril of spiritual stagnation and persevere in the faith
7. Jesus is the mediator of a new and superior covenant
8. Christ's self-sacrifice is all-sufficient and eternal
9. The Heavenly Father disciplines His children

As this series continues we will explore these points.

Now that we've been introduced to the book, let's take a look at what the book has to tell us.

Hebrews 1

The book begins by taking a look at the way things used to be:

Hebrews 1:1: “God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets,”

In the Old Testament God used a variety of ways to speak to His people. Sometimes God spoke to them through prophets: He sent men like Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Isaiah, and Samuel to tell His people His messages. In other times He spoke to people through angels – like the time He sent angels to remove Lot and his family from Sodom. Sometimes God spoke to people through a dream, such as the time He spoke to King Solomon and asked him what gift he wanted. There was even a time when God opened the mouth of Balaam's donkey and used that donkey to rebuke the errant Balaam.

So we see that God has used a wide variety of methods. However, all of that is now changed. In these last days God has *stopped* speaking through prophets, and visions, and angels, and donkeys. He now uses just one method to speak to His people:

Hebrews 1:2a: “Hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son”

God now speaks to us through His Son, and *only* through His Son. He no longer speaks to people through angels or visions or dreams; He only speaks to us *through His Son*. In the days of the

Old Testament God would speak to His people from time to time and give them new revelation, but God no longer does that. Instead God has taken the words of His Son and has placed them into the New Testament. It is crucial to realize that the Bible says that it contains 100% of the revelation that we need:

2 Timothy 3:16: “All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness:
17 That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.”

What this passage is saying is that the information contained within the Bible is enough to enable us to perform *all* good works. In other words, *we do not need any other divine revelation!* The Bible contains all of the revelation from God that we need in order to do *everything* that God wants us to do.

Now, this does not mean that we don't need to listen to sermons or go to church. Listening to the pastor preach the Word is a good thing, because if he is doing his job then he is telling us what God has said to us in His Word. That is something we very much need to hear.

What it does mean is that if someone comes to us and tells us that God gave them new revelation, we know immediately that they are wrong. If someone says “God told me this” or “God revealed this to me” then they *must* be wrong, because God has stopped giving new revelation. If God was continuing to give new revelation then that would mean the Bible was *not* sufficient, which would mean that 2 Timothy 3:17 was a lie – but Jesus said the Scripture could not be broken.

You see, you cannot have it both ways! If God is giving people new revelation then the Bible is not sufficient. It means that God left important things out of the Bible and then lied about it – but we know that is impossible. Since that is impossible, God must not be giving out new revelation. (I know I'm repeating myself, but this is a critical point: *God is not giving out new revelation.*)

In our day people claim to receive new revelation all the time. Popular Bible teachers stand up and say “I had a vision, and God told me to tell you these things”. But the truth is the Bible says that God *does not do that*. God used to do that, but He doesn't do it anymore. If someone is claiming that God came to them and gave them new revelation that is outside what the Bible says, you should run from them. Those people are false prophets, and false prophets are very dangerous.

I really want to emphasize this point. When a person stands up and says “God told me to tell you this”, when in fact God did no such thing in His Word, then that person is lying about what God has said. This is a very, very serious sin! In fact, under the Mosaic Law that sin was punishable by death:

Deuteronomy 18:20: “But the prophet, which shall presume to speak a word in my name, which I have not commanded him to speak, or that shall speak in the name of other gods, even that prophet shall die.”

You were simply *not allowed* to say “Thus saith the Lord” when God actually said no such thing. In our day it is very easy to spot false prophets: anyone who stands up and claims that God gave them new revelation is a false prophet. All of the revelation that God wants you to know can already be found in the Bible. God is not going to reveal anything new to anybody.

Another example we see of this is the case of people who claim to have had visions of Heaven. There are no end of books where the author claims to have gone into Heaven and seen all sorts of things. I have always viewed these books with great suspicion, because the books never agree with

each other. When you have five different books about Heaven and all five disagree with each other on what Heaven is like, then I can only conclude that all five books are lying. After all, five accounts that contradict each other cannot possibly be all true!

But there is a bigger problem. In the Bible there are a number of people who died and then came back to life – and *not a single one of them was allowed to tell what they saw*. Lazarus had nothing to say about his time in the afterlife. Paul was embarrassed to even mention the event at all. No one who died and came back was ever permitted to talk about it. Only one person was ever allowed to talk about Heaven, and that was the apostle John. Everyone else was forced to be silent! This is what the apostle Paul had to say about his experience:

2 Corinthians 12:4: “How that he was caught up into paradise, and heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter.”

It seems extremely unlikely that the *apostle Paul* would be forbidden to talk about Heaven, but all these other modern people are allowed to write entire *books* about it and have movies made. Even though Paul's credibility was unimpeachable, he was allowed to say *nothing*. Yet we are to believe that God has chosen to reveal the hidden secrets of Heaven to people who are not apostles and whose story we cannot verify? Does that really seem likely to you?

There is also the fact that these books about Heaven constitute new revelation. They are telling us things about God and God's home that are not included in the Bible – yet the Bible tells us that it contains everything that we need. If these books about Heaven are true then that means the Bible *isn't* sufficient and God left out a lot of details that we need to know – but we know God wouldn't do that! That can only mean that the books on Heaven are a lie. You simply cannot have it both ways: either the Bible is sufficient and contains everything that we need, or it isn't.

After talking about the way God has chosen to speak through His Son, the writer goes on to point out the preeminence of Christ:

Hebrews 1:2b: “whom he hath appointed heir of all things”

This is a very significant statement that looks forward to the coming reign of Christ. One of the great truths that has been largely lost in our day is the fact that Christ is *King*. Not only is He *a* king, but He is *the* King – the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. The day is coming when He will rule over the world and all that it contains:

Revelation 11:15: “And the seventh angel sounded; and there were great voices in heaven, saying, The kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of his Christ; and he shall reign for ever and ever.”

Revelation 20 speaks of the Millennium – the time when Jesus will reign over the world for a thousand years of peace. The reign of Christ is not limited to that time, however. The book of Daniel tells us that He will create an everlasting kingdom:

Daniel 2:44: “And in the days of these kings shall the God of heaven set up a kingdom, which shall never be destroyed: and the kingdom shall not be left to other people, but it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand for ever.”

Jesus Christ is going to reign forever and ever. Amen!

After telling us that Jesus is the heir of all things, the book of Hebrews goes on to tell us that Christ is the Creator:

Hebrews 1:2c: “by whom also he made the worlds”

Not only will Christ one day rule over the world, but He is the one who created the world in the first place! Jesus Christ created the world, saved the world, and will one day rule over the world. The one who died for us is the one who formed us in the first place.

As if all of that were not enough, we are also told that Christ is a perfect image of God the Father:

Hebrews 1:3a: “Who being the brightness of his glory, and the express image of his person”

What this means is that God the Son is a perfect reflection (or copy) of God the Father. The Son does not do His own will, but instead He does the will of the Father. The Son is perfect, as His Father is perfect. Jesus Himself told His disciples that seeing Him was the same thing as seeing the Father:

John 14:8: “Philip saith unto him, Lord, show us the Father, and it sufficeth us.
9 Jesus saith unto him, Have I been so long time with you, and yet hast thou not known me, Philip? he that hath seen me hath seen the Father; and how sayest thou then, Show us the Father?”

That is not because the two are actually the same person (they are *not*), but because Jesus perfectly reflects the person, work, and character of His Father.

Taken together, all of these verses paint an amazing picture of Christ – but the writer is not done. He has more to say:

Hebrews 1:3b: “and upholding all things by the word of his power”

Throughout history there have been people known as Deists who believe that God created the world and then walked away from His creation to allow it to do whatever it wanted. Deists teach that God doesn't interfere with mankind. However, the Bible tells us that is not the case. As we read through the Scriptures we see that God is the one who directs the flow of history, and who sets up kings and nations and destroys them. This verse tells us that Jesus actually holds Creation together – in fact, the universe continues to exist because of the continual exercise of His divine power! The universe is not something that Jesus made once and then walked away from; it is something that He continues to uphold. That is an amazing fact.

Not only did Jesus create the universe, but as we said earlier He also saved us from our sins:

Hebrews 1:3c: “when he had by himself purged our sins, sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high:”

It is an astonishing thing that God, the everlasting creator, would willingly die for the sins of

His creation. That is an incredible testament to His surpassing love for us! He freely gave Himself for us, and suffered a cruel death on the cross for our sins. He took on Himself the punishment that we deserved. What amazing love!

The author of Hebrews is making it clear that the person of Jesus is of surpassing greatness. Jesus is the heir of all things and will one day rule over all. Jesus is the one who created the universe. Jesus is the perfect image of God the Father. Jesus upholds the universe by His divine power. Jesus saved us from our sins by offering Himself as a sacrifice. The author then goes on to point out that Jesus is much, much better than the angels:

Hebrews 1:4: “Being made so much better than the angels, as he hath by inheritance obtained a more excellent name than they.

5 For unto which of the angels said he at any time, Thou art my Son, this day have I begotten thee? And again, I will be to him a Father, and he shall be to me a Son?

6 And again, when he bringeth in the firstbegotten into the world, he saith, And let all the angels of God worship him.

7 And of the angels he saith, Who maketh his angels spirits, and his ministers a flame of fire.”

Some cults claim that Jesus is just an angel, but that is a lie. Jesus is far greater than the angels; He is God, part of the Trinity! In fact, Jesus is the one who created the angels in the first place. As we can see in verse 6, the angels are commanded to worship Jesus. Our Lord is *far superior* to the angels. His power, His position, and His glory are vastly greater. God has given Jesus an everlasting throne:

Hebrews 1:8: “But unto the Son he saith, Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever: a sceptre of righteousness is the sceptre of thy kingdom.

9 Thou hast loved righteousness, and hated iniquity; therefore God, even thy God, hath anointed thee with the oil of gladness above thy fellows.”

The angels are not kings; they do not rule over creation. As we can see in Hebrews 1:7, the angels are *servants* – they carry out the will of God. Jesus, however, has an everlasting throne. He will rule over all of creation with perfect righteousness.

This matters much more than it seems. Islam teaches that its god Allah can do as he pleases: he can be both evil and good, and can choose to do right or evil. Allah is not bound by his oaths, but can break them freely. In other words, he can choose to be as evil as he wants.

That is a *tremendous* difference from the God who is revealed in the Bible. The Scriptures tell us that God is utterly perfect and righteous: He hates evil and cannot even be tempted by it. God always keeps His promises and never breaks His word. In fact, His word *cannot* be broken:

John 10:35: “If he called them gods, unto whom the word of God came, and the scripture cannot be broken;”

God is utterly upright and holy. As Hebrews 1:9 tells us, He loves righteousness and hates iniquity.

Jesus is also eternal. The universe itself will one day come to an end, but Jesus will endure forever:

Hebrews 1:10: “And, Thou, Lord, in the beginning hast laid the foundation of the earth; and the heavens are the works of thine hands:

11 They shall perish; but thou remainest; and they all shall wax old as doth a garment;

12 And as a vesture shalt thou fold them up, and they shall be changed: but thou art the same, and thy years shall not fail.”

The apostle Peter also speaks of the fact that one day the world and all that it contains will be destroyed by fire:

2 Peter 3:10: “But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up.”

Throughout the Bible the phrase “the day of the Lord” refers to the Tribulation period. The Bible teaches that during the Tribulation God will pour out His wrath upon a sinful and wicked world. At the end of that period God will destroy this world and create a new one, which He will reign over during His Millennial Kingdom. Isaiah 65:17-25 talks about this glorious world that is coming:

Isaiah 65:17: “For, behold, I create new heavens and a new earth: and the former shall not be remembered, nor come into mind.

18 But be ye glad and rejoice for ever in that which I create: for, behold, I create Jerusalem a rejoicing, and her people a joy.”

The passage goes on to say that the lion will lay down with the lamb, and there will be great peace and harmony. People will live so long that someone who dies at the age of 100 will be considered to be just a child. It will be a time of tremendous joy.

But even this is not the end. Revelation 20 tells us that at the end of the Millennium the devil will be freed from his prison. He will deceive the nations and gather together a mighty army, and will attempt to overthrow God. However, God will defeat the devil and cast him into the Lake of Fire. There will then be a final judgment, where God will judge the wicked and will put an end to all evil and to death itself. After that God will create yet another new heaven and earth. This one, though, will be different:

Revelation 21:1: “And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea.

2 And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

3 And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God.

4 And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.”

In this perfect world to come there will no longer be any sin or suffering or pain or death. The

devil will be gone forever and evil will be ended once and for all. On top of that, God will live with mankind on Earth. Right now God is in Heaven and man is on Earth; a holy God cannot live in a sinful world. In the world that is to come, though, there will be no such divide: God and man will live together in the same world. This world will pass away, and God will replace it with a much better one.

The first chapter of Hebrews concludes as the author makes his point that Jesus is vastly superior to the angels:

Hebrews 1:13: “But to which of the angels said he at any time, Sit on my right hand, until I make thine enemies thy footstool?

14 Are they not all ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation?”

The angels are servants who are sent to minister to mankind. They do not rule over mankind, nor are they gods. There are some people who worship angels, but that is a sin. God is the only one who we should worship! Angels are the servants of God, and God uses them to minister to us – the heirs of salvation. Jesus is the one who will rule over all things.

HEBREWS 2:1-13

In the first chapter of Hebrews we studied the Messiah, Jesus. We looked at His person – the fact that He is the image of God, a perfect reflection of God the Father. We looked at His work – how He created the world, how He sustains the world, how He died for our sins, and how He will one day create an everlasting kingdom that will never be destroyed and that will rule over the entire world. We also studied the fact that Jesus is much greater than the angels.

This time, in the second chapter of Hebrews, we are warned that we must be careful. We must not neglect the salvation that the Lord is offering to us:

Hebrews 2:1: “Therefore we ought to give the more earnest heed to the things which we have heard, lest at any time we should let them slip.”

The message of the gospel is *vital*. Mankind has a very serious problem: all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, and the wages of sin is death. Without the gospel there would be no hope. Apart from Christ, all of mankind is doomed to spend an eternity in fiery torment. The gospel is the only way to escape the wrath of God. It is the only way to escape from Hell. There is no other way!

It is extremely important that we pay a good deal of attention to the words that God has given to us. In this world there are many distractions. There are all sorts of things clamoring for our attention – bills, chores, things that need to be done, trials, illnesses – to say nothing of the things that we see on the news. The world is full of distractions and is constantly telling us that there are all sorts of things that are worthy of our attention. Advertising in particular tries very hard to entice us into desiring the goods, pleasures, and desires of this world.

However, God tells us to not be fooled. The things of this world are temporary and passing away, and we should not desire them:

1 John 2:15: “Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him.

16 For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world.

17 And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever.”

The apostle John was very clear: the things of this world, and the desires of this world, are passing away. The things that we see around us are not going to last. This world is temporary; it is not eternal, and its possessions and wealth are all going to disappear.

There are a great many things that people desire and spend a lifetime trying to get, but Christians ought to be different. As John said, if anyone loves the world then the love of the Father is not in him. You cannot serve God and mammon at the same time, nor can you desire both the things of God and the things of this world. It will either be one or the other. The things that we desire – the desires of the flesh, and of the eyes, and the pride of life – do not come from God. Those things come from the world, and the world is bound for destruction.

If we focus on the things of the world and desire its pleasures then the message of the gospel is going to slip. Our focus is going to change and our life purpose is going to go in the wrong direction.

We are going to derail and find ourselves in places where we shouldn't have gone, and doing things we shouldn't have done. What we ought to do is realize temptation for the evil that it is and passionately seek the things of God. As Hebrews said, we ought to take earnest heed to the things God has revealed to us so that we don't lose sight of what really matters. Do not give in to the devil's distractions.

You see, life has very real and very serious consequences:

Hebrews 2:2: “For if the word spoken by angels was steadfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just recompense of reward;”

People today like to think that they can get away with anything. Many people – even those who claim to be Christians – think that they can live however they want, and it won't matter because God will forgive them. They take sin very lightly and live as they please. To use a Biblical phrase, they do that which is right in their own eyes.

But sin is a serious matter and has very real consequences. Our actions really *do* matter to God, and He will hold us accountable for them. In fact, one day we will stand before God and give an account of our lives:

2 Corinthians 5:10: “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad.”

God takes sin *very* seriously! He takes it so seriously that there was a time God became so upset with mankind's sin that He destroyed the *entire world* in the Flood. He saved eight people and destroyed *all of the rest of mankind*. That should tell you exactly what God thinks of sin.

Notice that the verse says that *every* act of disobedience received retribution. This is a critical fact to remember. It often seems that the wicked get away with all sorts of things – that people do all kinds of terribly evil acts and then go on to lead great lives. People seem to get away with evil, but that is not actually the case. God tells us that no one gets away with anything. Each person will stand before God and be judged, and those whose sins are not covered by the blood of Christ will have to pay for each and every one of their wicked deeds. Since they will not be able to pay for their sins (because they have rejected the only payment God will accept – the blood of Jesus), they will be condemned to Hell.

No one is going to “get away” with anything. In this life God gives people a chance to repent; He often withholds His judgment so that people can repent of their sin and change their ways. However, those who do not take advantage of that opportunity will find themselves in very serious trouble. If we do not repent and believe then there will be no escape:

Hebrews 2:3a: “How shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation;”

This is very important: apart from Christ *there is no escape!* Some people claim that there are many ways to God, but that is not true. Jesus was very clear that He was the *only* way:

John 14:6: “Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.”

Jesus could not have been more plain: the only way to get to the Father is *through Him*. If you do not go through Jesus then you *cannot* be saved. All other religions are false religions, and only guide

men to Hell. Good works will not get you to Heaven! Only Jesus can save you.

The reason only Jesus can save you goes back to the reason why people are lost in the first place. People's great problem is *sin*. Their sin separates them from God and makes them worthy of His judgment. In order to be saved those sins must be paid for. The only way they can be paid for is if someone who is innocent suffers on their behalf, and takes upon himself the punishment that they deserve. The only person who has done this is Jesus – and therefore, Jesus is the only way to be saved. There is no other sacrifice for sins that God will accept. It is Jesus or nothing.

The author of Hebrews goes on to point out that there is a great deal of evidence to support this gospel:

Hebrews 2:3b: “...which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed unto us by them that heard him;

4 God also bearing them witness, both with signs and wonders, and with divers miracles, and gifts of the Holy Ghost, according to his own will?”

There is a great deal going on in these verses, so let's spend a little time talking about them.

One of the things that people like to say today is that we should just take things “on faith”. When people say that, what they are saying is we don't need evidence or reasons to believe; instead, we should believe things “just because”. That may sound very wise and spiritual, but it is not Biblical! It is true that God commands us to have faith in Him, but He does not ask for blind faith. Instead God has spent a great deal of time giving us *reasons* to believe.

For example, Jesus did a great many miracles. Why did Jesus do these things? So that people would believe that He was the Messiah:

John 2:23: “Now when he was in Jerusalem at the passover, in the feast day, many believed in his name, when they saw the miracles which he did.”

People saw the miracles of Christ and believed what He had to say. His miracles validated His claims. When Christ was about to be crucified He told His disciples what would happen *before* it happened. He told them that He was going to be killed and that He would raise back to life on the third day. The reason He did that was so that when those things took place the disciples would have proof that Jesus really was their long-awaited Messiah:

John 13:19: “Now I tell you before it come, that, when it is come to pass, ye may believe that I am he.”

In other words, Jesus gave people *reasons* to believe. He did not just say “I'm the Messiah, so believe it”. Instead He offered proof that He truly was who He claimed to be.

In fact, this is something that the passage in Hebrews even talks about. It mentions that God's word was *confirmed* to them by the signs and wonders the apostles did. One thing you may find strange when reading through the book of Acts is that the apostles could do all sorts of miracles. Peter and Paul had the gift of healing – in fact, people could be healed just by touching Paul's handkerchief:

Acts 19:11: “And God wrought special miracles by the hands of Paul:

12 So that from his body were brought unto the sick handkerchiefs or aprons, and the diseases departed from them, and the evil spirits went out of them.”

Why did God do special miracles by the hands of Paul? According to Hebrews it was to confirm the validity of the Gospel. Paul and the other apostles were missionaries; they went all over the world preaching the gospel. When they went to a place they did not just say “You should believe us because we say so”. Instead they proved that they really were sent from God by the miracles they did. The miracles validated their identity and their message, because the miracles were impossible to do apart from the power of God. Since the apostles did so many miracles, it gave people a good reason to believe their words.

It is important to realize that these extraordinary gifts were only exhibited by the apostles themselves. No one else seems to have had the gift of healing – and even Paul did not have it for his entire life. Later in his life there were people he knew who were sick, but he could no longer heal them. The reason for this is because the gifts had served their purpose, and so they passed away. God gave them to the apostles in order to establish His Church, and His Church was established.

Today these sign gifts are no longer present. We do not have the gift of tongues, or the gift of healing, or the gift of prophecy. Those gifts were limited to apostolic times. I realize that there are Charismatic churches today that claim to still have these gifts, but they are greatly mistaken. What you find in these churches is a poor counterfeit of these gifts – nothing more.

You see, in the Bible the gift of tongues was the ability to speak real languages that you had never learned. It would be as if you could suddenly speak Chinese, when in fact you had never studied that language at all. The gift of healing was the ability to walk up to hundreds of people, touch them, and have them instantly and miraculously healed of whatever disease they had. It is true that today God still heals, but not in the same way. Today the Church prays over a person, and God may heal them or He may not. A person who had the gift of healing, though, could walk into a hospital and heal everyone there by touching them – without even praying over anyone! The apostles did that sort of thing all the time, but no one has the ability to do that today.

Finally, the gift of prophecy was the ability to infallibly foretell the future. This was a very serious thing, because anyone who ever got *anything* wrong was to be put to death for being a false prophet. Needless to say, there are no longer any real prophets around! People claim to be prophets, but the accuracy of their messages is nowhere near 100%. In fact, these self-proclaimed prophets rarely get anything right at all – which is proof that they are not from God.

No one today manifests any of the sign gifts of the New Testament. The modern gift of tongues is just people babbling random nonsense, while the real gift of tongues involved people speaking real languages. The modern gift of prophecy is nowhere near 100% accurate, so it is not from God. Nor is there anyone who has anything remotely like the apostles' power to heal. The Charismatic churches are teaching a lie: their gifts are counterfeits. The real thing has fulfilled its purpose and passed away.

After having covered all this, the author goes back to talk about the position of Christ:

Hebrews 2:5: “For unto the angels hath he not put in subjection the world to come, whereof we speak.”

The author points out that the angels are not going to rule over the world to come. Instead the person that God has given all power and authority to is none other than Jesus Christ. As we saw last week, He is the one who is the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords, and He will reign over the entire world. All kingdoms and principalities and powers will belong to Him:

Hebrews 2:6: “But one in a certain place testified, saying, What is man, that thou

art mindful of him? or the son of man that thou visitest him?

7 Thou madest him a little lower than the angels; thou crownedst him with glory and honour, and didst set him over the works of thy hands:

8 Thou hast put all things in subjection under his feet. For in that he put all in subjection under him, he left nothing that is not put under him. But now we see not yet all things put under him.

9 But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels for the suffering of death, crowned with glory and honour; that he by the grace of God should taste death for every man.”

In this passage Hebrews is quoting from Psalm 8. Many people apply this chapter to mankind, but as we can see it is actually talking about Christ. *Jesus* is the one who was made a little lower than the angels; that happened when He was born a man in Bethlehem. Jesus is the one who was crowned with glory and honor. Jesus is the one who was set over the work of God's hands. All things in this world will be subject to Jesus, and not to anyone else. Verse 9 makes this very clear. Jesus – who is the eternal and infinite God – was made lower than the angels in order to suffer and die for our sins, but He has now been crowned with glory and honor. Jesus humbled Himself, and God glorified Him.

As verse 8 says, at this point in history Jesus has not yet received His kingdom. There are still many things that are not in subjection to Him. In fact, if you look at the world around us you will see that virtually *nothing* is in subjection to Him. The whole world is in a state of rebellion and chaos! The nations rage, both against God and against His followers. The world has no interest in being made subject to God.

But one day that will change. There will come a time of great Tribulation when God will spend seven years pouring out His wrath upon a sinful and disobedient world. He will judge the world for its wickedness and its sins. During that time the announcement will finally be made that the kingdoms of this world are now under new management:

Revelation 11:15: “And the seventh angel sounded; and there were great voices in heaven, saying, The kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of his Christ; and he shall reign for ever and ever.”

After this announcement is made Satan will still try to defeat Jesus, but he will utterly fail. The kingdom that God establishes will last forever and it will never fall or be destroyed. One day everything will be subject to Jesus, and when that day comes it will last for all of eternity. His power is undefeatable.

What is truly amazing is that God has invited *us* into His kingdom. In fact, He suffered and died so that we might be saved and go on to enjoy the kingdom with Him! That is an astonishing thing. It is amazing that Jesus, the Creator, would die for mankind. It is astonishing that He would suffer on our behalf:

Hebrews 2:10: “For it became him, for whom are all things, and by whom are all things, in bringing many sons unto glory, to make the captain of their salvation perfect through sufferings.”

One of the themes of this book is that the sufferings of Christ play a vital role in His ministry. Later in the book it will tell us that because Jesus was tempted as we are, He can help those who are

tempted. Jesus isn't some distant God who doesn't really understand what we are going through; instead He really can feel our pain because He was hurt Himself. He became a man and went through all the pains and sufferings that man goes through. He was tempted as we are and yet He did not sin. His experiences enable Him to help us. That is what this verse is getting at, and the author will expand upon it later.

Thanks to the sacrifice of Christ we can become the children of God:

Hebrews 2:11: “For both he that sanctifieth and they who are sanctified are all of one: for which cause he is not ashamed to call them brethren,

12 Saying, I will declare thy name unto my brethren, in the midst of the church will I sing praise unto thee.

13 And again, I will put my trust in him. And again, Behold I and the children which God hath given me.”

It is critical to realize that not everyone is a child of God. The Bible is very clear about this: only those whose sins have been forgiven are God's children. None of the wicked are children of God. In order to become a child of God you must repent of your sins and believe. Only then will you be one of God's children and have the right to enter His kingdom. Being a child of God is a very special privilege – one that can only be obtained through Christ.

HEBREWS 2:14 – 3:6

In our previous lessons we have studied the position of Christ, the power of Christ, the person of Christ, and the work of Christ. Now we are going to continue to study Christ's role as Messiah.

It is important to realize that what Jesus did for us is unique. There are many other religions in the world, but none of their leaders are anything like Christ. Buddha did not come to die for the sins of man. Mohammad did not come to die for the sins of man. Joseph Smith did not found Mormonism and then die for the sins of man. There is only one religion that is centered around the sacrifice, death, and resurrection of its founder, and that is Christianity. All of the other leaders of other world religions did *not* come to offer themselves as a sacrifice (nor did any of them prove their deity by rising from the dead).

Jesus is different. He came to Earth, became a man, and sacrificed His life for our sins. In order to be saved we must partake of His sacrifice:

Hebrews 2:14a: “Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he also himself likewise took part of the same; ...”

There are a lot of important truths in this verse. The first thing I'd like to point out is the incredibly important fact that *Jesus became a man*. Throughout all the ages of eternity Jesus has always existed as part of the Trinity – the uncreated God. There was never a time when Jesus did not exist. Jesus is the one who is, and who was, and who is to come. He is eternal.

In fact, Jesus existed throughout the Old Testament, and occasionally appeared to people. Theologians refer to these pre-incarnate appearances of Christ as “theophanies”. Although we don't have time to do an in-depth look at all of the theophanies of Christ, there are a few that I want to mention.

Throughout the Old Testament there is a being who appears who is called the Angel of the Lord. Most of these appearances aren't actually an angel at all, but are Jesus Christ. There are a couple ways that we can tell that this isn't a normal angel. First of all, the Angel of the Lord accepts people's worship and sacrifices – even though real angels refuse worship and tell people to worship God only. Second, there are times when the Bible actually calls the angel “God”. Those are clues that what we are dealing with is not an angel at all, but is someone much greater.

This Angel of the Lord appeared to Joshua outside Jericho. When Joshua fell down and worshiped, the angel did not stop him:

Joshua 5:13: “And it came to pass, when Joshua was by Jericho, that he lifted up his eyes and looked, and, behold, there stood a man over against him with his sword drawn in his hand: and Joshua went unto him, and said unto him, Art thou for us, or for our adversaries?”

14 And he said, Nay; but as captain of the host of the Lord am I now come. And Joshua fell on his face to the earth, and did worship, and said unto him, What saith my Lord unto his servant?

15 And the captain of the Lord's host said unto Joshua, Loose thy shoe from off thy foot; for the place whereon thou standest is holy. And Joshua did so.”

Yet we know that real angels do not receive worship:

Revelation 19:10: “And I fell at his feet to worship him. And he said unto me, See thou do it not: I am thy fellowservant, and of thy brethren that have the testimony of Jesus: worship God: for the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.”

The apostle John did the exact same thing that Joshua did – but in Revelation the angel rebuked him for it. That tells us that the Angel of the Lord is not an angelic being, but is God Himself.

One thing we need to keep in mind is that the word “angel” means *messenger*. Jesus spent a great deal of time relaying God's messages. In fact, He said this:

John 12:49: “For I have not spoken of myself; but the Father which sent me, he gave me a commandment, what I should say, and what I should speak.
50 And I know that his commandment is life everlasting: whatsoever I speak therefore, even as the Father said unto me, so I speak.”

Jesus did not speak for Himself; instead He relayed the messages that His Father had given him. If the phrase “Angel of the Lord” bothers you, think of it as “Messenger of the Lord”. Jesus was certainly a messenger of the Lord. In fact, as we learned in our first lesson in this series, God now speaks to us *solely* through the person of Jesus Christ.

The Angel of the Lord makes quite a few appearances in the Old Testament. He was there when Hagar fled from Sarah:

Genesis 16:7: “And the angel of the Lord found her by a fountain of water in the wilderness, by the fountain in the way to Shur.
8 And he said, Hagar, Sarai's maid, whence camest thou? and whither wilt thou go? And she said, I flee from the face of my mistress Sarai.
9 And the angel of the Lord said unto her, Return to thy mistress, and submit thyself under her hands.
10 And the angel of the Lord said unto her, I will multiply thy seed exceedingly, that it shall not be numbered for multitude.
11 And the angel of the Lord said unto her, Behold, thou art with child and shalt bear a son, and shalt call his name Ishmael; because the Lord hath heard thy affliction.
12 And he will be a wild man; his hand will be against every man, and every man's hand against him; and he shall dwell in the presence of all his brethren.”

Notice that the Angel of the Lord says that *he* will “multiply thy seed exceedingly”. He doesn't say that God will do it; he says that *he* will do it *himself!* That's rather startling, isn't it? But if the Angel of the Lord is actually Jesus then it makes perfect sense.

The Angel of the Lord later reminded Hagar of this promise:

Genesis 21:17: “And God heard the voice of the lad; and the angel of God called to Hagar out of heaven, and said unto her, What aileth thee, Hagar? fear not; for God hath heard the voice of the lad where he is.
18 Arise, lift up the lad, and hold him in thine hand; for I will make him a great

nation.”

The Angel of God didn't say that God would make Ishmael “a great nation”; he said that *he* would do it. That is a detail that we should not miss. It's more evidence that the Angel of the Lord is not simply an angel.

The Angel of the Lord also appears when Abraham is about to sacrifice Isaac. In fact, the Angel of the Lord stopped Abraham from sacrificing his son:

Genesis 22:11: “And the angel of the Lord called unto him out of heaven, and said, Abraham, Abraham: and he said, Here am I.

12 And he said, Lay not thine hand upon the lad, neither do thou any thing unto him: for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son from me.”

Take a close look at verse 12. The Angel of the Lord said that Abraham had not withheld his son *from him*. It doesn't say “from God”, which is what the angel should have said if it was just an angel! The Angel of the Lord is acting like he is God.

The Angel of the Lord also rebuked Israel in the days of the judges. Pay close attention to the pronouns that are used:

Judges 2:1: “And an angel of the Lord came up from Gilgal to Bochim, and said, I made you to go up out of Egypt, and have brought you unto the land which I swear unto your fathers; and I said, I will never break my covenant with you.

2 And ye shall make no league with the inhabitants of this land; ye shall throw down their altars: but ye have not obeyed my voice: why have ye done this?

3 Wherefore I also said, I will not drive them out from before you; but they shall be as thorns in your sides, and their gods shall be a snare unto you.

4 And it came to pass, when the angel of the Lord spake these words unto all the children of Israel, that the people lifted up their voice, and wept.”

Verse 1 does say “an angel”, but verse 4 clarifies that the words were said by *the* Angel of the Lord. Notice, also, what the angel actually said. The Angel said that *he* made them go out of Egypt and *he* made the covenant with their fathers. The Angel is talking as if he was God.

There are many more appearances of Christ in the Old Testament, but that's not the focus of our lesson today. The point I want to make is that Christ is not some new person who suddenly came into existence when He was born in Bethlehem. Jesus is the uncreated God. He has always existed and He will always exist.

What is so amazing about Bethlehem is that Jesus, even though He was God, took on the form of a man. Jesus did not stop being God (although He did lay aside His glory, which is *not* the same thing as laying aside His deity), but He did take on human form. He became the God-Man – something theologians refer to as the “hypostatic union”.

This was truly something special. When the angels sinned, Jesus did not take on the form of an angel and die for the sins of angels. However, when mankind sinned Jesus took on the form of a man and died for the sins of men. He *became a man*. It would be as if one of us took on the form of a snail and died for the sins of snails. It would be unthinkable! After all, snails are so far below us that the idea of a man dying for a snail is utterly ridiculous. It would be a foolish thing to do. Snails just aren't worth

it.

Yet when Jesus became a man and died for the sins of man, that was an infinitely greater act. God is infinite, holy, eternal, and perfect; He is so far above us that there is simply no comparison.

Why did He do it? Because He loved us:

John 3:16: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”

Now, some people get the wrong idea about this. They say that the reason God did this is because we were worth dying for. They say “Look how much God values you! He thinks you're so valuable that He was willing to die to save you. Aren't you something special!” Nothing could be further from the truth. The fact is that the life of the eternal Son of God is worth *vastly* more than your life. In fact, His life is worth more than all the lives of everyone who has ever lived! The idea that people are more precious than *God Himself* is utterly blasphemous.

God did *not* die for you because you were worth “that much”; He died for you *because He loved you*. He died for you even though your life was *not* worth dying for. What Jesus did was an act of pure love, not some kind of calculated financial deal. His death is not a testament to your worth; it is a testament to His surpassing love.

Christ's death had a powerful impact: it conquered death. Thanks to His sacrifice we are freed from a terrible fate:

Hebrews 2:14b: “...that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil;

15 And deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage.”

It is an amazing thing, if you stop to think about it, that Christ conquered death through death. Yet that is exactly what happened! The reason people die is because of sin. People think that death is a result of disease, or old age, or accidents, or something like that, but that's not actually the case. Before Adam and Eve sinned there was no death at all. Death wasn't a part of the world. There was no sickness or disease. However, when they sinned they brought death into the world. That is when mankind became subject to aging, sickness, and death.

If it were not for sin, no one would ever get sick. If it were not for sin, no one would ever get old. If it were not for sin, no one would ever die. Now, I am not saying that your illnesses were given to you by God as punishment for your sins; that's a separate issue. What I am saying is that there would never have been such a thing as illness at all if sin had not entered the world. The reason we live in a world full of suffering is because of that sin back in the Garden of Eden. That one act broke everything.

There was only one possible way to remedy the problem. Since death is the punishment for sin, the only way we could ever be set free is if someone else suffered and died on our behalf. In order for us to escape death, someone had to die in our place:

Romans 5:12: “Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned: . . .

18 Therefore as by the offence of one judgment came upon all men to condemnation; even so by the righteousness of one the free gift came upon all men unto justification of life.

19 For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous."

This is important! Since sin entered the world through the act of one man, it was possible for the righteousness of one man to give the world forgiveness and mercy. Since death came into the world by the act of one man, life could come into the world by the act of another man. Christ could undo what Adam had done – but the price was high. In order to save mankind, Christ would have to become a man and die. There was no other way.

Now, it is true that death is still in the world. However, its days are numbered:

1 Corinthians 15:26: "The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death."

As Christians we know that if the Lord should tarry and we should die before He returns, we will not stay dead forever. Our spirits will go to the Lord in Heaven, and there we will wait until His return. When Christ returns He will raise us from the dead and give us perfect, immortal, glorified bodies.

But that's not all. After the thousand-year reign of Christ, and after Satan has launched his final rebellion and been defeated, there will be a final judgment. At the Great White Throne judgment God will put an end to death forever:

Revelation 20:14: "And death and hell were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death."

After this judgment God will create a new Heavens and a new Earth. In that fantastic place there will be no death, or sorrow, or dying, or pain, or disease. All of those things will be gone forever. Instead God will live with His people in this new creation, and we will live with God. We will have a glorious eternity of unending joy and peace. The power of death will be broken forever – all thanks to the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

As we said earlier, this is something Jesus did not do for the angels:

Hebrews 2:16: "For verily he took not on him the nature of angels; but he took on him the seed of Abraham."

Christ has shown a level of mercy and compassion to us that He did not show to the angels. It is important to realize that Christ was *not* required to save us. He did not have to have compassion on us; after all, He owed us nothing. Yet Christ chose to love us and save us, even though we were His enemies:

Romans 5:7: "For scarcely for a righteous man will one die: yet peradventure for a good man some would even dare to die.

8 But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us."

There are very few people who would be willing to sacrifice their life to save their friends. Yet Jesus did something far greater than that: He sacrificed His life to save *His enemies*.

The fact that Jesus became a man enables Him to help us in yet another way:

Hebrews 2:17: “Wherefore in all things it behoved him to be made like unto his brethren, that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make reconciliation for the sins of the people.

18 For in that he himself hath suffered being tempted, he is able to succour them that are tempted.”

This is something that we touched on earlier. Jesus knows what it's like to be tempted. He knows what it's like to suffer, and be in pain, and live in a world that is full of hatred and malice. He was tempted in all things and yet He never sinned.

In other words, Jesus knows what we're going through. He understands what it's like to have problems and trials and to suffer, because Jesus had problems and trials and He suffered. This gives Him the ability to help us in a very personal and direct way. He knows exactly what we need.

The final point the author makes is that Christ is greater than Moses:

Hebrews 3:1: “Wherefore, holy brethren, partakers of the heavenly calling, consider the Apostle and High Priest of our profession, Christ Jesus;

2 Who was faithful to him that appointed him, as also Moses was faithful in all his house.

3 For this man was counted worthy of more glory than Moses, inasmuch as he who hath builded the house hath more honour than the house.

4 For every house is builded by some man; but he that built all things is God.

5 And Moses verily was faithful in all his house, as a servant, for a testimony of those things which were to be spoken after;

6 But Christ as a son over his own house; whose house are we, if we hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm unto the end.”

Earlier in the book we saw that Jesus was much greater than the angels. Here we see that Jesus is much greater than Moses as well. That may be obvious to us, but to a Jewish audience that is a staggering thing to say. Moses, after all, was the person who led Israel out of captivity in Egypt. Moses was the one who stood before God and was given the Ten Commandments. Moses was an exceedingly great man – one that God spoke with face to face. He was a towering figure in Jewish history; there was no one else like him!

Yet Moses is small indeed compared to Christ. Moses may have served God faithfully, but Christ was the God who Moses was serving. Moses spoke of the Messiah, but Christ actually *was* the Messiah. Moses was a great man, but Christ is infinitely greater.

HEBREWS 3:7 – 4:13

The book of Hebrews has spent the previous few chapters talking about the person and work of Christ. It has discussed the position of Christ – how He is the uncreated God who has always existed, who will always exist, and who created the world. It has discussed the fact that Jesus is superior to both the angels and to Moses. It has also talked about Christ's role in our redemption – how He became a man and died for our sins.

Now we are going to look at the consequences of failing to have faith in Christ. The writer of this book warns us that unbelief carries very heavy penalties:

Hebrews 3:7: “Wherefore (as the Holy Ghost saith, To day if ye will hear his voice,
8 Harden not your hearts, as in the provocation, in the day of temptation in the wilderness:

9 When your fathers tempted me, proved me, and saw my works forty years.

10 Wherefore I was grieved with that generation, and said, They do alway err in their heart; and they have not known my ways.

11 So I sware in my wrath, They shall not enter into my rest.)”

This passage is actually a quotation from the Old Testament. In order to put this passage into context we need to take a look at Israel's history. There is a very important lesson to be learned here.

If we go back to the book of Exodus we will find the story of Israel's enslavement. The nation of Israel was in Egypt for 400 years, where they were persecuted and forced into slavery. God commanded Moses to go to Pharaoh and demand that he let God's people go. When Moses did this, Pharaoh refused to listen and made Israel's life even harder by refusing to provide them with straw. When this happened God said that He would deliver Israel with a strong hand (Exodus 6:1). However, Israel refused to believe:

Exodus 6:9: “And Moses spake so unto the children of Israel: but they hearkened not unto Moses for anguish of spirit, and for cruel bondage.”

Even though Israel did not believe, God still kept His word. He sent ten terrible plagues upon the land of Egypt and miraculously spared Israel from those plagues. After He killed all the firstborn in Egypt, Pharaoh drove the Israelites out of the country. Israel left but then found themselves trapped at the Red Sea.

Before this happened, God told Israel that He was going to harden Pharaoh's heart so that he would chase them. God would then judge Pharaoh for what he had done:

Exodus 14:2: “Speak unto the children of Israel, that they turn and encamp before Pihahiroth, between Migdol and the sea, over against Baalzephon: before it shall ye encamp by the sea.

3 For Pharaoh will say of the children of Israel, They are entangled in the land, the wilderness hath shut them in.

4 And I will harden Pharaoh's heart, that he shall follow after them; and I will be honoured upon Pharaoh, and upon all his host; that the Egyptians may know that I

am the Lord. And they did so.”

Things happened exactly as the Lord said: Pharaoh came with his army and planned to seize the nation of Israel. Keep in mind that at this point, Israel had just seen God deliver them from Egypt using powerful miracles. God had even warned them *in advance* what Pharaoh was going to do and how God was going to respond! Yet the moment it happened, Israel proved that they had no faith in God whatsoever:

Exodus 14:10: “And when Pharaoh drew nigh, the children of Israel lifted up their eyes, and, behold, the Egyptians marched after them; and they were sore afraid: and the children of Israel cried out unto the Lord.

11 And they said unto Moses, Because there were no graves in Egypt, hast thou taken us away to die in the wilderness? wherefore hast thou dealt thus with us, to carry us forth out of Egypt?

12 Is not this the word that we did tell thee in Egypt, saying, Let us alone, that we may serve the Egyptians? For it had been better for us to serve the Egyptians, than that we should die in the wilderness.”

Did Israel believe God? No. Did they have faith in Him? No. However, God was still faithful. He parted the Red Sea and allowed Israel to pass over on dry ground. He then collapsed the Red Sea upon Pharaoh and his army, drowning the Egyptian host. God did exactly what He said He would do.

After this amazing miracle God tested Israel. This time they came to the waters of Marah, which they found to be bitter and therefore undrinkable. When this happened Israel could have cried out to God and asked Him to deliver them. But they didn't. Instead they murmured against Moses:

Exodus 15:23: “And when they came to Marah, they could not drink of the waters of Marah, for they were bitter: therefore the name of it was called Marah.

24 And the people murmured against Moses, saying, What shall we drink?”

Moses then cried out to the Lord (something the Israelites refused to do), and God provided. Even though Israel had just witnessed an astonishing miracle that God had done on their behalf, they still refused to trust Him!

God then tested Israel again: since they were in the wilderness they needed food. Now, Israel had just seen God miraculously provide them with water. You would think that Israel would now cry out to God and ask Him to feed them, but they didn't. Instead they complained that this whole trip was just a plot to kill them all:

Exodus 16:2: “And the whole congregation of the children of Israel murmured against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness:

3 And the children of Israel said unto them, Would to God we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the flesh pots, and when we did eat bread to the full; for ye have brought us forth into this wilderness, to kill this whole assembly with hunger.”

This is really astonishing. The *entire congregation* accused Moses of bringing them out into the wilderness for the express purpose of killing them all! None of the mighty miracles that God had done

for them *made any impression on them at all*. These people had absolutely no faith in God. They did not believe that He cared for them, even though He had shown them His love and care time and time again. They did not believe any of His promises. They were hardened in unbelief.

However, God still cared for them. He provided for their needs by feeding them with manna from Heaven. God literally rained down food from the sky in order to feed them. Now, you would think that after yet *another* mighty miracle Israel would have learned to trust God – but that is not the case. The next time they needed water they once again accused Moses of trying to kill them:

Exodus 17:3: “And the people thirsted there for water; and the people murmured against Moses, and said, Wherefore is this that thou hast brought us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our cattle with thirst?”

4 And Moses cried unto the Lord, saying, What shall I do unto this people? they be almost ready to stone me.”

That's right: their response to this problem was a desire to *stone Moses to death*. Keep in mind that Moses had delivered them from slavery. He *should* have been a hero – someone held in high regard – but the people had no respect for him whatsoever. God had taken care of Israel's every need in astonishing ways, yet none of that made any difference to these people. They didn't care that God had never let them down. They had no faith in God, and they had no love of Moses either. Moses received no credit for delivering them from centuries of horrible slavery and bondage. These people were utterly faithless. They did not trust God in the slightest.

But God still cared for them and provided them with water to drink.

Moses then brought the congregation to Mount Sinai. There the congregation actually heard God speak to them. They heard the voice of God Himself, and it terrified them so much that they told Moses they could not stand it. They asked him to go up to the mountain, hear what God had to tell them, and then come back. So that is what Moses did.

However, Moses was on the mountain for 40 days, and Israel decided that was too long to wait. Therefore, despite the fact that God was literally raining down food from Heaven to feed them and had delivered them in powerful ways, and despite the fact that God had never broken any of His promises, the Israelites decided to abandon God and turn to idols:

Exodus 32:1: “And when the people saw that Moses delayed to come down out of the mount, the people gathered themselves together unto Aaron, and said unto him, Up, make us gods, which shall go before us; for as for this Moses, the man that brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we wot not what is become of him.”

There are some people who say “Oh, if only God would show me a miracle! Then I would believe.” People who say that are lying. The truth is that in the Old Testament God showed people miracle after miracle and they *still* refused to believe. These people saw an *astonishing* amount of supernatural miracles from God, but they absolutely refused to trust Him. When Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, there were people who refused to believe *even though they saw it with their own eyes*. They immediately went to the Pharisees so they could have Jesus put to death. Raising someone *from the dead* wasn't enough to convince them! The truth is that *nothing* would have been enough to convince them. They would not believe no matter what God did. No amount of miracles would have made any difference.

At this point God came very close to killing the entire nation of Israel. Given their outrageous

behavior, it's not hard to see why. However, Moses persuaded God to give them another chance, so the Lord spared them.

After this the nation built the Tabernacle and God manifested His glory there. In fact, when the Tabernacle was built it was so filled with the glory of God that no one could enter it. You would think that at this point Israel would stop their rebellion – after all, they had gone so far last time that God nearly killed them! But, sadly, that was not the case. Israel had not learned anything.

When God established the priesthood He gave very strict rules about how things should function. However, Aaron's sons didn't listen. Nadab and Abihu decided they knew better than God and they did things their own way:

Leviticus 10:1: “And Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, took either of them his censer, and put fire therein, and put incense thereon, and offered strange fire before the Lord, which he commanded them not.

2 And there went out fire from the Lord, and devoured them, and they died before the Lord.”

Once again we find that these priests couldn't be bothered to take God seriously – and they paid for that sin with their own lives. Now surely, after this, one would think that Israel had learned their lesson. In the past God had overlooked their complaints and simply rebuked them, but now He was killing them for disobedience. However, that was not the case. Israel stubbornly continued in their wickedness:

Numbers 11:1: “And when the people complained, it displeased the Lord: and the Lord heard it; and his anger was kindled; and the fire of the Lord burnt among them, and consumed them that were in the uttermost parts of the camp.”

After all God had done Israel *still* would not believe. They still had no faith in God. At this point, though, God had stopped putting up with it. Now God was actually killing them for their faithlessness. You would think *that* would teach them a lesson, but it didn't. Immediately after this they started complaining about the fact that *God was raining down food from Heaven to feed them*:

Numbers 11:4: “And the mixt multitude that was among them fell a lusting: and the children of Israel also wept again, and said, Who shall give us flesh to eat?

5 We remember the fish, which we did eat in Egypt freely; the cucumbers, and the melons, and the leeks, and the onions, and the garlick:

6 But now our soul is dried away: there is nothing at all, beside this manna, before our eyes.”

These people were getting free food from the sky, but that wasn't good enough for them. God had *just burned people alive* for complaining, but people were still complaining anyway. They were utterly and completely faithless. Nothing God had done for them made any impression on them at all – nor had they ever shown God even the least bit of gratitude in return.

But God still gave them quail – in fact, He said He was going to give them quail until they were sick of it. Then, as they ate the quail, God smote them with a serious plague. You see, God had given them enough warnings. Since they would not listen to a mere warning, there was going to be consequences.

You would think that after all this people would have learned – but that was not the case. Immediately after that Miriam and Aaron decided it would be a good idea to criticize Moses. Oh, they had no criticism for the people of Israel, who were in flagrant rebellion. Nor did Aaron take to heart the fact that God had spared his life after *Aaron made Israel a golden idol to worship*. Moses had not done anything wrong. In fact, Moses had been faithful – even though *Aaron had not*. Yet they decided that now would be a perfect time to criticize Moses:

Numbers 12:1: “And Miriam and Aaron spake against Moses because of the Ethiopian woman whom he had married: for he had married an Ethiopian woman.
2 And they said, Hath the Lord indeed spoken only by Moses? hath he not spoken also by us? And the Lord heard it.”

There's a very interesting story here about that Ethiopian woman and why Moses might have married her, but I don't have time to get into it today. What I do want to point out is that what Aaron and Miriam did was completely unacceptable. We know this because God became very angry with them:

Numbers 12:6: “And he said, Hear now my words: If there be a prophet among you, I the Lord will make myself known unto him in a vision, and will speak unto him in a dream.
7 My servant Moses is not so, who is faithful in all mine house.
8 With him will I speak mouth to mouth, even apparently, and not in dark speeches; and the similitude of the Lord shall he behold: wherefore then were ye not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?
9 And the anger of the Lord was kindled against them; and he departed.
10 And the cloud departed from off the tabernacle; and, behold, Miriam became leprous, white as snow: and Aaron looked upon Miriam, and, behold, she was leprous.
11 And Aaron said unto Moses, Alas, my lord, I beseech thee, lay not the sin upon us, wherein we have done foolishly, and wherein we have sinned.”

What we see here is that when these people dared to criticize Moses, it made God very angry and God judged them for it. It should have been obvious to everyone that criticizing Moses was a very bad idea. You would think that Israel would have learned from this lesson – but they didn't. They learned nothing.

We know this because after this event, the people finally reached the land of Canaan. Moses sent out twelve spies – and Numbers 13:3 tells us that these spies were not just ordinary people either, but were the leaders of the Israelites. Moses sent out the nation's leadership in order to spy out the land. The spies brought back a report that the land was an incredible place of bounty – but there were giants living in it.

Joshua and Caleb said that God was able to give them the land, but the other 10 spies disagreed. They urged the people to turn back, because they had no faith in God. Despite all the astonishing miracles that God had done on their behalf, they did not believe that God could give them the land. They persuaded the people that the right thing to do was to kill Moses and return to Egypt:

Numbers 14:1: “And all the congregation lifted up their voice, and cried; and the

people wept that night.

2 And all the children of Israel murmured against Moses and against Aaron: and the whole congregation said unto them, Would God that we had died in the land of Egypt! or would God we had died in this wilderness!

3 And wherefore hath the Lord brought us unto this land, to fall by the sword, that our wives and our children should be a prey? were it not better for us to return into Egypt?

4 And they said one to another, Let us make a captain, and let us return into Egypt.

5 Then Moses and Aaron fell on their faces before all the assembly of the congregation of the children of Israel.

6 And Joshua the son of Nun, and Caleb the son of Jephunneh, which were of them that searched the land, rent their clothes:

7 And they spake unto all the company of the children of Israel, saying, The land, which we passed through to search it, is an exceeding good land.

8 If the Lord delight in us, then he will bring us into this land, and give it us; a land which floweth with milk and honey.

9 Only rebel not ye against the Lord, neither fear ye the people of the land; for they are bread for us: their defence is departed from them, and the Lord is with us: fear them not.

10 But all the congregation bade stone them with stones. And the glory of the Lord appeared in the tabernacle of the congregation before all the children of Israel."

Joshua, Caleb, and Moses had faith in God – and they were literally *the only ones*. Everyone else was determined *to kill them* and return to slavery in Egypt. None of the people had faith in God! Despite the astonishing miracles that God had performed on their behalf, they refused to believe. Despite the fact that God had miraculously provided them with both water and food time and time again, they refused to believe. Despite the fact that God was starting to kill them for their blatant disobedience, they still refused to believe. They did not take any of God's judgments to heart. They had no fear of God and no trust in Him either. It never crossed their mind that if *criticizing* Moses brought God's wrath, trying to *kill* Moses might have very serious consequences. They simply did not care. God had blessed this group of people more than He had ever blessed any other group up to this time, but that made no difference to them. They refused to believe.

This was not a single mistake, or a single act of rebellion, or an error of some kind. This was not Israel simply having a bad day. This was a determined, hardened rebellion that had been going on since *before they even left Egypt*. These people absolutely *refused* to believe no matter what God did. Even when God started killing them for disobedience they still would not believe.

So God decided that He had endured quite enough of these people, and told Moses that He was going to kill them all. Moses interceded on their behalf (which is astonishing: remember, these people wanted to kill him!), and God agreed to not kill them. But God was not going to give them the land of Canaan. Since they had proven utterly faithless, God was going to force them to march around the wilderness until they all dropped dead:

Numbers 14:22: "Because all those men which have seen my glory, and my miracles, which I did in Egypt and in the wilderness, and have tempted me now these ten times, and have not hearkened to my voice;

23 Surely they shall not see the land which I swear unto their fathers, neither shall

any of them that provoked me see it: . . .

32 But as for you, your carcasses, they shall fall in this wilderness.

33 And your children shall wander in the wilderness forty years, and bear your whoredoms, until your carcasses be wasted in the wilderness.

34 After the number of the days in which ye searched the land, even forty days, each day for a year, shall ye bear your iniquities, even forty years, and ye shall know my breach of promise.

35 I the Lord have said, I will surely do it unto all this evil congregation, that are gathered together against me: in this wilderness they shall be consumed, and there they shall die.

36 And the men, which Moses sent to search the land, who returned, and made all the congregation to murmur against him, by bringing up a slander upon the land,

37 Even those men that did bring up the evil report upon the land, died by the plague before the Lord.”

Now, you would think that after this Israel would have repented of their sins and changed their ways. But they did not. In fact, they immediately decided to try to attack Canaan anyway, even though God told them not to. They never learned.

During their 40 years in the wilderness they continued to prove that they were utterly faithless. They continued in their unbelief. No matter what God did for them they would not listen. Time does not permit me to continue a look at their history, but I do want to show how it ends. The passage from Hebrew is actually a quote from the book of Psalms. There we get God's viewpoint of this whole miserable affair. This is what God had to say about it:

Psalm 95:8: “Harden not your heart, as in the provocation, and as in the day of temptation in the wilderness:

9 When your fathers tempted me, proved me, and saw my work.

10 Forty years long was I grieved with this generation, and said, It is a people that do err in their heart, and they have not known my ways:

11 Unto whom I swear in my wrath that they should not enter into my rest.”

Israel saw God's mighty miracles, but that was not enough to convince them to have faith. Israel was denied the land of Canaan, but that wasn't enough to get them to repent. These people continued to test and grieve God for 40 long years. Despite everything God had done, and despite all of His signs and wonders and marvelous care, they still would not believe. *That* is when God swore that they would never enter into His rest. That entire generation was damned.

Why? *Because they would not believe.* God had given them plenty of reasons to trust Him, but they still refused to do so. They persisted in their unbelief even though it was completely irrational. They were determined to never believe under any circumstances.

This brings us back to Hebrews:

Hebrews 3:12: “Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God.

13 But exhort one another daily, while it is called To day; lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin.

14 For we are made partakers of Christ, if we hold the beginning of our confidence

stedfast unto the end;"

The lesson here is very simple: *don't be like the Israelites*. Don't rebel against God. Don't refuse to believe. Many people act as if unbelief is some sort of get-out-of-jail-free card. They think that Hell will go away if they don't believe in it. They think that God won't judge them if they refuse to believe that God exists. They think that unbelief has magical powers.

But the truth is that *unbelief is a fearful sin*. Refusing to believe in God had terrible consequences for ancient Israel, and it will have terrible consequences for us as well. The only hope of salvation is belief in Christ. If we refuse to believe then we will be damned. If we fall away from that belief we will be equally lost:

I John 2:19: "They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would no doubt have continued with us: but they went out, that they might be made manifest that they were not all of us."

The Bible is full of examples of people who started well but ended poorly. Judas was one of Christ's disciples, but in the end he betrayed Christ and perished. Saul started out as a good king, but in the end he abandoned God and perished. Demas started out as a helper of the apostles, but in the end he abandoned the faith and perished.

The fact that they abandoned the faith was proof that they were never actually saved at all. If they had really been saved then they would have remained in the faith. Yes, there are times when people have doubts and sin; Peter, in a moment of weakness, denied ever knowing Christ. But Peter repented of his sin. Anyone who rejects God and walks away was never saved to begin with. You see, God tests people, and one of the reasons He does this is to demonstrate whether their faith is real or not. Now, God already knows the answer to that question – but the test shows *to that individual* the true nature of their faith. Real faith will pass the test; false faith is not.

If you have genuine faith then you will endure to the end. If your faith is phony then you will crumble when the tests of life come. When the storms rage upon your house, it will collapse and prove that you built your life on a foundation of sand instead of the Rock of Christ.

The unbelief of the Israelites cost them everything:

Hebrews 3:15: "While it is said, To day if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts, as in the provocation.

16 For some, when they had heard, did provoke: howbeit not all that came out of Egypt by Moses.

17 But with whom was he grieved forty years? was it not with them that had sinned, whose carcasses fell in the wilderness?

18 And to whom sware he that they should not enter into his rest, but to them that believed not?

19 So we see that they could not enter in because of unbelief."

God freed the Israelites from slavery in Egypt and miraculously brought them across the wilderness to the land of Canaan – but that generation did not inherit the promises of God. Why? Because of their unbelief. Not only did their unbelief cost them the inheritance that God had promised them, but it also cost them eternity. God said that since they refused to believe they would never enter into His rest. Unbelief carries a fearful price.

The same can be said of us. If we follow Israel's example and refuse to believe, we will also perish. We will die and face the wrath of God. But if we believe – if we trust the God Who cannot lie and who always keeps His promises – then we will find rest. We will find salvation, everlasting joy, and endless life in paradise with God.

There are many people who will never enter into that rest:

Hebrews 4:1: “Let us therefore fear, lest, a promise being left us of entering into his rest, any of you should seem to come short of it.

2 For unto us was the gospel preached, as well as unto them: but the word preached did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in them that heard it.”

Israel heard the word of God but they refused to believe. They heard God speak with their own ears but they refused to believe. They saw the miracles of God but they refused to believe. They saw the provision of God but they refused to believe. They witnessed the power of God but they refused to believe. They had every opportunity and reason to believe, but they did not.

It is not enough to simply hear the word of God, and it is not enough to simply know about God; we must believe in Him. Believing that there is a God is not enough; we must put our faith in Him. The only way to be saved is to obey the gospel – to repent of our sins and believe in Christ. If we do not do that then our end will be the same as those who perished in the wilderness and were eternally lost. We must *believe*. Hearing alone will not do us any good.

You see, there is a better day coming:

Hebrews 4:3: “For we which have believed do enter into rest, as he said, As I have sworn in my wrath, if they shall enter into my rest: although the works were finished from the foundation of the world.

4 For he spake in a certain place of the seventh day on this wise, And God did rest the seventh day from all his works.

5 And in this place again, If they shall enter into my rest.

6 Seeing therefore it remaineth that some must enter therein, and they to whom it was first preached entered not in because of unbelief:

7 Again, he limiteth a certain day, saying in David, To day, after so long a time; as it is said, To day if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts.

8 For if Jesus had given them rest, then would he not afterward have spoken of another day.

9 There remaineth therefore a rest to the people of God.

10 For he that is entered into his rest, he also hath ceased from his own works, as God did from his.

11 Let us labour therefore to enter into that rest, lest any man fall after the same example of unbelief.”

Just as God rested from His works, so one day we will rest from ours. In this life we labor for the Lord, and after this life is over we will rest. There is a day of rest coming – a day when the troubles, pains, and sorrows of this life will be over; a day when sin and death and illness will no longer trouble us, and when persecution will be utterly unable to touch us.

However, not everyone will enter into that rest. It can only be obtained through belief. And make no mistake: God can easily tell those who do believe from those who do not. You may think that

you have the world fooled, but you can't fool God. Jesus knew all along that Judas was the traitor. Nothing is hidden from God:

Hebrews 4:12: “For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.

13 Neither is there any creature that is not manifest in his sight: but all things are naked and opened unto the eyes of him with whom we have to do.”

God knows all and sees all; He knows the truth. We cannot deceive Him. The Israelites who persisted in unbelief, despite all that God had done, perished. They failed to enter into God's rest.

But what about us? Will we believe and be saved? Will we lead lives of faithfulness – or will we also continue in our rebellion and perish?

HEBREWS 4:14 – 5:6

In this passage we find that the book of Hebrews spends some time talking about Jesus' role as our high priest. In order to understand what this means we need to take some time to study what a high priest actually was. The people who originally read the book of Hebrews (Jewish Christians) would have had no problem understanding these references, because they very were familiar with the Levitical system. However, since we are Gentiles we are at a disadvantage. There hasn't been a functional Levitical system in our lifetime – or in anyone's lifetime for nearly two thousand years. That means we will have to do a little bit of research.

The Levitical system was ordained by God. After the Lord delivered the Israelites from bondage in Egypt He led them through the wilderness to Mount Sinai, where He gave the Israelites His law. Part of that law was a system of holy days, priests, and sacrifices.

The Levitical system is far too complex to cover here, but I would like to briefly touch on the role of the high priest. The first high priest was Moses' brother Aaron. In order to be a priest you had to be a direct descendant of Aaron:

Numbers 18:1: “And the Lord said unto Aaron, Thou and thy sons and thy father's house with thee shall bear the iniquity of the sanctuary: and thou and thy sons with thee shall bear the iniquity of your priesthood.

2 And thy brethren also of the tribe of Levi, the tribe of thy father, bring thou with thee, that they may be joined unto thee, and minister unto thee: but thou and thy sons with thee shall minister before the tabernacle of witness.

3 And they shall keep thy charge, and the charge of all the tabernacle: only they shall not come nigh the vessels of the sanctuary and the altar, that neither they, nor ye also, die.

4 And they shall be joined unto thee, and keep the charge of the tabernacle of the congregation, for all the service of the tabernacle: and a stranger shall not come nigh unto you.

5 And ye shall keep the charge of the sanctuary, and the charge of the altar: that there be no wrath any more upon the children of Israel.

6 And I, behold, I have taken your brethren the Levites from among the children of Israel: to you they are given as a gift for the Lord, to do the service of the tabernacle of the congregation.

7 Therefore thou and thy sons with thee shall keep your priest's office for everything of the altar, and within the vail; and ye shall serve: I have given your priest's office unto you as a service of gift: and the stranger that cometh nigh shall be put to death.

8 And the Lord spake unto Aaron, Behold, I also have given thee the charge of mine heave offerings of all the hallowed things of the children of Israel; unto thee have I given them by reason of the anointing, and to thy sons, by an ordinance for ever.”

In this passage God made it clear that Aaron and his sons were dedicated as priests. They and their descendants were the only ones allowed to serve in the Temple and offer sacrifices. However, God gave the tribe of Levi to the priests in order to act as assistants. The Levites were divided into three

groups, and (among other things) they maintained the tabernacle and kept it in good repair. However, the Levites were not allowed to make sacrifices. Only priests could do that.

The priests had to be physically perfect:

Leviticus 21:17: “Speak unto Aaron, saying, Whosoever he be of thy seed in their generations that hath any blemish, let him not approach to offer the bread of his God.

18 For whatsoever man he be that hath a blemish, he shall not approach: a blind man, or a lame, or he that hath a flat nose, or any thing superfluous,

19 Or a man that is brokenfooted, or brokenhanded,

20 Or crookbackt, or a dwarf, or that hath a blemish in his eye, or be scurvy, or scabbed, or hath his stones broken;

21 No man that hath a blemish of the seed of Aaron the priest shall come nigh to offer the offerings of the Lord made by fire: he hath a blemish; he shall not come nigh to offer the bread of his God.”

But being physically perfect was not enough. The priests also had to be holy:

Leviticus 21:6: “They shall be holy unto their God, and not profane the name of their God: for the offerings of the Lord made by fire, and the bread of their God, they do offer: therefore they shall be holy.”

There were many priests serving at a given time, but there could only be one high priest. High priests served for life; after they died another high priest took their place. The high priest was in charge of the other priests and oversaw their duties. However, there were some duties that only the high priest could perform. For example, the high priest alone had the power to use the Urim and the Thummim to inquire of God:

Numbers 27:21: “And he shall stand before Eleazar the priest, who shall ask counsel for him after the judgment of Urim before the Lord: at his word shall they go out, and at his word they shall come in, both he, and all the children of Israel with him, even all the congregation.”

The Bible doesn't say very much about the Urim and the Thummim. All we know is that when people (such as kings) had questions, they could go to the high priest and he would use the Urim and Thummim to ask God the question and get a specific answer in return. The answer could be as simple as yes or no, or it could be much more involved than that. However, the high priest was the one who used it.

The whole job of the priests was to act as a go-between between God and man. The common people were not holy enough to approach God. They needed someone to go to God on their behalf – someone who was holy and who could offer sacrifices for their sins and seek forgiveness. The priests acted as that go-between. People would bring their animals to the priests, and the priests would sacrifice them.

Once a year, on the Day of Atonement, the high priest would offer a sacrifice for his own sins. He would then enter the Holy of Holies and offer a sacrifice on behalf of the sins of the entire nation:

Exodus 30:10: “And Aaron shall make an atonement upon the horns of it [the mercy seat in the Holy of Holies] once in a year with the blood of the sin offering of atonements: once in the year shall he make atonement upon it throughout your generations: it is most holy unto the Lord.”

The high priest was the only person who was allowed to enter the holiest place in the Temple, and he could only do so once a year – and even then he had to first make an offering on behalf of his own sins.

There is a lot more that could be said, but the point is that the high priest acted as the mediator between God and the nation. The high priest was the one who went before the very presence of God Himself in order to atone for the sins of the people. He was the one who sought forgiveness for the sins of the people. No one else could do that – only the high priest alone.

This finally brings us back to the passage. The Bible tells us that Jesus is our High Priest:

Hebrews 4:14: “Seeing then that we have a great high priest, that is passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our profession.”

This is one of the recurring themes of the book of Hebrews. Jesus is the one who made a sacrifice for the sins of the world – only instead of offering an animal, He offered His own life. He is the one who went before God and obtained our forgiveness.

However, there is a key difference. In the Old Testament the priests offered animals as sacrifices – but the blood of animals could never atone for sins:

Hebrews 10:4: “For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and of goats should take away sins.”

Those sacrifices were made looking forward to the work of Christ, who offered His own body and His own blood as an offering for sins. His sacrifice *was* able to take away sins. Therefore, Christ only had to offer Himself once; there was no need to offer Himself again. That one sacrifice finished our redemption once and for all.

Another important point is that in the Old Testament the high priest only served until he died. After his death another man took his position. Christ, however, will never die again. He lives forever to make intercession for us:

Hebrews 7:23: “And they truly were many priests, because they were not suffered to continue by reason of death:

24 But this man, because he continueth ever, hath an unchangeable priesthood.

25 Wherefore he is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them.”

Since He lives forever, our salvation is assured. Christ will never lose His position as high priest. (This concept will be discussed in more detail later in the book of Hebrews.)

Next, the author goes on to remind us that Jesus really can understand what we are going through:

Hebrews 4:15: “For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the

feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin.”

This is the very same point that was made back at the end of Hebrews 2. Even though Jesus is the eternal, uncreated God, He knows exactly what it is like to be a man because He became a man in order to redeem us. He knows what it is like to suffer and be in pain, because He suffered and was in pain. He knows what it is like to face temptation and trials, because He faced temptation and trials. He has been there. He faced it all – and since He faced it all, He knows how to help those who are being tempted (Hebrews 2:18:).

Another key fact is that *Jesus was sinless*. This is very important! One of the points of the Old Testament sacrificial system is that the offerings for sin had to be utterly perfect. They could not have any spot or blemish:

Leviticus 6:6: “And he shall bring his trespass offering unto the Lord, a ram without blemish out of the flock, with thy estimation, for a trespass offering, unto the priest:”

This is just one example; there are many more. If you read through Leviticus and Numbers you will see many, many references to the fact that the animals which were sacrificed had to be without blemish and without spot. If you were seeking forgiveness from God then your offering had to be perfect.

There is a reason for this. You see, God cannot simply brush sin under the rug. All sin must be punished; God's justice demands it. He cannot overlook sin or pretend that it didn't happen. It *must* be punished. This means that the only way we can possibly be forgiven is if some innocent party suffered for our sins. If that happened then justice would be served and we could go free.

However, this is only possible if the person who suffered was innocent. If that person was not innocent – if he had sins of his own – then all he could do is suffer for the sins that he had committed. He could not suffer for the sins of someone else.

Therefore, in order for Jesus to save us from our sins He *had* to be perfect. He had to be utterly sinless – otherwise He could not have suffered on our behalf. The sinlessness of Christ is *vital* to the gospel. Without it we cannot be saved. Therefore, the fact that Jesus never sinned is absolutely critical – and it is exactly what the Bible teaches, and what Jesus Himself claimed.

Since Jesus is our High Priest, the Bible says that we ought to take advantage of that fact:

Hebrews 4:16: “Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.”

Our high priest is not some sort of unknowable God who has no idea what we're going through; instead He is someone who became a man and lived a life full of suffering and pain. The Bible even referred to Him as the man of sorrows who was well acquainted with grief:

Isaiah 53:3: “He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not.”

Our high priest is not someone who is uncaring or distant, but someone who actually loved us

so much that He gave His very life to save us. We should have no hesitation in approaching Him.

Hebrews 4:16 says there are two things we need to seek: mercy and grace. The first thing that we ought to seek is the mercy of God. All men have sinned against God, and the wages of sin is death. The only way to escape God's wrath and the fires of Hell is to come to Christ, repent of your sins, and seek His forgiveness. Jesus will be merciful to all who come to Him and will forgive all those who repent and believe.

We *must* go to Him for mercy, for there is no one else who can give us mercy. No one else can forgive our sins! No one else can cancel our debt and give us righteousness. No one else can save us from the wrath of God. Mercy and forgiveness can only be obtained through Christ. There is no other way.

But that is not all that Jesus offered. Jesus promised to be with His disciples and said that He would never leave or forsake them. He promised to give them grace in time of need. God did not say "I have forgiven you; now it's up to you to live a good life. Let me know how that works out for you." Instead He promised to intercede for us. God offers us grace to help, if we will but seek it. He has *not* commanded us to live our lives on our own, trying to do the impossible; instead He has commanded us to go to Him for grace and strength, for we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us. Nothing is impossible with God – so we ought to run to the throne of grace and seek Christ.

The book of Hebrews then tells us that God is the one who appoints men to the priesthood:

Hebrews 5:1: "For every high priest taken from among men is ordained for men in things pertaining to God, that he may offer both gifts and sacrifices for sins:

2 Who can have compassion on the ignorant, and on them that are out of the way; for that he himself also is compassed with infirmity.

3 And by reason hereof he ought, as for the people, so also for himself, to offer for sins.

4 And no man taketh this honour unto himself, but he that is called of God, as was Aaron."

Since we took some time at the beginning of this lesson to cover the functions of priests, these verses should be easy to understand. The role of priests was to offer sacrifices in the Temple. The priests were to show compassion, and help those who were in need. They made offerings for sins. Also, priests did not choose themselves; instead they were chosen by God. You could not simply say "You know, I think I'd like to become a priest." In order to be a priest you had to be of the lineage that God had chosen; if you were not a descendant of Aaron then you could not be a priest. God was very specific about who could be priests and who could not.

The same is true of Christ. Jesus did not appoint Himself as our priest. Instead God the Father made Him our high priest:

Hebrews 5:5: "So also Christ glorified not himself to be made an high priest; but he that said unto him, Thou art my Son, to day have I begotten thee.

6 As he saith also in another place, Thou art a priest for ever after the order of Melchisedec."

God chose Christ to be our high priest. Just as God chose Aaron to be the high priest of the Israelites and said that his descendants should serve as priests, God also chose Jesus Christ to be our priest.

However, Jesus is a descendant of the tribe of Judah, not the tribe of Levi. This means that Jesus is not a Levitical priest; instead He is a priest of an entirely different order. The Bible says that Jesus was a priest of the order of Melchisedec.

In order to understand what that means we need to take a little history lesson. In the Old Testament the patriarch Abraham had a nephew named Lot. Now, Abraham and Lot were so rich that they could not live next to one another – the land could not support them both. So Abraham gave Lot a choice: whichever way Lot went, Abraham would go in the other direction.

Lot then made the very bad choice to live in Sodom – a city that was filled with people who were exceedingly wicked sinners:

Genesis 13:12: “Abram dwelled in the land of Canaan, and Lot dwelled in the cities of the plain, and pitched his tent toward Sodom.

13 But the men of Sodom were wicked and sinners before the Lord exceedingly.”

This proved to be an extremely bad idea – in fact, it ultimately ended up costing Lot everything (although that's a different story that we don't have time to cover here). It is *never* a good idea to pitch your tent toward Sodom.

While Lot was living there, a coalition of kings invaded:

Genesis 14:1: “And it came to pass in the days of Amraphel king of Shinar, Arioch king of Ellasar, Chedorlaomer king of Elam, and Tidal king of nations;

2 That these made war with Bera king of Sodom, and with Birsha king of Gomorrah, Shinab king of Admah, and Shemeber king of Zeboiim, and the king of Bela, which is Zoar.”

The Sodomites did not win this battle. The coalition was victorious and carried away everything – including Lot:

Genesis 14:8: “And there went out the king of Sodom, and the king of Gomorrah, and the king of Admah, and the king of Zeboiim, and the king of Bela (the same is Zoar;) and they joined battle with them in the vale of Siddim;

9 With Chedorlaomer the king of Elam, and with Tidal king of nations, and Amraphel king of Shinar, and Arioch king of Ellasar; four kings with five.

10 And the vale of Siddim was full of slimepits; and the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah fled, and fell there; and they that remained fled to the mountain.

11 And they took all the goods of Sodom and Gomorrah, and all their victuals, and went their way.

12 And they took Lot, Abram's brother's son, who dwelt in Sodom, and his goods, and departed.”

The cities of Sodom and Gomorrah were looted and Lot was abducted. When Abraham found out about this he trained his servants and launched a counter-attack. God gave Abraham the victory, and his small band of servants was able to defeat the combined armies of the coalition of kings:

Genesis 14:13: “And there came one that had escaped, and told Abram the Hebrew; for he dwelt in the plain of Mamre the Amorite, brother of Eshcol, and brother of of

Aner: and these were confederate with Abram.

14 And when Abram heard that his brother was taken captive, he armed his trained servants, born in his own house, three hundred and eighteen, and pursued them unto Dan.

15 And he divided himself against them, he and his servants, by night, and smote them, and pursued them unto Hobah, which is on the left hand of Damascus.

16 And he brought back all the goods, and also brought again his brother Lot, and his goods, and the women also, and the people.”

Abraham was able to defeat the kings, recover all of the stolen goods, and free his nephew Lot. The rescue party was a complete success. That is when Melchizedek appeared on the scene:

Genesis 14:17: “And the king of Sodom went out to meet him after his return from the slaughter of Chedorlaomer, and of the kings that were with him, at the valley of Shaveh, which is the king's dale.

18 And Melchizedek king of Salem brought forth bread and wine: and he was the priest of the most high God.

19 And he blessed him, and said, Blessed be Abram of the most high God, possessor of heaven and earth:

20 And blessed be the most high God, which hath delivered thine enemies into thy hand. And he gave him tithes of all.”

This is the one and only time that Melchizedek appears in the Bible. We see that he was apparently a king, because he is called the king of Salem (which, translated, means king of peace). We also see that he was a priest – and not just any priest, but a priest of the most high God. We see that he brought forth bread and wine, and that he blessed Abraham. He was such a great man that Abraham even gave him tithes!

(Now, some people use this passage as evidence that Christians need to tithe. However, I'd like to point out that the things Abraham tithed *didn't belong to him*. Abraham tithed of the stolen loot that he recovered. This is a lot like recovering a stolen purse, taking out the wallet, giving 10% of the cash to your local church, and then returning the rest to its original owner. This is *not* tithing in the modern sense of the word! There is no record of Abraham *ever* tithing things that actually belonged to him.)

Christ could not be a priest after the order of Aaron because He was not from the tribe of Levi. Instead God made Him a priest after the order of Melchizedek. Like Melchizedek, Christ was a king. Like Melchizedek, Christ was a priest. Just as there is no recorded end to the priesthood of Melchizedek, so there will be no end to the priesthood of Christ.

Now, this does *not* mean that Melchizedek was some sort of preincarnate appearance of Christ. If that were the case then being a priest after the order of Melchizedek would mean that Christ was a priest after the order of Christ, which makes no sense at all. Melchizedek was just a man. He was a very great man, as the book of Hebrews explains, but he was still just a man.

Christ, then, was a priest after the order of Melchizedek – not after the order of Aaron. Because of His actions He can save to the uttermost those who believe:

Hebrews 5:7: “Who in the days of his flesh, when he had offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears unto him that was able to save him from death, and was heard in that he feared;

8 Though he were a Son, yet learned he obedience by the things which he suffered;
9 And being made perfect, he became the author of eternal salvation unto all them
that obey him;
10 Called of God an high priest after the order of Melchisedec.”

Who became the author of eternal salvation? Jesus did – and *no one else*; there is no one else who can save you. Who does Jesus save? All those who obey Him.

Now, this does not mean that we are saved by works. It does not mean that in order to be saved we have to obey God, and that God saves those who do good works and condemns those who do bad works. The Bible is very clear that we are not saved by the works of the law:

Galatians 2:16: “Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law: for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified.”

This is very important: *no one* is justified by the works of the law! Your obedience is incapable of saving you. When the book of Hebrews talks about obeying Christ it is actually talking about something else. You see, during Jesus' ministry He preached the gospel. His message was very simple:

Mark 1:14: “Now after that John was put in prison, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God,
15 And saying, The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe the gospel.”

Previously we spent an entire lesson talking about what it means to have faith, and the consequences of unbelief. Jesus commands us to repent and believe. We are to repent of our sins and believe in the *Biblical* Jesus – that He is the uncreated God who created the world; that He became a man and was born of a virgin; that He died on the cross; that He rose from the dead on the third day; and that His sacrifice – and it alone – can save us from our sins. He wants us to believe that all who repent and believe on Him are forgiven and have everlasting life. That is what we are commanded to do.

But there is something else that I must point out. There are many people today who want to avoid Hell but who have no intention of ever submitting themselves to Christ. These people essentially say “Jesus, make sure I go to Heaven when I die, but don't you dare tell me how to live my life.” They believe that they can make Jesus their Savior *without* making Him their Lord. This is a very serious error! In order to be saved you *must* repent of your sins and submit your life to Christ. You must give your life to Him. Being saved requires total and absolute surrender. It means that you do as Jesus says. It means that you obey His commands. It means that if your opinions are different from His, you are wrong and you need to change. It means you adopt His priorities, His will, and His way of thinking. It means dying of yourself and living for God.

God will not save anyone who will not surrender to Him. All those who live lives in rebellion, refusing to obey God and doing as they please, are not saved. The apostle John was very clear about this:

I John 2:3: “And hereby we do know that we know him, if we keep his

commandments.

4 He that saith, I know him, and keepeth not his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him.”

This does not mean that we are saved by our works, nor does it mean that we have to keep our salvation through a life of good works. Instead John is saying that *genuine salvation results in a changed life*. Salvation creates a person who hates sin and who seeks God's help in turning from sin and living a more righteous life. If a person is truly saved then *they will change*. One of the marks of this change is holiness. In other words, genuine salvation results in a more holy life.

Those whose lives are not characterized by holiness are not saved. Those who continue in sin, who love sin, who refuse to obey God, and who claim that God has no right to tell them what to do, are not saved. They do not know God and are utterly lost.

At this point the author of Hebrews switches gears. He says there is more he would like to say, but he cannot go into more detail because he is writing to people who are too immature:

Hebrews 5:11: “Of whom we have many things to say, and hard to be uttered, seeing ye are dull of hearing.

12 For when for the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need that one teach you again which be the first principles of the oracles of God; and are become such as have need of milk, and not of strong meat.

13 For every one that useth milk is unskilful in the word of righteousness: for he is a babe.

14 But strong meat belongeth to them that are of full age, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.”

Things have not gotten any better since this letter was written. Some churches are still full of people who have attended church their entire lives and yet have an incredibly poor grasp of Christian theology. People who have been Christians for decades ought to know the Bible well, but instead many know almost nothing about it and are in constant need of being reminded of the basics.

It astonishes me how some Christians care so very little about the Bible. There are Christians who can't be bothered to even *read* their Bibles, let alone study them. Few Christians today have read through their entire Bible, and most would have a very hard time answering even basic questions about it. Ignorance is rampant. Pastors are forced to stick to basic messages because their congregations are too immature for messages with actual depth and complexity.

Lest you think I am being unfair, let me give you an example. The researcher George Barna did some research where he polled people in the United States to find out if they were actually Christians or not. He found out that if you ask people if they are a Christian, nearly everyone will claim to be one. If you ask people if they are evangelical Christians, 38% of people will claim to be one.

He then asked this last group if they agreed with these nine statements:

1. They say they have made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ that is still important in their life today.
2. They believe when they die they will go to Heaven because they have confessed their sins and accepted Christ as Savior.
3. They say their faith is very important in their life today.
4. They believe they have a personal responsibility to share their beliefs with non-

Christians.

5. They believe Satan exists.
6. They believe eternal salvation is possible only through grace, not works.
7. They believe Jesus Christ lived a sinless life on earth.
8. They assert that the Bible is accurate in all it teaches.
9. They describe God as the all-knowing, all-powerful, perfect deity who created the universe and still rules it today.

How many people claimed to believe all nine points? Just *eight percent*. Keep in mind that 38% claimed to be an evangelical Christian – but it turned out that nearly 80% of those didn't believe even the most *basic* of Christian doctrines! In other words, some churches are full of people who, if the truth were known, actually *reject* Christianity. They don't even believe the basics – and if they don't believe that then you can forget about trying to teach anything more advanced!

Do you think that it honors God when His people can't even be bothered to *read* His Word, much less believe what it says? Do you think He is pleased at the staggering ignorance that plagues our churches? I very much doubt it. If your church was quizzed on the basic doctrines of Christianity, how many people do you think would get a passing grade?

The book of Hebrews has a simple message for the churches: *grow up*. Learn what the Bible says, believe it, and apply it to your life. Do not remain an immature believer your entire life. Grow in the Word:

2 Timothy 2:15: “Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.”

Study the Word. This is not optional! Do you really want to stand before God on the day of judgment and tell Him that you couldn't be bothered to read His Word or pay attention to what He said?

NEHEMIAH 2 – GOD INSPIRES THE WORK

Our lesson today is entitled “God Inspires The Work” and is taken from Nehemiah 2. However, I have a problem: the story that is told in chapter 2 doesn't actually begin in chapter 2. In order to place this chapter into the proper context we need to go back and take a look at chapter 1. It's simply not wise to start in the middle of a story and leave out the beginning.

When the story begins we find Nehemiah in the king's palace:

Nehemiah 1:1: “The words of Nehemiah the son of Hachaliah. And it came to pass in the month Chisleu, in the twentieth year, as I was in Shushan the palace,”

Later on in the chapter we learn that Nehemiah was a very important man. He was the king's cupbearer:

Nehemiah 1:11b: “... For I was the king's cupbearer.”

The position of cupbearer was a very important one. It was his job to taste the king's drink before he drank it, to make sure that it was not poisoned and would do the king no harm. Obviously, if you were the king you would want that position to be held by someone that you trusted, because your life depended on him.

Since Nehemiah was the cupbearer that meant he was important, he was powerful, he had the king's ear, he spent his time in the palace, and he led a comfortable and wealthy life. In other words, Nehemiah had it made. He was far better off than most people in his day.

Yet, as we will see, Nehemiah still cared about the plight of his people. He had not forgotten them:

Nehemiah 1:2: “That Hanani, one of my brethren, came, he and certain men of Judah; and I asked them concerning the Jews that had escaped, which were left of the captivity, and concerning Jerusalem.”

When Nehemiah's fellow Jews came, he asked them how things were going for his people. In other words, Nehemiah *cared*. This is one of the attributes that we see in the great heroes of faith. Moses was raised as Pharaoh's son and lived a splendid life of tremendous wealth in one of the greatest nations of his day, and yet he still cared about the life of his fellow Israelites and sought to deliver them from bondage. He could have said “Their suffering isn't my problem” and went on his way, but he didn't. He willingly abandoned the great treasures of Pharaoh's household in order to live a life of suffering and deliver his people. This is what Hebrews 11 has to say about Moses:

Hebrews 11:24: “By faith Moses, when he was come to years, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter;
25 Choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season;
26 Esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt: for he had respect unto the recompence of the reward.”

Moses cared about his people – and he was not the only one. When Haman plotted to kill all the Jews, Esther risked her life to save them. She could have said “Well, it's not my problem; I am the Queen and will be just fine,” but she didn't. Instead she put everything on the line to save her people.

Nehemiah truly cared about the plight of the rest of Israel. Even though he led a comfortable, powerful life, he still cared. Even though he had nothing to gain and everything to lose, he still cared. When he heard about the plight of Jerusalem he was greatly disturbed:

Nehemiah 1:3: “And they said unto me, The remnant that are left of the captivity there in the province are in great affliction and reproach: the wall of Jerusalem also is broken down, and the gates thereof are burned with fire.

4 And it came to pass, when I heard these words, that I sat down and wept, and mourned certain days, and fasted, and prayed before the God of heaven,”

Nehemiah was so overcome by the distress of his people that he wept and mourned. He was deeply upset. Keep in mind that this affliction wasn't afflicting *him*; Nehemiah himself was living a great life in the king's palace. What upset Nehemiah so greatly was the affliction of *other people*.

Notice also that Nehemiah actually *did something*. When he heard the news he fasted and prayed. He sought God. He wasn't content to do nothing – instead he went straight to the all-powerful God, for whom nothing is impossible. Nehemiah wanted to see this problem fixed, and he knew that there was only one being who could possibly fix it.

But Nehemiah didn't stop there. He also confessed his sins:

Nehemiah 1:6: “Let thine ear now be attentive, and thine eyes open, that thou mayest hear the prayer of thy servant, which I pray before thee now, day and night, for the children of Israel thy servants, and confess the sins of the children of Israel, which we have sinned against thee: both I and my father's house have sinned.

7 We have dealt very corruptly against thee, and have not kept the commandments, nor the statutes, nor the judgments, which thou commandedst thy servant Moses.”

Nehemiah did not say “I have been a wonderful human being, but all those other Israelites have been awful.” He confessed that he, too, was a sinner. He did not act as if he was somehow better or superior to everyone else. He humbled himself and cried out for God to forgive both himself and his people. In other words, he interceded on behalf of his nation. He did not try to pretend that Israel had been a wonderful, God-fearing nation; instead he readily acknowledged their past wickedness.

Nehemiah is not the only hero of faith who did this. Daniel did exactly the same thing:

Daniel 9:2: “In the first year of his reign I Daniel understood by books the number of the years, whereof the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah the prophet, that he would accomplish seventy years in the desolations of Jerusalem.

3 And I set my face unto the Lord God, to seek by prayer and supplications, with fasting, and sackcloth, and ashes:

4 And I prayed unto the Lord my God, and made my confession, and said, O Lord, the great and dreadful God, keeping the covenant and mercy to them that love him, and to them that keep his commandments;

5 We have sinned, and have committed iniquity, and have done wickedly, and have

rebelled, even by departing from thy precepts and from thy judgments:

6 Neither have we hearkened unto thy servants the prophets, which spake in thy name to our kings, our princes, and our fathers, and to all the people of the land.

7 O Lord, righteousness belongeth unto thee, but unto us confusion of faces, as at this day; to the men of Judah, and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and unto all Israel, that are near, and that are far off, through all the countries whither thou hast driven them, because of their trespass that they have trespassed against thee.”

In Daniel's case he was praying that God would have mercy on Israel and free them from captivity; in Nehemiah's case he was praying that God would restore Israel's fortunes. In both situations, though, the attitude is the same: Daniel and Nehemiah approached God humbly, with fasting and prayer. They both asked God to forgive their own sins and the sins of the people, and they both asked God to have mercy on the nation.

When Nehemiah prayed he had a specific request:

Nehemiah 1:11: “O Lord, I beseech thee, let now thine ear be attentive to the prayer of thy servant, and to the prayer of thy servants, who desire to fear thy name: and prosper, I pray thee, thy servant this day, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man. For I was the king's cupbearer.”

Nehemiah knew that the king had the power to help him or hinder him. If the king showed him favor then that would be a tremendous help – but if the king opposed him then all would be lost. Everything depended on how the king responded to Nehemiah's request. Therefore Nehemiah cried out to God and asked God to have the king favor what Nehemiah was going to ask.

Now, remember, Nehemiah was living a great life. He had nothing to gain by getting involved in this mess; in fact, he was risking everything. He could have told Israel that the plight of Jerusalem was their problem, not his, but he didn't. Instead he was going to put everything on the line to try to help them – just as Esther once had.

Now we can at last start on chapter 2. Nehemiah finally approaches the king:

Nehemiah 2:1: “And it came to pass in the month Nisan, in the twentieth year of Artaxerxes the king, that wine was before him: and I took up the wine, and gave it unto the king. Now I had not been beforetime sad in his presence.”

The first detail that I'd like to mention is that in Nehemiah 1:1 we are told that he found out about the plight of Israel in the month Chisleu, which corresponds to our November. However, Nehemiah didn't talk to the king until the month Nisan, which corresponds to our March. In other words, Nehemiah didn't rush to talk to the king the very next day.

The passage doesn't explain the delay, but there are a couple possible reasons for it. One possibility is that Nehemiah wasn't the king's only cupbearer, and that he only served the king at certain times of the year. Remember, in ancient times you couldn't just wander into the king's presence whenever you felt like it! You had to be called, and if you came without being called then you could be killed for it:

Esther 4:10: “Again Esther spake unto Hatach, and gave him commandment unto Mordecai;

11 All the king's servants, and the people of the king's provinces, do know, that whosoever, whether man or women, shall come unto the king into the inner court, who is not called, there is one law of his to put him to death, except such to whom the king shall hold out the golden sceptre, that he may live: but I have not been called to come in unto the king these thirty days."

Nehemiah may have simply been waiting for his turn to come. Another possibility is that going to Jerusalem in the winter would have been a terrible idea, since it was the wrong time of year to actually start any building projects or make any long trips. It made far more sense to wait until the spring and do things then.

We also see from this verse that Nehemiah hadn't previously been sad in the king's presence. This is probably not an accident. The book of Esther tells us that no one in sackcloth was allowed before the king:

Esther 4:2: "When Mordecai perceived all that was done, Mordecai rent his clothes, and put on sackcloth with ashes, and went out into the midst of the city, and cried with a loud and a bitter cry;
2 And came even before the king's gate: for none might enter into the king's gate clothed with sackcloth."

In other words, you couldn't go before the king while you were in mourning. It was simply not allowed. Nehemiah did, though, and the king noticed – and that is probably why Nehemiah was immediately terrified:

Nehemiah 2:2: "Wherefore the king said unto me, Why is thy countenance sad, seeing thou art not sick? this is nothing else but sorrow of heart. Then I was very sore afraid,"

Remember that in those days kings had absolute power: if they decided they wanted you dead then they could simply kill you. It was a very bad idea to get on the king's nerves! When the king saw Nehemiah he knew that something was wrong, and now Nehemiah has a problem. However, he handled it very wisely:

Nehemiah 2:3: "And said unto the king, Let the king live for ever: why should not my countenance be sad, when the city, the place of my fathers' sepulchres, lieth waste, and the gates thereof are consumed with fire?"

Nehemiah appealed to the king in a very clever way. Why *shouldn't* he be upset, since his home lied in waste and had been destroyed? Wouldn't that upset anyone? Isn't that just a natural response? The king wanted to know what Nehemiah has in mind – and so Nehemiah prayed:

Nehemiah 2:4: "Then the king said unto me, For what dost thou make request? So I prayed to the God of heaven."

When the moment finally came, Nehemiah didn't trust himself or the king; instead he looked directly to God. Nehemiah knew that if this was to succeed at all then God would have to bless it – and

if God blessed it then all would be well. Nehemiah apparently understood something that modern man has forgotten:

Psalm 127:1: “Except the Lord build the house, they labour in vain that build it: except the Lord keep the city, the watchman waketh but in vain.”

If we want our efforts to succeed then we need the help of the Lord – and that is exactly where Nehemiah went for aid. So Nehemiah made his request:

Nehemiah 2:5: “And I said unto the king, If it please the king, and if thy servant have found favour in thy sight, that thou wouldst send me unto Judah, unto the city of my fathers' sepulchres, that I may build it.”

Nehemiah wants the king to send him to Jerusalem so that he can repair the fallen city. Nehemiah went on to request the resources he would need to carry out this enormous task:

Nehemiah 2:7: “Moreover I said unto the king, If it please the king, let letters be given me to the governors beyond the river, that they may convey me over till I come into Judah;

8 And a letter unto Asaph the keeper of the king's forest, that he may give me timber to make beams for the gates of the palace which appertained to the house, and for the wall of the city, and for the house that I shall enter into. And the king granted me, according to the good hand of my God upon me.”

Nehemiah requested safe passage to Jerusalem, along with the resources from the king's forest that he would need to accomplish the rebuilding project. The king granted Nehemiah's request – and when that happens, note that Nehemiah immediately gives the credit to God. Nehemiah was quite clear about why his request was granted: it was because the good hand of his God was upon him. Nehemiah took no credit whatsoever.

Now that he had the king's permission and the king's resources, he made his trip to Jerusalem. The king even sent armed guards to protect him on his journey:

Nehemiah 2:9: “Then I came to the governors beyond the river, and gave them the king's letters. Now the king had sent captains of the army and horsemen with me.”

Nehemiah finally arrived:

Nehemiah 2:11: “So I came to Jerusalem, and was there three days.

12 And I arose in the night, I and some few men with me; neither told I any man what my God had put in my heart to do at Jerusalem: neither was there any beast with me, save the beast that I rode upon.”

There are a couple things here that we tend to miss. First of all, notice that there is no mention of anyone even acknowledging Nehemiah's arrival in Jerusalem. Here was an important man, coming on a mission from the king himself, and yet his arrival seems to pass by unnoticed. When Nehemiah does arrive he does not tell anyone what he is there to do. Nehemiah does not make a big show of

himself or brag about his plans. He does not seek fame – in fact, he acts with great humility. He does not announce his plans to anyone:

Nehemiah 2:16: “And the rulers knew not whither I went, or what I did; neither had I as yet told it to the Jews, nor to the priests, nor to the nobles, nor to the rulers, nor to the rest that did the work.”

In our time we love to make much of ourselves. We want to be famous and well-respected, and we crave the applause of men. Nehemiah, though, had his heart elsewhere. He did not take up this quest in order to find honor; instead he did it out of a love for his people.

As we can see, Nehemiah surveyed the city at night, when most people would be in bed. He did not want anyone to know what his plans were before he had a chance to see the situation for himself. So he carefully surveyed the situation:

Nehemiah 2:13: “And I went out by night by the gate of the valley, even before the dragon well, and to the dung port, and viewed the walls of Jerusalem, which were broken down, and the gates thereof were consumed with fire.

14 Then I went on to the gate of the fountain, and to the king's pool: but there was no place for the beast that was under me to pass.

15 Then went I up in the night by the brook, and viewed the wall, and turned back, and entered by the gate of the valley, and so returned.”

Nehemiah surveyed the city and took a close look at the actual damage and the work that would need to be accomplished. Once he knew the full scope of the assignment, he talked to the people about the task at hand:

Nehemiah 2:17: “Then said I unto them, Ye see the distress that we are in, how Jerusalem lieth waste, and the gates thereof are burned with fire: come, and let us build up the wall of Jerusalem, that we be no more a reproach.”

Nehemiah pointed out the obvious: the city was in bad shape. The city walls had been destroyed and the gates had been burned with fire. In the ancient world that was a serious problem because it meant the city was defenseless. The walls and gates of a city were what kept out invading armies and provided protection for the city's inhabitants. Jerusalem was completely exposed and unprotected. Not having a wall would be like a bank not having any locks – it was a terrible situation, and one that was very dangerous for the residents.

One thing we tend to overlook is that the people who lived in Jerusalem must have already known that. After all, *they lived there!* They knew the sorry plight of their own city, *and yet they did nothing*. We see no sign that any of the rulers or priests of the city were crying out to God and pleading for His help. There is no evidence that any of the city's residents were trying to repair their own sections of the wall. The people who actually lived there were doing *nothing* about the problem.

The reason the wall got rebuilt was because someone from out of town, who didn't live there and who wasn't affected by the problem, risked his job and his very life to travel all the way to Jerusalem and fix the problem. Nehemiah was the catalyst God used to rebuild the wall – because apparently the city's actual residents couldn't be bothered to care.

Only after Nehemiah makes his speech, points out the problem, and explains that he has the

king's support and resources, do the people agree that maybe it's time to do something about the problem:

Nehemiah 2:18: “Then I told them of the hand of my God which was good upon me; as also the king's words that he had spoken unto me. And they said, Let us rise up and build. So they strengthened their hands for this good work.”

Armed with Nehemiah's leadership and support, the people will rise up and build.

This is not the only time that things worked out this way. The same thing happened when it came to rebuilding the Temple. The book of Ezra tells us that when the people began the rebuilding project, the enemies of God stepped in and managed to stop it. When that happened the people stopped caring and went their own way – they just gave up. God had to send Haggai the prophet to prod them back into action:

Haggai 1:2: “Thus speaketh the Lord of hosts, saying, This people say, The time is not come, the time that the Lord's house should be built.

3 Then came the word of the Lord by Haggai the prophet, saying,

4 Is it time for you, O ye, to dwell in your cieled houses, and this house lie waste?

5 Now therefore thus saith the Lord of hosts; Consider your ways.

6 Ye have sown much, and bring in little; ye eat, but ye have not enough; ye drink, but ye are not filled with drink; ye clothe you, but there is none warm; and he that earneth wages earneth wages to put it into a bag with holes.

7 Thus saith the Lord of hosts; Consider your ways.

8 Go up to the mountain, and bring wood, and build the house; and I will take pleasure in it, and I will be glorified, saith the Lord.

9 Ye looked for much, and, lo it came to little; and when ye brought it home, I did blow upon it. Why? saith the Lord of hosts. Because of mine house that is waste, and ye run every man unto his own house.

10 Therefore the heaven over you is stayed from dew, and the earth is stayed from her fruit.”

Since the people had stopped caring about the Temple and cared only about their own lives, God actually cursed them. It took the curse of God and the rebuke of God's prophet in order to prod the nation into actually rebuilding the Temple. When it came time to rebuilding the wall around Jerusalem, God had to send someone from a distant land to Jerusalem in order to make it happen, because once again the people who lived there couldn't be bothered to take action.

It seems there are times in history when God uses one man to do great things, because that one man is the only one who actually cares. God spared Noah and his family because Noah – and Noah alone – was righteous in a wicked world. God used Moses to deliver Israel because he cared about the plight of his people. God used Nehemiah to rebuild the wall because Nehemiah actually cared. In each of these cases God found the man whose heart was right, and that is the man God used to accomplish His purposes.

Our time is not so very different. We live at the very end of the Church Age. The book of Revelation tells us that our age is characterized by indifference:

Revelation 3:15: “I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would

thou wert cold or hot.

16 So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth.

17 Because thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked:

18 I counsel thee to buy of me gold tried in the fire, that thou mayest be rich; and white raiment, that thou mayest be clothed, and that the shame of thy nakedness do not appear; and anoint thine eyes with eyesalve, that thou mayest see.”

God is not a fan of indifference; in fact, He hates it. God despises the indifferent churches of our day and threatens them with judgment. However, He gives us a promise. If we change our ways and come to Him, He will come to us:

Revelation 3:20: “Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me.”

This verse has been widely misunderstood. In the case of the modern church Jesus is actually *outside* the door, trying to get inside! In other words, Jesus is *not* a part of what is going on. Instead He is outside, hoping that someone will open the door and let Him in.

If someone does let him in then Jesus promises to have fellowship *with that person*. The rest of the church might be lukewarm and spiritually dead, but if that person seeks after Jesus then they will find Him and have fellowship with Him. Jesus is seeking people who have a heart after Him – people who refuse to give in to the indifference of their age and who seek after God. That is what we are called to do.

NEHEMIAH 6

In this lesson we are going to take a look at the external opposition that Nehemiah faced while trying to rebuild the wall around Jerusalem. However, since the opposition didn't start in chapter 6, we need to take a step back in order to view the bigger picture.

The first time we meet Nehemiah's enemies is in chapter 2. After Nehemiah obtained the king's permission and support to rebuild the walls around Jerusalem, he traveled to Israel. When other people found out what was going on, some of them were very unhappy about it:

Nehemiah 2:10: “When Sanballat the Horonite, and Tobiah the servant, the Ammonite, heard of it, it grieved them exceedingly that there was come a man to seek the welfare of the children of Israel.”

Sanballat and Tobiah were not at all pleased that someone had come to help the Israelites. These two people were Israel's enemies and they did *not* want to see her rise again. Before we get into what they did, however, it's worth spending a little time explaining who these people are. Sanballat the Horonite is thought to be from the town of Horonaim (which is why he's called a Horonite) of the country of Moab. This means he was a Moabite. Tobiah, on the other hand, was an Ammonite.

The Bible has quite a bit to say about these two peoples. It turns out that both of them are the descendants of Lot's daughters:

Genesis 19:36: “Thus were both the daughters of Lot with child by their father.
37 And the first born bare a son, and called his name Moab: the same is the father of the Moabites unto this day.
38 And the younger, she also bare a son, and called his name Benammi: the same is the father of the children of Ammon unto this day.”

In other words, the Ammonites and the Moabites were the product of incest. Since Lot was Abraham's nephew these two people groups were related to Abraham, even though they weren't his direct descendants.

These nations appeared quite frequently in the Old Testament. The Bible tells us that they were both cursed by God and were not allowed to enter into the congregation of the Lord. The book of Deuteronomy tells us why:

Deuteronomy 23:3: “An Ammonite or Moabite shall not enter into the congregation of the Lord; even to their tenth generation shall they not enter into the congregation of the Lord for ever:
4 Because they met you not with bread and with water in the way, when ye came forth out of Egypt; and because they hired against thee Balaam the son of Beor of Pethor of Mesopotamia, to curse thee.”

Even though the Israelites had not done anything against either of these groups, they still hated Israel. They even hired Balaam to curse Israel, in an attempt to harm that nation and cause them to fail! Israel had not done anything to deserve this hate – they were simply hated, and so God forbade the

Moabites and Ammonites from ever entering His congregation.

Later, when Israel sinned against God, the Lord turned Israel over to the king of Moab. The Ammonites helped the Moabite king to conquer Israel. In other words, Moab and Ammon had once again teamed up to cause Israel problems:

Judges 3:12: “And the children of Israel did evil again in the sight of the Lord: and the Lord strengthened Eglon the king of Moab against Israel, because they had done evil in the sight of the Lord.

13 And he gathered unto him the children of Ammon and Amalek, and went and smote Israel, and possessed the city of palm trees.

14 So the children of Israel served Eglon the king of Moab eighteen years.”

God later delivered Israel from the Moabite king, but Israel refused to serve God for very long. When Israel started serving the gods of the Moabites and the Ammonites, the Lord once again turned them over to their enemies:

Judges 10:6: “And the children of Israel did evil again in the sight of the Lord, and served Baalim, and Ashtaroth, and the gods of Syria, and the gods of Zidon, and the gods of Moab, and the gods of the children of Ammon, and the gods of the Philistines, and forsook the Lord, and served not him.

7 And the anger of the Lord was hot against Israel, and he sold them into the hands of the Philistines, and into the hands of the children of Ammon.

8 And that year they vexed and oppressed the children of Israel: eighteen years, all the children of Israel that were on the other side Jordan in the land of the Amorites, which is in Gilead.

9 Moreover the children of Ammon passed over Jordan to fight also against Judah, and against Benjamin, and against the house of Ephraim; so that Israel was sore distressed.”

The Ammonites have been Israel's enemy since the time of the exodus. They hated Israel for centuries, they repeatedly fought against Israel, and they conquered her cities. In fact, Saul's first act as king was to fight against the Ammonites:

1 Samuel 11:11: “And it was so on the morrow, that Saul put the people in three companies; and they came into the midst of the host in the morning watch, and slew the Ammonites until the heat of the day: and it came to pass, that they which remained were scattered, so that two of them were not left together.”

Later, King David tried to make peace with the Ammonites. His offer was roughly rejected:

2 Samuel 10:1: “And it came to pass after this, that the king of the children of Ammon died, and Hanun his son reigned in his stead.

2 Then said David, I will shew kindness unto Hanun the son of Nahash, as his father shewed kindness unto me. And David sent to comfort him by the hand of his servants for his father. And David's servants came into the land of the children of Ammon.

3 And the princes of the children of Ammon said unto Hanun their lord, Thinkest thou that David doth honour thy father, that he hath sent comforters unto thee? hath not David rather sent his servants unto thee, to search the city, and to spy it out, and to overthrow it?

4 Wherefore Hanun took David's servants, and shaved off the one half of their beards, and cut off their garments in the middle, even to their buttocks, and sent them away."

Not only did the king of Ammon treat David's peace envoy shamefully, but when the king realized that he had offended David he decided to *declare war on David* instead of apologizing! That is how much the Ammonites hated Israel.

Interestingly, the Ammonites proved to be David's downfall. When David tarried in Jerusalem and committed adultery with Bathsheba, do you know who his armies were fighting? That's right – it was the Ammonites:

2 Samuel 11:1: "And it came to pass, after the year was expired, at the time when kings go forth to battle, that David sent Joab, and his servants with him, and all Israel; and they destroyed the children of Ammon, and besieged Rabbah. But David tarried still at Jerusalem.

2 And it came to pass in an eveningtide, that David arose from off his bed, and walked upon the roof of the king's house: and from the roof he saw a woman washing herself; and the woman was very beautiful to look upon.

3 And David sent and enquired after the woman. And one said, Is not this Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite?"

And who did David get to kill Bathsheba's husband, Uriah the Hittite? That's right – it was the Ammonites:

2 Samuel 12:9: "Wherefore hast thou despised the commandment of the Lord, to do evil in his sight? thou hast killed Uriah the Hittite with the sword, and hast taken his wife to be thy wife, and hast slain him with the sword of the children of Ammon."

These two groups also played a role in the downfall of Solomon. It turns out that among his wives were Moabites and Ammonites:

1 Kings 11:1: "But king Solomon loved many strange women, together with the daughter of Pharaoh, women of the Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Zidonians, and Hittites:"

These women taught him to worship the false gods of the Moabites and Ammonites, which led to the kingdom being taken away from Solomon's son:

1 Kings 11:31: "And he said to Jeroboam, Take thee ten pieces: for thus saith the Lord, the God of Israel, Behold, I will rend the kingdom out of the hand of Solomon, and will give ten tribes to thee: . . .

33 Because that they have forsaken me, and have worshipped Ashtoreth the goddess of the Zidonians, Chemosh the god of the Moabites, and Milcom the god of the children of Ammon, and have not walked in my ways, to do that which is right in mine eyes, and to keep my statutes and my judgments, as did David his father.”

Interestingly, Solomon passed his kingdom on to his son Rehoboam. It turns out that Rehoboam's mother was – you guessed it – an Ammonite:

1 Kings 14:21: “And Rehoboam the son of Solomon reigned in Judah. Rehoboam was forty and one years old when he began to reign, and he reigned seventeen years in Jerusalem, the city which the Lord did choose out of all the tribes of Israel, to put his name there. And his mother's name was Naamah an Ammonitess.”

I could go on, but I think you get the point: the Moabites and Ammonites had been causing problems for Israel for a long time. It should come as no surprise that an Ammonite was unhappy to hear that someone was seeking the welfare of the children of Israel.

The very first thing that Sanballat and Tobiah did was accuse Nehemiah of treason:

Nehemiah 2:19: “But when Sanballat the Horonite, and Tobiah the servant, the Ammonite, and Geshem the Arabian, heard it, they laughed us to scorn, and despised us, and said, What is this thing that ye do? will ye rebel against the king?”

The charge of treason was utterly baseless, but it was still a dangerous threat. All these enemies had to do was persuade the king that Nehemiah was leading a rebellion, and that would put an end to everything Nehemiah was attempting to do – and it would probably get Nehemiah killed as well. This false charge wasn't just an attempt to stop Israel; it was also an attempt to end Nehemiah's life. But it didn't work. Nehemiah had an answer ready for them:

Nehemiah 2:20: “Then answered I them, and said unto them, The God of heaven, he will prosper us; therefore we his servants will arise and build: but ye have no portion, nor right, nor memorial, in Jerusalem.”

One of the things we see in the life of Nehemiah is that whenever he had a problem he always put his trust in God. When he wanted to go before the king and plead on behalf of Jerusalem, he fasted and prayed. Here, when his life was being threatened, he trusted in God and said that the Lord would prosper them. His faith was solidly fixed on God – and on nothing else.

He was also not shy about putting the Ammonites in their place. Nehemiah pointed out that God gave Jerusalem to the Jews, and not to anyone else. The Ammonites had no claim to the city. They were meddling in something that did not concern them.

In chapter 6, when the rebuilding project was well under way, Sanballat once again tried to get Nehemiah killed:

Nehemiah 6:1: “Now it came to pass when Sanballat, and Tobiah, and Geshem the Arabian, and the rest of our enemies, heard that I had builded the wall, and that there was no breach left therein; (though at that time I had not set up the doors upon the gates;)

2 That Sanballat and Geshem sent unto me, saying, Come, let us meet together in some one of the villages in the plain of Ono. But they thought to do me mischief."

Sanballat's plan was obvious: he wanted to meet Nehemiah so he could kill him and put a stop to the work. He understood that Nehemiah was the one driving the entire effort. As we discussed during the lesson on chapter 2, the effort to rebuild the walls was Nehemiah's doing. In fact, Nehemiah actually had to persuade the people of Jerusalem to help him – it wasn't their idea at all. If Sanballat could kill Nehemiah then there was a good chance the entire project would fail.

But Nehemiah didn't fall for it:

Nehemiah 6:3: "And I sent messengers unto them, saying, I am doing a great work, so that I cannot come down: why should the work cease, whilst I leave it, and come down to you?"

4 Yet they sent unto me four times after this sort; and I answered them after the same manner."

Sanballat repeatedly tried to get Nehemiah to come see him so that he could kill Nehemiah, but it didn't work. Nehemiah had a job to do and he stuck to it. He stayed focused on the task at hand and refused to be distracted.

When Sanballat saw that his trick wasn't working, he decided to start issuing threats:

Nehemiah 6:5: "Then sent Sanballat his servant unto me in like manner the fifth time with an open letter in his hand;

6 Wherein was written, It is reported among the heathen, and Gashmu saith it, that thou and the Jews think to rebel: for which cause thou buildest the wall, that thou mayest be their king, according to these words.

7 And thou hast also appointed prophets to preach of thee at Jerusalem, saying, There is a king in Judah: and now shall it be reported to the king according to these words. Come now therefore, and let us take counsel together."

This time Sanballat told Nehemiah that if he didn't agree to a face-to-face meeting, he would tell the king that Nehemiah was planning on launching a rebellion. In other words, he would lie and accuse Nehemiah of treason – something that stood a chance of getting Nehemiah executed. This was a serious threat; kings did not take accusations like that lightly.

Of course, everything that Sanballat said was a lie. Nehemiah had no desire to be the king; his only concern was for the welfare of his people. Nehemiah had not appointed anyone to go around saying that he was a king. Everything that Sanballat said was an outright lie – and that's exactly what Nehemiah told him:

Nehemiah 6:8: "Then I sent unto him, saying, There are no such things done as thou sayest, but thou feignest them out of thine own heart.

9 For they all made us afraid, saying, Their hands shall be weakened from the work, that it be not done. Now therefore, O God, strengthen my hands."

Sanballat wanted to terrify people so that they would stop working on the rebuilding project. He wanted the Jews to start thinking that rebuilding the wall was treasonous, and if they kept at it the king

would come and kill them all. Sanballat was trying to use lies and false accusations to fill people with terror so they would stop what they were doing – but it didn't work. When Nehemiah was afraid, he went to God and asked God to strengthen them and give them courage to continue. The Lord was Nehemiah's refuge.

Notice that Nehemiah did not fall for Sanballat's trap. Instead he simply told them that they were lying, and he refused to stop working and refused to give in to the blackmail. He stayed focused on what had to be done and he kept working on it, trusting God to take care of them and see the work through.

Since Sanballat's plans weren't working, he then shifted strategies:

Nehemiah 6:10: “Afterward I came unto the house of Shemaiah the son of Delaiah the son of Mehetabeel, who was shut up; and he said, Let us meet together in the house of God, within the temple, and let us shut the doors of the temple: for they will come to slay thee; yea, in the night will they come to slay thee.”

The purpose of this threat was to get Nehemiah to sin, so that Sanballat could bring a bad report about him and cause the work to cease. However, Nehemiah refused to give in:

Nehemiah 6:11: “And I said, Should such a man as I flee? and who is there, that, being as I am, would go into the temple to save his life? I will not go in.

12 And, lo, I perceived that God had not sent him; but that he pronounced this prophecy against me: for Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him.

13 Therefore was he hired, that I should be afraid, and do so, and sin, and that they might have matter for an evil report, that they might reproach me.

14 My God, think thou upon Tobiah and Sanballat according to these their works, and on the prophetess Noadiah, and the rest of the prophets, that would have put me in fear.”

Nehemiah realized what Sanballat was trying to do, and he did not give in to the temptation. He refused to be afraid, even though Sanballat was trying to sow fear. This fear tactic is very effective; people are often willing to do a great many things when they are afraid, even things that they know are wrong. Some people will sin if they think it will help them or save their life – but Nehemiah refused. He did not give in to fear, and he would not flee – even when he was told that his life depended on it.

However, Nehemiah had another problem. It turns out that Tobiah had a lot of political connections in Jerusalem:

Nehemiah 6:17: “Moreover in those days the nobles of Judah sent many letters unto Tobiah, and the letters of Tobiah came unto them.

18 For there were many in Judah sworn unto him, because he was the son in law of Shechaniah the son of Arah; and his son Johanan had taken the daughter of Meshullam the son of Berechiah.

19 Also they reported his good deeds before me, and uttered my words to him. And Tobiah sent letters to put me in fear.”

This may be why the wall hadn't been rebuilt in the first place: the enemies of God had many friends in Jerusalem. Tobiah the Ammonite used his connections to send threatening letters that were

crafted to put Nehemiah in fear. Tobiah was hoping that he could weaken the project and get Nehemiah in trouble – but he failed. Despite all of their efforts, the wall was completed:

Nehemiah 6:15: “So the wall was finished in the twenty and fifth day of the month Elul, in fifty and two days.

16 And it came to pass, that when all our enemies heard thereof, and all the heathen that were about us saw these things, they were much cast down in their own eyes: for they perceived that this work was wrought of our God.”

To the enemies of God this was a staggering blow. They knew that the Lord had accomplished this, and they realized they had been utterly defeated. Nehemiah was a man of faith and integrity, and he refused to give in to their threats or the fear that they were trying to spread. He saw the project through to the end, and thanks to the grace of God the project was a success. The wall was rebuilt, thus providing much-needed protection to Jerusalem. It was a mighty victory.

All of this brings to mind a passage from the New Testament:

Ephesians 6:13: “Wherefore take unto you the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand.

14 Stand therefore, having your loins girt about with truth, and having on the breastplate of righteousness;

15 And your feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace;

16 Above all, taking the shield of faith, wherewith ye shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked.”

Nehemiah did exactly what this passage says: he took the shield of faith and used it to neutralize the attacks of the enemies of God. When the forces of darkness tried to terrify him, he refused to be afraid and instead trusted in God. The book of Psalms put it this way:

Psalms 56:1: “Be merciful unto me, O God: for man would swallow me up; he fighting daily oppresseth me.

2 Mine enemies would daily swallow me up: for they be many that fight against me, O thou most High.

3 What time I am afraid, I will trust in thee.”

Nehemiah illustrates this passage beautifully: when he was afraid he trusted in God. When he needed strength he went to God. God was his refuge and his strength – his ever-present help in times of trouble.

This is exactly what we need to do when we are in trouble. Instead of giving in to fear and doing terrible things, we should instead trust God and go to Him for strength and comfort. We should stand in our integrity and refuse to give in to fear and temptation. It is high time that we learned to use the shield of faith, for it is a powerful defense against evil.

GENESIS 3

The first two chapters of Genesis tell us about the creation of the universe. When God created the world it was absolutely perfect in every way. There was no sin, or sorrow, or death. Everything in the world was good – in fact, God Himself pronounced it as being “very good” (Genesis 1:31).

Sadly, the paradise that God created did not remain unspoiled for very long. Sin would soon enter the world and bring with it an enormous amount of misery and pain. The lives of everyone in this world was about to become a whole lot harder. All of the problems that we face today – sickness, disease, death, war, famine – can be traced back to that first sin in the Garden of Eden. Why is the world such a bad place? It is because mankind sinned and turned the world into a bad place. Why do so many terrible things happen? It is because mankind chose to reject God and embrace a life of sin. God created a perfect world, and mankind broke it. People like to blame God for the evil that takes place in this world, but the truth is *we* are the ones who are responsible. Mankind chose sin over God, and this world is the result.

But the good news is that God will one day create a new and better world, where there will never again be any sickness or pain or death. The cost of our salvation, though, was very high. It took the shed blood of God's perfect Son, Jesus Christ, to pay the ransom for our sins.

Let's take a look at the Fall of Man and see what happened.

Before the Fall

Genesis 3 starts out with the serpent tempting Eve to eat the forbidden fruit. That isn't actually the beginning of the story, though. The real story starts before this, with a different fall into sin by a different creature.

You see, in the beginning God created a being named Lucifer. This being was perfect in beauty. In fact, he was the highest ranking angel:

Ezekiel 28:12: “Son of man, take up a lamentation upon the king of Tyrus, and say unto him, Thus saith the Lord God; Thou sealest up the sum, full of wisdom, and perfect in beauty.

13 Thou hast been in Eden the garden of God; every precious stone was thy covering, the sardius, topaz, and the diamond, the beryl, the onyx, and the jasper, the sapphire, the emerald, and the carbuncle, and gold: the workmanship of thy tabrets and of thy pipes was prepared in thee in the day that thou wast created.

14 Thou art the anointed cherub that covereth; and I have set thee so: thou wast upon the holy mountain of God; thou hast walked up and down in the midst of the stones of fire.”

Even though this passage seems to be talking about the King of Tyrus, it is actually referring to Satan, not to a human king. After all, no human king in Ezekiel's day had ever set foot in Eden! This passage is telling us what Satan was like *before* he fell and became the devil. As you can see, God created him as a perfect being. He was full of wisdom and perfect in beauty, and he was arrayed in

precious stones.

Verse 14 tells us that he was “the anointed cherub that covereth”. Now, cherubs are a special type of angel. All of the other cherubs were stationed below the throne of God, with the exception of the covering cherub. That angel was stationed *above* God's throne and acted as a covering. This means that the covering cherub was the highest rank of cherub – which means that Satan was created to be the highest ranking angel.

At first Satan was perfect, but then he became proud. That led to his downfall:

Ezekiel 28:15: “Thou wast perfect in thy ways from the day that thou wast created, till iniquity was found in thee.

16 By the multitude of thy merchandise they have filled the midst of thee with violence, and thou hast sinned: therefore I will cast thee as profane out of the mountain of God: and I will destroy thee, O covering cherub, from the midst of the stones of fire.

17 Thine heart was lifted up because of thy beauty, thou hast corrupted thy wisdom by reason of thy brightness: I will cast thee to the ground, I will lay thee before kings, that they may behold thee.”

His beauty led to pride, and he decided to exalt himself still further:

Isaiah 14:12: “How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! how art thou cut down to the ground, which didst weaken the nations!

13 For thou hast said in thine heart, I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God: I will sit also upon the mount of the congregation, in the sides of the north:

14 I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will be like the most High.”

The devil (who was originally called Lucifer, which according to Strong's Concordance means “light-bearer”) decided that he wanted to be God. The gifts, beauty, position, and wisdom that God had given him were not enough; he demanded more. His pride led to his rebellion, and one third of the angels joined him.

No one knows when this happened, but it must have been pretty soon after the angels were created. There doesn't seem to have been much time between the creation of man on day six and Satan's temptation of Eve in the Garden of Eden. By the time that happened, Satan had already fallen and become the deceiver.

The devil was not content to just corrupt one third of God's angels, though. He was also determined to corrupt mankind as well – which brings us back to the Garden of Eden.

That Old Serpent

Genesis 3 begins with a villain entering the picture:

Genesis 3:1a: “Now the serpent was more subtil than any beast of the field which the Lord God had made...”

We see here that Eve was tempted by a serpent. The Bible tells us that the serpent was the most “subtil” beast that God had created. The word “subtil” is Strongs #6175. It means “cunning (usually in a bad way)” and “crafty”. Since the serpent tempts Eve and persuades her to eat the Forbidden Fruit, we can see that this really was a very crafty and cunning animal.

However, we also know that this was more than just an animal. The book of Revelation tells us exactly who this serpent really was:

Revelation 12:9: “And the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world: he was cast out into the earth, and his angels were cast out with him.”

There are some interesting things going on here. First of all, when God later punishes people for their participation in this sin He punishes both the serpent *and* the devil. Since the Lord held them both responsible, it would seem that the two actually worked together in order to deceive mankind. Although the devil is a deceiver, it would appear that the serpent willingly helped him accomplish his goal.

Now, it does seem a bit strange that the serpent could talk to Eve. After all, snakes don't usually do a lot of talking! However, it may be that the serpent allowed itself to become possessed, and it was actually the devil himself who was speaking to Eve. That could explain the snake's ability to talk. One might wonder why Eve didn't run off screaming when a snake tried to talk to her, but remember that the whole world was brand new. *We* know that snakes don't talk, but remember that Eve was literally just a couple days old. Would she really have had enough experience with animals to know what they could and couldn't do? Besides, she lived in a world where as far as she knew there was no danger! No one had ever gotten hurt, or died, or become horribly injured. Why should she have been afraid of anything? Fear wasn't a part of life.

Hath God Said?

The serpent began by asking Eve a question:

Genesis 3:1b: “...And he said unto the woman, Yea, hath God said, Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden?”

The devil wanted mankind to fall into sin. In order to do that, mankind needed to do the one thing that had God forbidden: eat the forbidden fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. So the devil begins by seeing if Eve has been paying attention. “Did God *really* say that you can't eat of every tree?”

Satan was probably hoping that Eve had forgotten about the commandment. Then his job would be easy: Eve would just say “Oh, no, I guess He didn't”, and eat it, and it would all be over. You see, God is quite clear that He still holds people responsible for sins committed in ignorance. Even if you didn't realize that what you were doing was a sin, *it is still a sin*. In the Mosaic Law there was actually a special sacrifice required for sins that were committed in ignorance:

Leviticus 4:27: “And if any one of the common people sin through ignorance, while he doeth somewhat against any of the commandments of the Lord concerning

things which ought not to be done, and be guilty;

28 Or if his sin, which he hath sinned, come to his knowledge: then he shall bring his offering, a kid of the goats, a female without blemish, for his sin which he hath sinned.

29 And he shall lay his hand upon the head of the sin offering, and slay the sin offering in the place of the burnt offering.”

That's right: if you sinned in ignorance you were still required to make a sin offering in order to cover your guilt. Even though you had no intention of sinning, you were still guilty in the sight of God. Even though you didn't know that what you were doing was a sin, you were still guilty. God does not say “Well, you didn't know any better, so that's fine. We'll just pretend it never happened.” Nope. Instead God required a sacrifice in order to purchase forgiveness for what you had done.

If you think about it, this makes a great deal of sense. If ignorance really *was* an excuse then we could all escape blame by burning all the Bibles in the world and making sure no one has any idea what God's commandments are! After all, if we're all completely ignorant then we can't be held responsible for anything we do, right? But *that's not how it works*. Sins committed in ignorance are still sins.

So if Eve had forgotten the commandment and eaten of the fruit, it would still have been a sin. Eve, though, knew what God had commanded, so the devil's first ploy failed.

This is a principle that we need to take to heart. The devil has not changed his approach to temptation. He will still come to us and say “Hath God said...?” That is why it is so important to know what the Word of God says! If we know the truth we can defeat the devil when he tempts us to sin by saying “That action is wrong; the Bible forbids it”. We can defeat the lies of the devil with the Word of God – but that's only possible if we know what the Word of God teaches.

Neither Shall Ye Touch It

Eve knew that God had commanded them to not eat that particular fruit:

Genesis 3:2: “And the woman said unto the serpent, We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden:

3 But of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God hath said, Ye shall not eat of it, neither shall ye touch it, lest ye die.”

However, we can already see that there is a problem. Not only did Eve say that they weren't allowed to eat from the tree, but she added that they couldn't touch it either. This is bad news, because that is *not* what God actually said. Let's go back and take a look at His exact words:

Genesis 2:16: “And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat:

17 But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.”

Did God say that they could not touch it? No, He did not. That was *not* a part of the commandment! Touching the tree would *not* bring death, and touching its fruit would not bring death

either. Death would only come if you *ate* of the tree. The Lord was very specific about this.

This actually matters more than it seems. Later in this conversation the serpent will say that God lied to her and Eve won't die after all. Eve will then touch the tree and its fruit, and she will see that the serpent was right – touching it did not make her die. Since the serpent had been proven right about that, she went ahead and ate of the fruit – and that is when everything went bad.

Someone modified God's commandment and added additional restrictions to it. This was *not* a good move. If you go back and read Genesis 2 you will see that God gave this commandment after placing Adam in the Garden of Eden, but before He created Eve. This means that Eve was not there when God told Adam not to eat of the Tree. Now, it may be that Adam was the one who added to God's commandment, or it may be that Eve did that. Since the Bible doesn't tell us how that conversation went, there's no way to tell. But we do know that someone added to it.

The tendency to add to God's commandments in order to make them even more strict is still with us today. For example, in the Ten Commandments God told the Israelites this:

Exodus 20:7: “Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain; for the Lord will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain.”

That's pretty simple, right? No blasphemy. Do not use the name of the Lord as a swear word. Treat the Lord's name with reverence and give it the respect it deserves. For the Jews, though, that was not enough. They decided the only way to keep that commandment was to never say the name of the Lord under any circumstances. To this day when they write God's name they write G-d. That way they're not actually saying God's name at all.

Now, did God say “Don't ever, *ever* say My name?” Of course not! God commanded men to treat His name with respect, but instead the Jews have treated it as some kind of unspeakable word that must not be uttered under any circumstances. That's not respect; that's madness! Refusing to call someone by their name, and going to great lengths to corrupt that name whenever it is written down, is not *remotely* respectful to that person. Would you want someone to treat *you* that way? God never required anything like that. In fact, He never even suggested it.

Time and space does not permit us to explore the ways that the Pharisees of Christ's day took the Law and added endless absurd restrictions to it. It is so easy for us to do the same thing. There are times when we're not content to simply abide by the commandments that God gave us; instead we expand them to outlaw things that God never forbade at all. But that is a discussion for another time.

Ye Shall Not Surely Die

When Eve told the serpent that the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge was forbidden on pain of death, the serpent told her that she was wrong:

Genesis 3:4: “And the serpent said unto the woman, Ye shall not surely die:
5 For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened,
and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil.”

Now, the devil doesn't provide any evidence that what he is saying is true – he simply asserts it! He basically asks Eve to trust him instead of God. He is claiming that God actually lied to her – that He

is denying her something that is good and beneficial, and if she disobeys God then her life would become so much better. Disobedience, he claims, is the path to enlightenment.

The reality is that God never lied to Adam or Eve. In fact, God *never* lies:

Numbers 23:19: “God is not a man, that he should lie; neither the son of man, that he should repent: hath he said, and shall he not do it? or hath he spoken, and shall he not make it good?”

People lie all the time, but God *never* lies. Adam and Eve had no reason not to trust Him, and they had no reason to not obey Him – and yet they decided to heed the words of the serpent anyway. Even though God had never withheld any good thing from them, Eve still believed the lie that God was somehow mean, cruel, and out to get her.

The devil is still telling the same lies today. We are still told that God is holding out on us, and if we are just willing to sin then our life will get better. It often seems that disobedience and sin is an easier road to take, but the truth is that sin is devastating. The wages of sin is *death*. Eating the forbidden fruit did *not* make things better; instead it destroyed the whole world! It brought sin, death, pain, and incredible misery to *billions* of people. It was a terrible decision. It literally brought misery upon all of creation:

Romans 8:22: “For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now.”

If Adam and Eve had obeyed God then they really *would* have had peace and happiness. If they had trusted God then all would have been well – but they didn't. They instead chose to go their own way and do what they thought best.

We are faced with the same decision in our own lives. What are we going to do? Are we going to trust God and be obedient, or are we instead going to sin? Do we trust God's judgment and faithfulness? When hard times come into our life and we are faced with difficult choices, are we willing to simply have faith in God and see things through to the end?

Part of what the devil said was true: if they ate of the fruit then they would indeed have their eyes opened. However, that was a *bad* thing, not a good thing. The devil didn't tell them about the consequences, or what they would lose, or about all of the pain they would experience. Instead he lied about it and said that they wouldn't die – but they *did* die, didn't they?

When temptation comes into our own lives it is often quick to tell us about the supposed benefits that we're going to get out of sinning, without mentioning the terrible, life-altering consequences. The truth is that sin carries a very high cost. We would be far better off to simply obey God and do what is right.

She Took The Fruit

This is where Eve made her fatal mistake (and I do mean *literally* fatal). Instead of telling the serpent that God said not to eat of the fruit and that she was going to obey God, Eve disobeyed. She gave in to temptation:

Genesis 3:6: “And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat.”

Eve saw that the serpent was right: the food was edible and looked appealing, and eating it would make one wise. So she disobeyed God and did the one thing God told her not to do. Eve ate the fruit, and then she gave it to her husband who ate of it as well. Both of them had now sinned – but the consequences were more far-reaching than they ever could have imagined. They had brought death into the world, and turned God's paradise into the planet full of sorrow that it is today.

Eve could have said no, but she didn't. Adam could have said no, but he didn't. Eve focused on the temptation instead of the commandment, and listened to the lies of the devil instead of the truth that came from God. That was her downfall. If she had clung to the commandment and obeyed God in spite of what the fruit looked like, she would have been saved. If she had trusted God's judgment instead of her own then none of this would have happened. But she didn't. Instead she followed her own desires, and that destroyed everything. Now things would never be the same – not for her and not for anyone else.

Their Eyes Were Opened

Now that Adam and Eve had eaten the forbidden fruit and fallen into sin, everything was different. Instead of enjoying fellowship with God, Adam and Eve tried to hide from Him:

Genesis 3:7: “And the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together, and made themselves aprons.

8 And they heard the voice of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day: and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God amongst the trees of the garden.

9 And the Lord God called unto Adam, and said unto him, Where art thou?

10 And he said, I heard thy voice in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.”

First they made clothing for themselves. That is always our first instinct – to seek to cover our sin with our own efforts and fix the problem ourselves. They didn't run to God when they had a problem; instead they trusted in themselves to find a solution. However, sin is a problem that no man can fix. Only God can resolve the sin in our lives. Our own efforts will fail – just as Adam and Eve's efforts did.

Next, they tried to hide from the Lord. In the past they had not been ashamed to be in the presence of God because they were innocent. Now that they were stained with sin, they fled from the Judge of the universe. They had not been afraid of Him before, but they were afraid of Him now. When God came into the Garden of Eden they did not seek Him out; instead they hid from His presence. Since they were in darkness they could not abide the light:

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

20 For every one that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds should be reproved.

21 But he that doeth truth cometh to the light, that his deeds may be made manifest, that they are wrought in God.”

When Adam and Eve were innocent they had no reason to hide. Now, though, they tried to hide from the light so that the light would not expose what they had done.

But there was no hiding from God.

What Have You Done?

God immediately asked them what they had done:

Genesis 3:11: “And he said, Who told thee that thou wast naked? Hast thou eaten of the tree, whereof I commanded thee that thou shouldest not eat?”

The Lord was not asking them this question because He was somehow confused and wanted to understand what had happened. You see, God knows all things. He knew exactly what Adam and Eve had done. When God asks questions it is for *our* benefit, not for His. God already knows what has happened and He even knows what we are going to say before we say it.

Adam, though, could not bring himself to admit what he had done. Instead he tried to place the blame on Eve:

Genesis 3:12: “And the man said, The woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I did eat.”

Not only does he blame his wife (instead of owning up to the fact that he chose to eat of the fruit), but he even tries to lay some of the blame on God. “Why, God, it's that woman you gave me! If you hadn't given her to me then I would have been fine. This is all your doing.”

This was a terrible accusation to make, for a number of reasons. First of all Eve was a wonderful gift to Adam. She was not a curse; she was a blessing. Second, God did not tell her to sin; instead He told both of them *not* to sin. What Adam and Eve did was a direct violation of God's commandment. They didn't get into this mess by obeying God and doing what He said; no, they fell into sin because they chose to sin. Thirdly, Adam did not have to partake of the fruit. When Eve offered it to him he could have said no, but he didn't. Adam is not the innocent party that he is claiming to be. (After all, it's not like Eve cut it up in his salad and fed it to him secretly or anything.) Adam could have resisted the sin but he chose not to.

Next, God then asks Eve what she had done. She also refused to take any personal responsibility and instead blamed someone else:

Genesis 3:13: “And the Lord God said unto the woman, What is this that thou hast done? And the woman said, The serpent beguiled me, and I did eat.”

Eve did not own up to the sin or apologize for it. Instead she just blamed the serpent. There is

no trace of personal responsibility here at all – just more blame-shifting. If either of these people were actually sorry for what they had done, neither of them showed it by apologizing. Instead all they did was blame other people for their own actions.

If they were hoping that this would get them out of trouble, they were about to be disappointed. You cannot escape punishment for your sin by blaming someone else. God will always hold each person responsible for the things they had done, and will hold them accountable for it.

Judgment

Since a sin was committed, God passed judgment upon it and cursed each of the guilty parties. The Lord started with the serpent:

Genesis 3:14: “And the Lord God said unto the serpent, Because thou hast done this, thou art cursed above all cattle, and above every beast of the field; upon thy belly shalt thou go, and dust shalt thou eat all the days of thy life:”

Notice how the serpent was said to be in the same category as cattle! No one today would mistake a snake for a cow; after all, snakes have no legs and slither along on the ground. It would seem that's *not* how they were originally created, though. There was a time when snakes were quite different from the way they are today, which means their modern design is a result of the curse that God placed upon them. Snakes are no longer grouped with cattle; instead they slither along the ground. (I realize this seems strange, but keep in mind that this chapter also has a literal Tree of Knowledge, an immortality-granting Tree of Life, and a talking snake. There are a number of things that don't exist anymore. Calling snakes “cattle” is *not* the strangest thing that we find in Genesis 3. This is not a fairy tale or a myth; all of this really and literally happened, just as it is written.)

The Lord cursed the devil who was behind the snake:

Genesis 3:15: “And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel.”

This is actually the first Messianic prophecy in the Bible. The phrase “her seed” is singular. It is talking about *one specific offspring* – an individual, not a line of people. The individual God was talking about was, of course, Jesus Christ. There would come a day when the Messiah would come into this world and be crucified on the cross. On that day He would indeed be “bruised”; in fact, He would actually die. However, Jesus would then be raised back to life again – freeing men from sin, defeating the devil, and conquering death itself. There would indeed be enmity between the devil and the people of God, but in the end Satan would be defeated. The devil might be able to injure God's people, but he could not overcome them or defeat God's plan of redemption.

Next, God cursed the woman:

Genesis 3:16: “Unto the woman he said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee.”

This was a very personal thing to curse, and it struck at the heart of who Eve was. Only the woman could bring forth children, and Eve would be responsible for starting the human race (since all of mankind would be descended from her). Before this curse that would have been a source of joy, but now giving birth would be intensely painful. Women would still continue to have children, but it was going to be a difficult process. It would no longer be what God originally designed it to be.

But that was not all. In the future the husband would rule over his wife. In the past there was perfect harmony, but now that harmony was broken. The wife would desire to usurp power over her husband, and the husband would find himself in conflict with his wife. Eve was created to be a helper who was suitable for Adam, but now she would seek to dominate him instead. In the future Adam would find it difficult to get any sort of help at all. Marriages were no longer a perfect union; now they would be filled with trouble.

Finally, God turned to Adam:

Genesis 3:17: “And unto Adam he said, Because thou hast hearkened unto the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree, of which I commanded thee, saying, Thou shalt not eat of it: cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life;

18 Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of the field;

19 In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.”

The Lord put Adam in the garden to tend it and keep it. This was not intended to be a difficult job – but that had changed. Now Adam would have to work the ground in order to get food, and the ground would not cooperate. In the future the ground would bring forth thorns and thistles. The soil would fight him and bring pain, and he would be forced to sweat for his food. Life would not be easy; instead it would be very difficult, with problems on every side. His ability to support himself and feed his family was severely diminished.

But there was one last curse, and we see it in verse 19. God warned them that the wages of sin was death. They should have listened to God instead of the serpent, because God was right: as a consequence of what they had done, they would now die. God created Adam from the dust, and Adam would now die and return to the dust. Adam lived a long time (which should not come as a surprise; after all, God originally intended for Adam to live *forever*), but in the end he died just as God warned him:

Genesis 5:5: “And all the days that Adam lived were nine hundred and thirty years: and he died.”

In fact, *all* would die and return to the dust. Mankind was no longer immortal; instead man would be faced with sickness, pain, and death. Death had now entered the world and would claim the life of him and his descendants.

The Mother Of All Living

Adam and Eve did indeed go on to have children. In fact, the entire human race can be traced back to those two people:

Genesis 3:20: “And Adam called his wife's name Eve; because she was the mother of all living.”

This is actually a critical theological point. You see, the reason that we are born with a sin nature is because we are all the children of Adam. We inherit his sin nature, which means we also inherit the penalty of death that comes with it:

Romans 5:12: “Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned:”

Sin entered the world through one man – the man Adam – and through him all are born with a sin nature. Since we are all sinners, we are all worthy of death. But since sin entered the world through one man, that made it possible for the sacrifice of one man to save the world:

Romans 5:18: “Therefore as by the offence of one judgment came upon all men to condemnation; even so by the righteousness of one the free gift came upon all men unto justification of life.

19 For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous.”

This is one of the key truths in the Bible. The reason you are a sinner is because Adam was a sinner. You not only inherit Adam's sin nature, but you also inherit his guilt! From the moment you were conceived you were already guilty in the sight of God. All it took was the sin of *one man* – our forefather Adam – to condemn the entire human race. It is true that we have sins of our own, but we are actually guilty *before we are even born* thanks to Adam's sin:

Psalms 51:5: “Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me.”

This verse is true for all of us. We are sinners from the moment of conception because we inherit Adam's sin. As it says in Romans 5:19, Adam's disobedience turned *all* of us into sinners.

Because of this fact, it is possible for Christ to save us. Since we were all made guilty by the sin of one man, we can all be saved by the obedience of the man Christ. Since we all inherit death from Adam, we can all inherit eternal life through Christ. The fact that *one man's sin* makes us all guilty is what makes it possible for one man's obedience to make us all righteous.

That is why Christ came: to take on Himself the form of a man and die in the place of men. Since He was fully man (while still being fully God), and since He had no sins of His own to suffer for, He could die in our place. Therefore, His death on the cross could be the atonement for all of our sins. His death paid the price and set us free. When we repent and believe in Christ, God gives us His righteousness. God no longer sees our sins and wickedness; instead God sees the perfect righteousness of His Son.

The First Sacrifice

Adam and Eve were no longer innocent. Their eyes were opened and they tried to cover themselves – but their efforts were badly flawed. They could not cover what they had done (just as we cannot cover our sins). Since Adam and Eve were helpless and in need, God made them clothing:

Genesis 3:21: “Unto Adam also and to his wife did the Lord God make coats of skins, and clothed them.”

There is deep meaning here. Who covered them? God did. God stepped in and took care of the problem. You see, in the Bible clothing is symbolic of righteousness:

Revelation 19:8: “And to her was granted that she should be arrayed in fine linen, clean and white: for the fine linen is the righteousness of saints.”

It's easy to see why. Just as clothing covers the body, so righteousness covers our sin. Where does our righteousness come from? It has to come from God. When we repent of our sins and believe in Christ, the Lord gives us the perfect righteousness of Christ, which covers our sin. If we reject that righteousness and try to handle the problem ourselves, we become like Adam and Eve who tried to make clothing out of a few leaves. It just doesn't work – and God doesn't accept it. God requires total perfection. The only way we can achieve that, and become holy enough to enter into His presence, is by partaking of the flawless righteousness of Christ.

Another thing: notice that these garments were not made out of fig leaves. These were “coats of skins” - in other words, coats made out of animal skin. Where do you get animal skin? From animals. And how do you get the skin off the animal? Well, you have to kill it first.

In other words, we see here that Adam and Eve's sin was already bringing death into the world. In order to provide this couple with something to wear, God killed an animal and used its skin as a covering. That means an animal had to die – and nothing had ever died before. This is pointing to the sacrificial system, where animals would be sacrificed so that their blood might cover the sins of men. The sacrificial system, in turn, points to Christ, who shed His blood to cover our sin.

We can clearly see that the wages of sin was death – and that it would take the death of an innocent party in order to cover the sin of the guilty. God was giving mankind a preview of what their future held.

The Tree of Life

The Tree of Knowledge was not the only tree in the Garden. There was another tree – the Tree of Life. If one ate of that tree then they would live forever. God had not forbidden Adam and Eve from eating that tree's fruit, but now that they had sinned things were different:

Genesis 3:22: “And the Lord God said, Behold, the man is become as one of us, to

know good and evil: and now, lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever:

23 Therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from whence he was taken.

24 So he drove out the man; and he placed at the east of the garden of Eden Cherubims, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life."

God did not want mankind to eat of the Tree of Life and live forever in their sinful condition. So, instead of destroying the Tree of Life, God evicted mankind from paradise. They could no longer live in God's perfect garden; now they were evicted from it. God stationed an angel (a cherubim, to be precise) and a flaming sword to guard the Tree of Life in order to make sure that no one ever ate its fruit.

The way to immortality was now forbidden to Adam and Eve. The wages of sin was death, and there was nothing mankind could do to escape that fate. The situation was hopeless – and it would have remained hopeless forever had it not been for the amazing love and grace of God.

You see, God made a way where there seemed to be no way. Thanks to the amazing sacrifice of Christ, we can now obtain forgiveness for our sins. Those who repent and place their faith in Christ will not only be forgiven, but will be resurrected as well. When the Lord Jesus returns He will transform them and give them perfect bodies. They will finally regain the immortality that was forbidden to them all those long millennia ago:

1 Corinthians 15:51: "Behold, I shew you a mystery; We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed,

52 In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed.

53 For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality.

54 So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory.

55 O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?

56 The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law.

57 But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

In fact, not only will they be given immortality, but God will also give them the right to eat of the Tree of Life – the very tree that was once in the Garden of Eden:

Revelation 2:7: "He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God."

The Tree of Life is not gone; it is still there, "in the midst of the paradise of God". All those who overcome will be given the right to eat of its fruit and live forever. Who are the "overcomers"? Well, this verse answers that question:

1 John 5:5: “Who is he that overcometh the world, but he that believeth that Jesus is the Son of God?”

As you can see, Christians are the overcomers! Those who repent and believe in Christ, trusting Him to be the Messiah (the one who died to save them from their sins), have overcome the world – and will be given the right to eat of the Tree of Life. Isn't that amazing?

The grace of God is truly astounding. God did not have to save us; after all, we were the ones who sinned against Him. Yet God chose to save us! Even though it cost the life and blood of His precious Son, God still chose to save us. The perfect God died to save sinful and wicked men. He died so that we might be forgiven (when we had no right to expect forgiveness at all), and so that we might live forever. Truly the love of God is surpassingly great! Who can measure such an astounding love as this?

GENESIS 17

This chapter of the Bible begins with God talking to Abraham. The Lord has some very important things to tell him:

Genesis 17:1: “And when Abram was ninety years old and nine, the Lord appeared to Abram, and said unto him, I am the Almighty God; walk before me, and be thou perfect.

2 And I will make my covenant between me and thee, and will multiply thee exceedingly.”

In order to understand what's going on we need to take a moment to go back and study the life of Abraham. His relationship with God didn't start when he was 99 years old; it began long before that.

When Abraham was 75 years old he was living in a place called Haran. While he was there the Lord appeared to him and told him to leave his home and go to the place the Lord would show him. God promised that if he did that the Lord would bless him, give him a great name, and turn him into a great nation.

So Abraham obeyed God. He left his home and moved to the land of Canaan. Years went by, but Abraham never had any children. God kept promising to give Abraham descendants but it never happened. Eventually Abraham's wife Sarah got tired of waiting to have children, and convinced the 86-year-old Abraham to have a child with her maidservant Hagar. Abraham did as his wife asked and had a child named Ishmael. When Sarah saw this she got *very* upset. She was not at all pleased.

Genesis 16 tells us about the birth of the child Ishmael. By the time we reach Genesis 17, a total of 13 years have gone by. Abraham still doesn't have any descendants of his own. It had been 24 years since the Lord came to him and made all those promises, and so far not a single one of them has come true. Abraham has no children with his wife, he is not a great nation, he does not have a great name, and his descendants certainly don't own the entire land of Canaan. Abraham has been waiting but nothing has happened.

But notice what God says to Abraham in the first verse: walk before me, and be thou perfect. God wants Abraham to obey the Lord and trust him. Even though Abraham was now an old man and had not seen the fulfillment of any promises, God still commanded him to be faithful. Now, we know that God did eventually keep all of his promises to Abraham and did everything He promised, but at this point in his life Abraham hadn't seen any of those promises come to pass. God is commanding Abraham to step out on faith and trust God *before* he sees the promises come true. The Lord is telling Abraham to do what is right, even though it doesn't seem to have done any good so far. What God desires from Abraham is *faith*.

God is promising Abraham that if he has faith and walks in the Lord's ways, He will give Abraham the child that he has desired for so long. The Lord is going to keep His promises – as long as Abraham has faith. “Without faith it is impossible to please God.”

This encounter overwhelmed Abraham:

Genesis 17:3: “And Abram fell on his face: and God talked with him, saying,”

This is a very common reaction to meeting the Lord. When the apostle John saw the risen Jesus

in the book of Revelation he had an even more severe reaction:

Revelation 1:17: “And when I saw him, I fell at his feet as dead. And he laid his right hand upon me, saying unto me, Fear not; I am the first and the last:”

Meeting the Lord is an overwhelming thing! God is perfect, infinite, and holy while man is limited and full of sins. It is no wonder that Abraham fell on his face when God came to him.

The Lord had much more to say. God told Abraham that he was going to be great and would be the father of nations:

Genesis 17:4: “As for me, behold, my covenant is with thee, and thou shalt be a father of many nations.”

When we think of Abraham we tend to think of the Jews, but that is not the only nation that came from Abraham. Ishmael (the son of Abraham) and Esau (the son of Abraham's son Isaac) were also descendants of Abraham. Genesis 25:13-16 tells us that Ishmael had twelve sons, who became princes:

Genesis 25:13: “And these are the names of the sons of Ishmael, by their names, according to their generations: the firstborn of Ishmael, Nebajoth; and Kedar, and Adbeel, and Mibsam,
14 And Mishma, and Dumah, and Massa,
15 Hadar, and Tema, Jetur, Naphish, and Kedemah:
16 These are the sons of Ishmael, and these are their names, by their towns, and by their castles; twelve princes according to their nations.”

Ishmael became father of the Arab peoples – his sons became the heads of nations. The same thing happened to Isaac's son Esau. His descendants moved to Mount Seir, where they became the Edomite nation:

Genesis 36:8: “Thus dwelt Esau in mount Seir: Esau is Edom.
9 And these are the generations of Esau the father of the Edomites in mount Seir:”

Genesis 36 lists all of Esau's descendants, who became the Edomite people. Abraham really did become the father of nations. He was the father of more than just the Israelites.

But God was not done. He changed Abram's name to Abraham:

Genesis 17:5: “Neither shall thy name any more be called Abram, but thy name shall be Abraham; for a father of many nations have I made thee.”

The name Abram means “exalted father”, whereas Abraham means “father of many”. When God changed Abram's name He was emphasizing the fact that Abraham was going to be the father of many nations – which is exactly what the Lord promised Abraham all those years ago. The name change was a reflection of God's covenant with Abraham. He was not just a father; he was a father of nations. God's covenant had turned Abraham into a different person and given him a different future. He was not the same person that he used to be before he met God.

God then emphasized this promise:

Genesis 17:6: “And I will make thee exceeding fruitful, and I will make nations of thee, and kings shall come out of thee.”

Notice how this verse says that God *will* make Abraham fruitful. This speaks of something that is going to come to pass in the future. A year after this encounter with God, Abraham's son Isaac was born. However, that was not Abraham's last child. After his wife Sarah died he remarried and had even more children:

Genesis 25:1: “Then again Abraham took a wife, and her name was Keturah.
2 And she bare him Zimran, and Jokshan, and Medan, and Midian, and Ishbak, and Shuah.”

But that's not all. The Bible also says that Abraham had other children whose names are not listed:

Genesis 25:6: “But unto the sons of the concubines, which Abraham had, Abraham gave gifts, and sent them away from Isaac his son, while he yet lived, eastward, unto the east country.”

We don't know who Abraham's concubines were or how many sons he had with them, but it's clear that Abraham had more than just two children (Ishmael and Isaac). God promised to make Abraham fruitful, and that is exactly what He did. God always keeps His promises! The Lord promised that nations would come from Abraham, and they did. He promised that kings would be in his line of descendants, and they were. Just think about all the kings of Judah: every one of them was a descendant of Abraham! Jesus Christ, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, is also in the line of Abraham. Abraham fathered more than just a few kings; there were *many* kings in his line.

God repeated the fact that He was establishing an everlasting covenant with Abraham and his descendants:

Genesis 17:7: “And I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee.

8 And I will give unto thee, and to thy seed after thee, the land wherein thou art a stranger, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God.”

In this everlasting covenant the Lord promised two things: to be a God to Abraham's descendants, and to give his descendants “all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession”. This is one of the key covenants in the Old Testament and it deserves more than just a passing mention.

This covenant is the reason why the Lord will never abandon the Israelites no matter how disobedient or rebellious they may be. God promised to be a God to them and He will never break that promise. This covenant is the reason why God delivered Israel from slavery in Egypt:

Exodus 2:23: “And it came to pass in process of time, that the king of Egypt died:

and the children of Israel sighed by reason of the bondage, and they cried, and their cry came up unto God by reason of the bondage.

24 And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob.

25 And God looked upon the children of Israel, and God had respect unto them.”

God told the nation of Israel that if they disobeyed Him then He would cast them out of the land of Canaan. However, if they repented the Lord would restore them to the land. The reason He would do this is because of the covenant God made with Abraham:

Leviticus 26:40: “If they shall confess their iniquity, and the iniquity of their fathers, with their trespass which they trespassed against me, and that also they have walked contrary unto me;

41 And that I also have walked contrary unto them, and have brought them into the land of their enemies; if then their uncircumcised hearts be humbled, and they then accept of the punishment of their iniquity:

42 Then will I remember my covenant with Jacob, and also my covenant with Isaac, and also my covenant with Abraham will I remember; and I will remember the land.”

In fact, God said that this covenant was the reason He would *never* forsake the nation of Israel:

Leviticus 26:44: “And yet for all that, when they be in the land of their enemies, I will not cast them away, neither will I abhor them, to destroy them utterly, and to break my covenant with them: for I am the Lord their God.

45 But I will for their sakes remember the covenant of their ancestors, whom I brought forth out of the land of Egypt in the sight of the heathen, that I might be their God: I am the Lord.”

This covenant secured Israel's future and their place as God's chosen people. Because of this covenant God would always watch over Israel and care for them, and He would always keep them from being utterly destroyed. Even in the days before the Babylonian exile, when the Israelites were exceedingly wicked and refused to repent, the Lord still refused to utterly destroy them and He delayed casting them out of the land. The reason He did those things was because of the covenant He had made with Abraham:

2 Kings 13:23: “And the Lord was gracious unto them, and had compassion on them, and had respect unto them, because of his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and would not destroy them, neither cast he them from his presence as yet.”

God loves Israel and cares for them, and that will never change. It is true that right now Israel has rejected their Messiah and is living in rebellion against God. At the moment Israel has been blinded, but that will not always be the case. The Bible promises that one day Israel will be saved:

Romans 11:25: “For I would not, brethren, that ye should be ignorant of this mystery, lest ye should be wise in your own conceits; that blindness in part is

happened to Israel, until the fulness of the Gentiles be come in.

26 And so all Israel shall be saved: as it is written, There shall come out of Sion the Deliverer, and shall turn away ungodliness from Jacob:

27 For this is my covenant unto them, when I shall take away their sins.

28 As concerning the gospel, they are enemies for your sakes: but as touching the election, they are beloved for the father's sakes.

29 For the gifts and calling of God are without repentance.”

The book of Zechariah looks forward to a time when Israel will repent of their rejection of the Messiah and will mourn over what they have done:

Zechariah 12:10: “And I will pour upon the house of David, and upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the spirit of grace and of supplications: and they shall look upon me whom they have pierced, and they shall mourn for him, as one mourneth for his only son, and shall be in bitterness for him, as one that is in bitterness for his firstborn.”

God has a plan to save Israel and turn their hearts back to Him. They will not be lost forever!

The second part of God's covenant with Abraham says that the Lord has given Israel all the land of Canaan as an everlasting possession. This means that the plot of land in the Middle East is theirs *forever* and can never be taken away from them. It's true that there have been times when God has removed them from the land because of their disobedience, but those removals are always temporary. The title to that land belongs to Israel, and that will never change. God even told Abraham exactly how much land He was going to give Israel:

Genesis 15:18: “In the same day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, Unto thy seed have I given this land, from the river of Egypt unto the great river, the river Euphrates.”

Everything between the Nile and the Euphrates rivers (a distance of some 1500 miles) belongs to Israel. There may be other nations that try to take that land from Israel, but the land will never actually belong to them. God has given it to Israel as an everlasting possession and that will never change. The Lord becomes very angry when nations try to take away the land that He gave to Israel:

Joel 3:2: “I will also gather all nations, and will bring them down into the valley of Jehoshaphat, and will plead with them there for my people and for my heritage Israel, whom they have scattered among the nations, and parted my land.”

This passage is speaking of the Second Coming – the time when Jesus Christ will return to Earth. When He returns He is going to attack the nations that dared to come against Israel and *take her land*. Not only is the Lord going to judge this sin, but He is going to do it *in person!* That is how big a deal this is to God.

Once the terms of the covenant were laid out, God gave Abraham the sign of the covenant. That sign was to be circumcision:

Genesis 17:9: “And God said unto Abraham, Thou shalt keep my covenant

therefore, thou, and thy seed after thee in their generations.

10 This is my covenant, which ye shall keep, between me and you and thy seed after thee; Every man child among you shall be circumcised.

11 And ye shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin; and it shall be a token of the covenant betwixt me and you.

12 And he that is eight days old shall be circumcised among you, every man child in your generations, he that is born in the house, or bought with money of any stranger, which is not of thy seed.

13 He that is born in thy house, and he that is bought with thy money, must needs be circumcised: and my covenant shall be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant.”

God entered into a covenant with Abraham and Abraham's descendants. The sign that the Jews were given, which showed that they were covered by this covenant, was circumcision. Now, circumcision did *not* save them or forgive their sins. It was just a token and did not have saving power. Each male child was to be circumcised on the eighth day of their life. Those who did not do this would be cut off from the covenant:

Genesis 17:14: “And the uncircumcised man child whose flesh of his foreskin is not circumcised, that soul shall be cut off from his people; he hath broken my covenant.”

The Lord took this very seriously. To get an idea of just how serious this was we need only to look at the life of Moses. The Bible tells us that Moses failed to circumcise his own son. God was so angry about this that He tried to kill Moses:

Exodus 4:24: “And it came to pass by the way in the inn, that the Lord met him, and sought to kill him.

25 Then Zipporah took a sharp stone, and cut off the foreskin of her son, and cast it at his feet, and said, Surely a bloody husband art thou to me.

26 So he let him go: then she said, A bloody husband thou art, because of the circumcision.”

The reason God did this is because Moses was supposed to be Israel's leader. God had sent him to Egypt to lead the people out of bondage – but Moses had not kept God's covenant! Moses was required to circumcise his children but he hadn't. How could Moses lead God's people when he had failed to keep God's covenant? That is why the Lord was so angry with him. Moses' behavior was not acceptable.

In the early church there was a debate about the issue of circumcision. Some people taught that all Christians were required to be circumcised because that was part of the Law. They claimed that keeping the entire Mosaic Law was part of being a Christian. However, the the apostle Paul explained that this was a misunderstanding of what circumcision actually was. The Jews thought that it made a person righteous, but that is *not* the case. Righteousness comes by faith, not by works. Paul proved this by pointing out that God declared Abraham to be righteous long before he was circumcised. Circumcision was just a sign of the covenant. It didn't actually save anybody:

Romans 4:9: “Cometh this blessedness then upon the circumcision only, or upon the uncircumcision also? for we say that faith was reckoned to Abraham for

righteousness.

10 How was it then reckoned? when he was in circumcision, or in uncircumcision?
Not in circumcision, but in uncircumcision.

11 And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had yet being uncircumcised: that he might be the father of all them that believe, though they be not circumcised; that righteousness might be imputed unto them also:

12 And the father of circumcision to them who are not of the circumcision only, but who also walk in the steps of that faith of our father Abraham, which he had being yet uncircumcised.”

It is *faith* that saves us, not works or circumcision or anything else. Circumcision was important in the Old Testament but it is not something God requires of New Testament Christians. What really matters is keeping God's commandments:

1 Corinthians 7:19: “Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but the keeping of the commandments of God.”

Galatians 5:6: “For in Jesus Christ neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision; but faith which worketh by love.”

Circumcision never had any saving power because salvation has always come through faith! This was true even in the days of Abraham. Christians today are required to repent of their sins and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, so that they might be saved. They are *not* required to be circumcised, nor are they required to keep the Mosaic Law. As the Bible says, we are not under the law anymore; instead we are under grace.

After God gave Abraham the sign of circumcision He told him that his wife Sarah would have a son:

Genesis 17:15: “And God said unto Abraham, As for Sarai thy wife, thou shalt not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall her name be.

16 And I will bless her, and give thee a son also of her: yea, I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of people shall be of her.”

God had promised to give Abraham a son, and the Lord was going to keep that promise. Abraham and Sarah would have a child after all these long years, in the time of their old age. The Lord also changed the name of Abraham's wife from Sarai to Sarah. (As far as I can tell, both of those names mean “princess”.) Abraham and Sarah were both given new names, new hope, and a new future.

When Abraham heard this he was astonished. The thought of having children at such an old age seemed impossible:

Genesis 17:17: “Then Abraham fell upon his face, and laughed, and said in his heart, Shall a child be born unto him that is an hundred years old? and shall Sarah, that is ninety years old, bear?”

The whole situation seemed preposterous. Abraham and Sarah were far too old to have children

– and yet that is exactly what God said would happen! It seemed ridiculous. So Abraham asked God to bless Ishmael instead:

Genesis 17:18: “And Abraham said unto God, O that Ishmael might live before thee!”

Abraham believed that he already has a son – the child he had with his bondmaid Hagar. He seems to be content with Ishmael, but the Lord had bigger plans. Ishmael was not the son that God had promised, and he was not the son that God was going to make His covenant with. The Lord had chosen Isaac:

Genesis 17:19: “And God said, Sarah thy wife shall bear thee a son indeed; and thou shalt call his name Isaac: and I will establish my covenant with him for an everlasting covenant, and with his seed after him.”

The name Isaac means “laughter”. The Lord made a covenant with Abraham and that covenant was going to be carried down through the line of Isaac, not Ishmael. Ishmael was the child that Abraham had when he took matters into his own hands. He was the child of works. Isaac, though, was the child that God gave to Abraham. He was a miracle – a gift given long after the days when childbearing was a possibility. Isaac was the child of faith – the child that God promised – and the Lord would make His covenant with him.

These things did not happen by accident. The book of Galatians says there is a deeper meaning here:

Galatians 4:22: “For it is written, that Abraham had two sons, the one by a bondmaid, the other by a freewoman.

23 But he who was of the bondwoman was born after the flesh; but he of the freewoman was by promise.

24 Which things are an allegory: for these are the two covenants; the one from the mount Sinai, which gendereth to bondage, which is Agar.

25 For this Agar is mount Sinai in Arabia, and answereth to Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children.

26 But Jerusalem which is above is free, which is the mother of us all.”

Ishmael represents the covenant of works, while Isaac represents the covenant of grace. These two covenants are at war with each other:

Galatians 4:28: “Now we, brethren, as Isaac was, are the children of promise.

29 But as then he that was born after the flesh persecuted him that was born after the Spirit, even so it is now.

30 Nevertheless what saith the scripture? Cast out the bondwoman and her son: for the son of the bondwoman shall not be heir with the son of the freewoman.

31 So then, brethren, we are not children of the bondwoman, but of the free.”

As Christians we are part of the covenant of grace, not the covenant of works. We have been freed from the Law and are now under grace. Jesus has kept the Law for us and given us His

righteousness. We have been set free and are not in bondage anymore.

Just as Ishmael struggled against Isaac, so the covenant of works struggles against the covenant of grace. Those who seek to be saved by their own good deeds cannot abide those who are saved through faith in Christ. The world hates the children of grace and persecutes them, just as Ishmael hated Isaac. It is not an accident that God identified Himself as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, instead of the God of Abraham and Ishmael.

But the Lord was not going to forget Ishmael. Although God would not establish His covenant with him, He did promise to turn him into a great nation:

Genesis 17:20: “And as for Ishmael, I have heard thee: Behold, I have blessed him, and will make him fruitful, and will multiply him exceedingly; twelve princes shall he beget, and I will make him a great nation.”

We have already seen that God kept that promise, so we won't repeat those verses here. However, even though God would make Ishmael into a great nation, He was going to establish His covenant with Isaac:

Genesis 17:21: “But my covenant will I establish with Isaac, which Sarah shall bear unto thee at this set time in the next year.

22 And he left off talking with him, and God went up from Abraham.”

Abraham had many descendants, but not all of them were a part of the covenant. God made His covenant with Isaac, not Ishmael, and He made it with Jacob, not Esau. His promises were made to a specific line – to the people that we call the Jews.

As soon as God left, Abraham did exactly what the Lord had commanded:

Genesis 17:23: “And Abraham took Ishmael his son, and all that were born in his house, and all that were bought with his money, every male among the men of Abraham's house; and circumcised the flesh of their foreskin in the selfsame day, as God had said unto him.

24 And Abraham was ninety years old and nine, when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin.

25 And Ishmael his son was thirteen years old, when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin.

26 In the selfsame day was Abraham circumcised, and Ishmael his son.

27 And all the men of his house, born in the house, and bought with money of the stranger, were circumcised with him.”

Notice that Abraham did not wait even a single day; instead he carried out the commandment immediately. This was very characteristic of Abraham. When the Lord commanded him to sacrifice his son Isaac, Abraham rose up early the next day to do so. He didn't delay; instead he obeyed. Abraham had many faults, but when the Lord told him to do something he always did it immediately, without argument or debate.

As we can see, the Lord promised to give Abraham a son, and he would call his name Isaac. That is exactly what happened. The Lord always keeps His promises.

ACTS 10

In Acts 10 we find the remarkable story of the centurion Cornelius. At this point in history the persecution of the Church had already begun, and early Christians had started to flee from Jerusalem and go to other cities and countries. Saul had just been converted to Christianity, but he was not yet a notable figure in the early Church and had not begun his missionary activities.

In this chapter the Church is about to branch out to the Gentiles. We have already seen a little movement in this direction earlier in Acts with the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch, but we are about to see God move in a major way to bring the Gentiles into His fold.

Up to this point the disciples had focused their efforts on preaching to the Jews. The idea that God would also want to bring in the Gentiles was a radical idea – but if the Jews had paid more attention to the Scriptures it would not have seemed so radical. God had left hints all throughout the Old Testament that one day His people would be composed of both Jews *and* Gentiles. For example, take a look at what the prophet Isaiah had to say:

Isaiah 11:10: “And in that day there shall be a root of Jesse, which shall stand for an ensign of the people; to it shall the Gentiles seek: and his rest shall be glorious.”

Isaiah 42:1: “Behold my servant, whom I uphold; mine elect, in whom my soul delighteth; I have put my spirit upon him: he shall bring forth judgment to the Gentiles.”

Isaiah 49:6: “And he said, It is a light thing that thou shouldest be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved of Israel: I will also give thee for a light to the Gentiles, that thou mayest be my salvation unto the end of the earth.”

God was clear that the Messiah would not just be a Jewish Messiah for the Jewish people. His plan all along was to save both Jews *and* Gentiles. His salvation was to extend “unto the end of the earth”. God was not just the God of the Jews; He was the Lord of everyone, and He desired to bring in people from every nation!

In this chapter we will see the Lord shake things up and make it clear to the early Church that the Gentiles were also to be included in the faith. The way that God is going to do that is through a man named Cornelius:

Acts 10:1: “There was a certain man in Caesarea called Cornelius, a centurion of the band called the Italian band,
2 A devout man, and one that feared God with all his house, which gave much alms to the people, and prayed to God alway.”

Cornelius was truly a remarkable man. Even though he was a Gentile he feared the Lord. In fact, the Bible says that he was very devout. Not only did he pray frequently, but he also gave generously to the Jews. (In other words, he followed up his words with actions. He did more than just talk; he took action.) This would not have been a popular thing to do in those days – especially for a

Gentile – and yet that is what Cornelius did.

How is it that Cornelius happened to come to the faith? The Bible doesn't say. It is unlikely that the Jews had tried to convert him; after all, the Jews tried hard to minimize their dealings with Gentiles, and they did not believe that the Gentiles were also heirs of salvation. At this point in history they thought that salvation was only for the Jews and that God did not care for anyone else. What we can see, though, is that God shed His grace upon this centurion in a very special and powerful way.

Incidentally, this is not the first converted centurion that we have come across in the New Testament. Jesus met one during His time on Earth and He was tremendously impressed by the centurion's great faith:

Matthew 8:10: “When Jesus heard it, he marvelled, and said to them that followed, Verily I say unto you, I have not found so great faith, no, not in Israel.

11 And I say unto you, That many shall come from the east and west, and shall sit down with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven.

12 But the children of the kingdom shall be cast out into outer darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

It is remarkable to realize that the only people Jesus praised for their great faith during His ministry *were Gentiles*. The Jews showed very little faith in Him; even His own disciples were rebuked for having little faith! But the Gentiles showed a faith in Jesus that the Jews themselves lacked. Jesus told His disciples that many Gentiles would come into the kingdom and enjoy it, while many Jews would be cast out. Why? Because *the Gentiles had faith* and the Jews did not.

The disciples must not have received the message, though, because after the ascension of Christ they continued to minister strictly to the Jews. However, God was about to change that. As Cornelius prayed, he saw a vision:

Acts 10:3: “He saw in a vision evidently about the ninth hour of the day an angel of God coming in to him, and saying unto him, Cornelius.

4 And when he looked on him, he was afraid, and said, What is it, Lord? And he said unto him, Thy prayers and thine alms are come up for a memorial before God.

5 And now send men to Joppa, and call for one Simon, whose surname is Peter:

6 He lodgeth with one Simon a tanner, whose house is by the sea side: he shall tell thee what thou oughtest to do.”

Even though Cornelius was a devout man who loved God and feared the Lord, it seems that he had heard nothing about Jesus or the way of salvation. When this centurion was praying God did something remarkable: He sent an angel to give him a message.

It's interesting to note that God did *not* tell him the way of salvation. God did not have the angel preach the gospel to him or tell him how to be saved. Instead God told him to go and talk to the disciple Peter, and Peter would tell him what to do.

Now, couldn't God have just told him how to be saved? Of course! But at this point in history that was not God's plan. You see, God was working through *the Church* to bring the gospel to all nations. That was, after all, the great commission that Jesus gave right before He ascended to Heaven:

Matthew 28:19: “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost:

20 Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen.”

During the Church Age it is the responsibility of the Church to spread the gospel to the nations. God is not going to do it for us; it is our solemn responsibility. God has given us a charge and we must go out and tell everyone the way of salvation. However, one day that will change. During the Tribulation period we are told that God will send an angel to preach the gospel to the whole world:

Revelation 14:6: “And I saw another angel fly in the midst of heaven, having the everlasting gospel to preach unto them that dwell on the earth, and to every nation, and kindred, and tongue, and people,
7 Saying with a loud voice, Fear God, and give glory to him; for the hour of his judgment is come: and worship him that made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and the fountains of waters.”

Why would God do this? Because during the Tribulation the Church will be in Heaven, since they were raptured before the Tribulation began. By the time Revelation 14 takes place the two witnesses have been killed, and the 144,000 Jews who were sealed and told to preach the gospel have been killed as well. Since all those whom God appointed to preach the gospel are either dead or no longer on Earth, God sends an angel to preach the message to everyone.

In Acts, though, the Church is still in the world. So God tells the centurion to speak to Peter, and Peter will show him the way of salvation. When the centurion hears this he immediately obeys:

Acts 10:7: “And when the angel which spake unto Cornelius was departed, he called two of his household servants, and a devout soldier of them that waited on him continually;
8 And when he had declared all these things unto them, he sent them to Joppa.”

Since God told him to go talk to Peter, that was what the centurion was going to do. He wastes no time, either. The team is dispatched the very next day:

Acts 10:9: “On the morrow, as they went on their journey, and drew nigh unto the city, Peter went up upon the housetop to pray about the sixth hour:”

Meanwhile, God was dealing with Peter. Remember, the Jews tried to minimize their dealings with the Gentiles, so Peter was not going to be very receptive to this request from Cornelius. God had sent some Gentiles to go to Peter and bring him to Cornelius, but before Peter would be willing to go with them God needed to teach him a lesson.

As we saw earlier, God came to Cornelius while he was in prayer. God likewise comes to Peter while he is in prayer as well – but the message that God brings was something Peter did not expect:

Acts 10:10: “And he became very hungry, and would have eaten: but while they made ready, he fell into a trance,
11 And saw heaven opened, and a certain vessel descending upon him, as it had been a great sheet knit at the four corners, and let down to the earth:
12 Wherein were all manner of fourfooted beasts of the earth, and wild beasts, and

creeping things, and fowls of the air:

13 And there came a voice to him, Rise, Peter; kill, and eat.”

Peter prayed while he was waiting for the meal to be fixed – which meant he was hungry. So he waited for the preparations to be finished. (In those days you couldn't just pop something into the microwave; preparing a meal took a bit more work than it does today.) During that time he fell into a trance and the Lord spoke to him. In Peter's vision he saw God provide him food, but to his surprise the food that God offered was unclean under the Mosaic Law. The Gentiles ate that sort of food, but no self-respecting Jew would have anything to do with it. Peter had no intention of eating any of the things he saw in the vision.

You see, under the Mosaic Law there were all sorts of restrictions about what food you could and could not eat. Deuteronomy 14 has a long list of dietary regulations that the Jews were required to follow. Certain things were abominations and could not be eaten:

Deuteronomy 14:3: “Thou shalt not eat any abominable thing.”

You were not free to simply eat whatever you wanted. For example, you could only eat animals that met certain criteria:

Deuteronomy 14:6: “And every beast that parteth the hoof, and cleaveth the cleft into two claws, and cheweth the cud among the beasts, that ye shall eat.”

Animals that did not meet this criteria (such as pigs) were forbidden. For example, you could only eat fish that had fins and scales. If the fish did not have fins and scales then it was forbidden:

Deuteronomy 14:10: “And whatsoever hath not fins and scales ye may not eat; it is unclean unto you.”

There were many other regulations, but you get the point. Since Peter was a devout, law-abiding Jew he knew better than to eat unclean animals. That is why when he saw all those unclean beasts in the vision, he immediately refused to make a meal out of them:

Acts 10:14: “But Peter said, Not so, Lord; for I have never eaten any thing that is common or unclean.”

Peter knows what the Mosaic Law says and he is not going to violate it. What God says next, though, surprises him:

Acts 10:15: “And the voice spake unto him again the second time, What God hath cleansed, that call not thou common.”

What did God say? That He had cleansed these animals and they were no longer forbidden! These animals could no longer be called unclean because God had cleansed them. The dietary restrictions of the Mosaic Law were null and void. Things had changed.

God didn't tell Peter this just once, though. The Lord actually repeated the message *three times*:

Acts 10:16: “This was done thrice: and the vessel was received up again into heaven.”

There's something special about Peter and the number three, isn't there? Jesus told Peter in Matthew 26:34 that Peter would deny the Lord three times, and he did. In John 21 Jesus asked Peter three times if he loved him, and told Peter three times to feed His sheep. Now we see that God gave Peter this vision three times as well. The Bible tells us that things were to be established by two or three witnesses (Deuteronomy 19:15, Matthew 18:16). Well, here Peter had his three witnesses. There was no mistaking what was going on.

Now, to us the message of the vision seems pretty clear: the dietary restrictions of the Mosaic Law were gone. Animals that used to be unclean were unclean no more. A new Age had begun and there were new rules. Peter, however, remained confused. He didn't understand what was going on:

Acts 10:17: “Now while Peter doubted in himself what this vision which he had seen should mean, behold, the men which were sent from Cornelius had made enquiry for Simon's house, and stood before the gate,
18 And called, and asked whether Simon, which was surnamed Peter, were lodged there.”

While Peter was up on the roof confused, the men that Cornelius sent arrived at the house. God had given Peter this vision just in time – not too soon and not too late. It was still fresh in his mind when the Gentiles came looking for him. In fact, Peter was still thinking about it when the Holy Spirit told him to go with the men who had come looking for him:

Acts 10:19: “While Peter thought on the vision, the Spirit said unto him, Behold, three men seek thee.
20 Arise therefore, and get thee down, and go with them, doubting nothing: for I have sent them.”

Keep in mind that when this happened there was intense persecution of the Church, and things were only going to get worse. Peter had been arrested before, and I am sure he wanted to avoid that again if at all possible. When some Romans came looking for him his first thought was probably that he was going to get arrested and put in prison. Peter would not have gone willingly with these complete strangers unless God told him to – and that is exactly what God did. The moment these men arrived, God told Peter to go with the men because God had sent them to him. Peter is told to not doubt or question what is going on because it was God's doing.

Peter was obedient. Instead of running for his life he went and talked with them:

Acts 10:21: “Then Peter went down to the men which were sent unto him from Cornelius; and said, Behold, I am he whom ye seek: what is the cause wherefore ye are come?”

Peter wants to know why they are here. Why have these Gentiles come to see him? God had told him to go with these men, but the Lord hadn't explained what was going on. The servants then explain what had happened:

Acts 10:22: “And they said, Cornelius the centurion, a just man, and one that feareth God, and of good report among all the nation of the Jews, was warned from God by an holy angel to send for thee into his house, and to hear words of thee.”

Remember that the people who were praising Cornelius in such glowing terms was not Cornelius himself, but his servants. It seems that those who served him held in high regard. They said that Cornelius was a just man who feared the Lord and had a good reputation among the Jews. This should have put Peter's mind to rest; he now knew that he was not going into the hands of an enemy.

After Peter heard their story he invited the group inside (since it was late in the day). The following day he left with them, just as God had commanded:

Acts 10:23: “Then called he them in, and lodged them. And on the morrow Peter went away with them, and certain brethren from Joppa accompanied him.”

Cornelius was anxiously waiting for Peter to arrive. In fact, this soldier actually gathered his family and friends as well so they could all hear the message that Peter was bringing to them:

Acts 10:24: “And the morrow after they entered into Caesarea. And Cornelius waited for them, and he had called together his kinsmen and near friends.”

The centurion wasn't even saved yet and he was already spreading the message to others! He truly had a deep love of God and a heart for evangelism. However, what he lacked was knowledge. We can see this in the fact that when Peter arrived, Cornelius immediately fell down to worship him:

Acts 10:25: “And as Peter was coming in, Cornelius met him, and fell down at his feet, and worshipped him.

26 But Peter took him up, saying, Stand up; I myself also am a man.”

As you can see, Peter immediately stopped him. Only the Lord was to be worshiped – not men. Peter was not going to allow that to happen. But it seems that apparently Peter still didn't know why he was there. The first thing he does is ask why they had called for him:

Acts 10:28: “And he said unto them, Ye know how that it is an unlawful thing for a man that is a Jew to keep company, or come unto one of another nation; but God hath shewed me that I should not call any man common or unclean.

29 Therefore came I unto you without gainsaying, as soon as I was sent for: I ask therefore for what intent ye have sent for me?”

This is what I was getting at earlier – the Jews did not have dealings with the Gentiles. The Jews went to great lengths to not eat Gentile food, or keep company with Gentiles, or really have anything to do with them at all. But Peter now understood the meaning of the vision – to some extent, at least. The Gentiles were *not* unclean. Because of the vision Peter came willingly with the servants, but he still didn't know what was going on.

Cornelius then explained what had happened. He told Peter that they wanted to hear the message that he had to share:

Acts 10:33: “Immediately therefore I sent to thee; and thou hast well done that thou art come. Now therefore are we all here present before God, to hear all things that are commanded thee of God.”

This is truly remarkable! Stop and think about this for a minute. We saw earlier in Acts that the Ethiopian eunuch wanted to understand Isaiah's prophecies about the Messiah. This Gentile centurion also wanted to hear the commandments of God. We have found two Gentiles who were eager to hear the Word. Do you know who did *not* want to hear that message? *The Jewish people*. Stop and think a minute: how many Jews do we find in Acts seeking the disciples (and the gospel) the way that the Gentiles did? It seems that these Gentiles had a heart for the Lord that the Jews themselves lacked. The house of Cornelius was full of Gentiles who had gathered together to hear what the Lord had to tell them. They *wanted* to obey the Lord and do what was right. They wanted to serve Him with their lives.

Peter was amazed. This taught him something that he had not realized before:

Acts 10:34: “Then Peter opened his mouth, and said, Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons:

35 But in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him.”

Peter now understands that the gospel was not just for the Jews, for God had made salvation available to all nations. God would forgive any who came to Him, who believed in Christ, and who repented of their sins. God would not withhold salvation from any people or nation but instead freely offered it to all. As we can see in verse 35, God will accept any person who fears Him.

This may seem very ordinary to us, but it was huge news to Peter. It was a massive change in his thinking. Even though God had hinted at this in the Old Testament (which is something we have already discussed), Peter had missed it. But now Peter clearly saw what God was doing.

So what did Peter do? He started telling the Gentiles about Christ, and how He is Lord of all:

Acts 10:36: “The word which God sent unto the children of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ: (he is Lord of all:)”

He told them of the great works that Christ did:

Acts 10:38: “How God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Ghost and with power: who went about doing good, and healing all that were oppressed of the devil; for God was with him.”

He told them of the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ:

Acts 10:39: “And we are witnesses of all things which he did both in the land of the Jews, and in Jerusalem; whom they slew and hanged on a tree:
40 Him God raised up the third day, and shewed him openly;”

Who saw the risen Lord? Not everyone – only a few people. But Peter was one of those chosen few. He was an eyewitness to the resurrected Lord:

Acts 10:41: “Not to all the people, but unto witnesses chosen before God, even to us, who did eat and drink with him after he rose from the dead.”

Peter told them that he was an eyewitness to these events. He told them about the life of Christ, the death of Christ, and the resurrection of Christ. But that is not all. Peter also told them that this Jesus was the Judge, and all those who believed on Him would have their sins forgiven:

Acts 10:42: “And he commanded us to preach unto the people, and to testify that it is he which was ordained of God to be the Judge of quick and dead.
43 To him give all the prophets witness, that through his name whosoever believeth in him shall receive remission of sins.”

Now, notice what Peter did *not* do. Peter did not say “Look, Cornelius, God loves you very much and has a wonderful plan for your life.” That is what preachers do today, but that is *not* how the apostles shared the gospel. In fact, they *never* took that approach! Instead they preached Christ crucified. They told people about the life of Christ, the death of Christ, and the resurrection of Christ. They told people that a great and terrible Day of Judgment was coming, and that the only way to be forgiven of your sins was to believe in Jesus. They preached a gospel of judgment and repentance. They preached the cross and the blood. That was the way they did it – and it was tremendously effective.

In fact, it was so effective that the people in the room immediately believed, and the Holy Spirit fell upon them:

Acts 10:44: “While Peter yet spake these words, the Holy Ghost fell on all them which heard the word.”

The people had become saved *while he was still talking!* Peter hadn't even finished his message yet, and already they had accepted his message and believed in the Lord. They were saved *immediately* and received the Holy Spirit. (Note that they were saved *before* they were baptized. Although baptism is a command from the Lord and is something we ought to do, you do *not* have to be baptized to be saved. This passage proves that rather conclusively.)

Needless to say, this astonished the Jews who were there and witnessed it:

Acts 10:45: “And they of the circumcision which believed were astonished, as many as came with Peter, because that on the Gentiles also was poured out the gift of the Holy Ghost.”

Even though Peter had just said that God was no respecter of persons, it seems that they didn't expect God to give the Gentiles the same spiritual gifts that He had given to the Jews. They apparently thought that was only for the Jews. But God truly *was* no respecter of persons. God gave the Gentiles the same miraculous spiritual gifts that He had given to the Jews. God was showing them that both Jew and Gentile were equal in His sight:

Acts 10:46: “For they heard them speak with tongues, and magnify God. Then answered Peter,”

These Gentiles were even speaking in tongues! God was showing the Jews in a very clear way that the Gentiles were full partners in the Church – not second class citizens, but recipients of the same grace and the same gifts.

All that was left to do now was baptize them:

Acts 10:47: “Can any man forbid water, that these should not be baptized, which have received the Holy Ghost as well as we?”

48 And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of the Lord. Then prayed they him to tarry certain days.”

It was impossible for anyone to object to this. As Peter pointed out, since they had already been baptized with the Holy Spirit, how could anyone say they could not be baptized with water as well?

This was a significant turning point in the early Church. The Gentiles had been brought in and were now full recipients of the Lord's grace and salvation. In coming chapters the Church will begin to minister to the Gentiles and all sorts of things will change - and it all started with the prayers of Cornelius.

ACTS 12

The persecution of Christianity started very early in the history of the Church. After the death and resurrection of Christ, it did not take long for the world to begin persecuting His followers. In Acts 4 we are told that the priests of Israel arrested Peter and John for daring to preach the gospel:

Acts 4:1: “And as they spake unto the people, the priests, and the captain of the temple, and the Sadducees, came upon them,
2 Being grieved that they taught the people, and preached through Jesus the resurrection from the dead.
3 And they laid hands on them, and put them in hold unto the next day: for it was now eventide.”

The priests were supposed to be holy men of God who served Him faithfully and taught the people how to follow the Lord. Instead they were vicious enemies of God who wanted to hunt down those who believed in the Messiah. Acts 4:21 tells us that the priests threatened the disciples and let them go – but that was not the end. In the very next chapter the High Priest orders that the disciples be arrested:

Acts 5:17: “Then the high priest rose up, and all they that were with him, (which is the sect of the Sadducees,) and were filled with indignation,
18 And laid their hands on the apostles, and put them in the common prison.”

The job of the High Priest was to make atonement for the nation. He was to be a man who was close to God, who loved the Lord, and who led the nation into righteousness. Instead, however, he was a man who hated God, who hated the Messiah, and who was going to do everything he could to lead people to Hell and eternal damnation. Instead of being a righteous man he was a man of deep wickedness.

This time the disciples were not simply scolded and let go. The High Priest commanded that these men should be beaten for the crime of preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ:

Acts 5:40: “And to him they agreed: and when they had called the apostles, and beaten them, they commanded that they should not speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go.”

In Acts 10 we saw that the Gentile centurion Cornelius was a devout man who prayed and earnestly sought to hear the gospel. The Jews, though, had a very different reaction: they wanted to stamp the gospel out. As you can see, the High Priest wickedly commanded that the disciples be beaten, and he then ordered them to never speak of the Messiah again. The religious leaders of Israel hated the gospel, hated their Messiah, and wanted to put an end to Christianity. They were supposed to be men of the Lord, but instead they were children of the devil.

The disciples, however, were not deterred. They knew the truth and they knew the power of God. The Lord gave them great boldness and they continued to preach the gospel. In response, the persecution intensified. When the priests caught Stephen preaching the gospel, they arrested him. When

Stephen then preached the gospel to them they got so angry that they had him killed on the spot:

Acts 7:57: “Then they cried out with a loud voice, and stopped their ears, and ran upon him with one accord,

58 And cast him out of the city, and stoned him: and the witnesses laid down their clothes at a young man's feet, whose name was Saul.

59 And they stoned Stephen, calling upon God, and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.

60 And he kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge. And when he had said this, he fell asleep.”

Keep in mind that the priests were not allowed to just grab someone and kill him. Under Roman law they did not have the right to execute anyone. That is why Jesus had to be brought before Pontius Pilate. It took a Roman in order to hand down the sentence of death. This time, though, the priests were so enraged at hearing the gospel that they didn't care about the legality of their actions. They formed an angry mob and executed him right there in the street. That is how much the priests hated God: just *hearing* the gospel was enough to make them fly into rage and murder the person speaking to them! These people were deeply demonic.

One thing we can see from this is that Christianity put people in a very dangerous position. It was not a safe thing to be at all. At first it was just punished by time in prison, and then it was punished by being beaten. Now, though, Christians are being illegally put to death in the street. Stephen was the first martyr that we are aware of, but he was not the last. After the death of Stephen a great persecution arose which was so severe that it scattered the early Christians far and wide:

Acts 8:8: “And Saul was consenting unto his death. And at that time there was a great persecution against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judaea and Samaria, except the apostles.”

The High Priest was determined to find all those who believed in the Messiah and murder them. The religious leadership of Israel was determined to wipe out everyone who loved God and followed Him. They were truly worthless shepherds, who led people to Hell and did their best to stop anyone who might want to be saved.

It must have seemed to the Church at that time that the priests were winning. A serious blow had been struck against them and now Christians were scattered all over the world. However, in reality, this persecution actually helped the Church and was a great benefit to it. The gospel was no longer being preached only in Jerusalem; it was now spread far and wide. Instead of stamping out the Church the priests had only caused it to grow even further.

But as the gospel spread, so did the persecution. The priests began sending people city to city in an attempt to find and kill those who were telling people about the Messiah. When the Jews came against Saul he narrowly escaped with his life:

Acts 9:22: “But Saul increased the more in strength, and confounded the Jews which dwelt at Damascus, proving that this is very Christ.

23 And after that many days were fulfilled, the Jews took counsel to kill him:

24 But their laying await was known of Saul. And they watched the gates day and

night to kill him.

25 Then the disciples took him by night, and let him down by the wall in a basket."

Saul (whose name was later changed to Paul) reasoned with the Jews and showed them through the Scriptures that Jesus really was the Messiah. When the Jews could not disprove his logic, but rather saw that what he was saying was actually true, they decided to respond by killing Saul. The fact that Saul could prove what he was saying with the Scriptures *made them hate Saul*. (Incidentally, if you preach the gospel to someone and show them the truth of the Scriptures, and they respond by trying to kill you, that is a pretty good indication that the person you are talking to is not a godly man.) These people were like Cain: they wanted to find the righteous and murder them.

As we can see, the persecution against the early Church was intense. Preaching the gospel was all it took to get you a death sentence at the hands of people who were supposedly great men of God. The religious leaders of the day were looking for Christians so they could murder them in acts of mob violence. They wanted to stamp out the gospel, and they didn't care how many laws they broke in order to make it happen.

Soon, though, it wasn't just the priests who were persecuting believers. In Acts 12 we find that King Herod started to do it as well. Before we go too far, let's take a moment to look into exactly who this Herod was. The man who executed John the Baptist was named Herod Antipas. This man, though, was Herod Agrippa, and he was the nephew of Antipas. This Herod was not a Jew at all, but was instead an Edomite. By this point the Edomites had been the enemies of Israel for a thousand years. During the Old Testament they frequently persecuted God's people, and in the New Testament we find them doing the exact same thing.

Herod decided to go straight to the source. He began arresting the disciples and executing them:

Acts 12:1: "Now about that time Herod the king stretched forth his hands to vex certain of the church.

2 And he killed James the brother of John with the sword.

3 And because he saw it pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to take Peter also.
(Then were the days of unleavened bread.)"

It would appear that Herod was doing this because it was a popular thing to do. Politicians like to do things that are popular, because they crave the support and respect of the people. Since there was so much support among the Jews for killing Christians, Herod decided to start executing them. (Think of it as a way of boosting his polling numbers.)

The first person he executed was James. This was not just any random James; this was one of the disciples – one of the twelve. The Church had lost one of its key members. Herod did not stop there, though. He also arrested Peter and intended to put him to death as well. James and Peter were probably not hard to find. After all, they spent their time among the people, preaching the gospel and telling them about Jesus. These men were not in hiding; they had a mission to accomplish, and they were preaching publicly with great boldness. (Would we have done the same, if we were in their position?)

The verse tells us that this happened during the Feast of Unleavened Bread, which always followed the Passover. This means that they were arrested shortly after the anniversary of the crucifixion. It looked like Peter was about to be killed and the Church was going to lose another one of the twelve disciples:

Acts 12:4: “And when he had apprehended him, he put him in prison, and delivered him to four quaternions of soldiers to keep him; intending after Easter to bring him forth to the people.”

Before going any further I'd like to stop and take a look at the word “Easter” in this verse. Some people argue that this shouldn't be translated “Easter” at all, but instead should be “Passover”. (In fact, that is exactly how the NIV translates it.) Translating it as “Passover”, however, is an exceptionally bad mistake that shows a very poor understanding of the Bible. You see, this event happened during the Feast of Unleavened Bread. That feast takes place *after* Passover, not before! That means Herod couldn't possibly be planning on keeping Peter in prison until Passover because *Passover was already over*. It was too late for that. This verse is *not* speaking about Passover, but about a very different – and much more pagan – festival.

Herod, remember, was not a Jew or a Christian. He was an Edomite. He did not care about Jewish festivals; what he cared about were his own, pagan, Edomite festivals. One of those festivals was the feast of Ishtar, the fertility god. (“Ishtar” is where we get the modern word “Easter”.) What this passage is saying is that Herod was going to wait until the feast of Ishtar was over, and then he would have time to bring out Peter and execute him. In this verse “Easter” really is the correct translation. This is not the “Christian” Easter that celebrates the resurrection of Christ; this is the pagan, Edomite “Easter”.

To get back to the story: Peter was put in prison and guarded by 16 Roman soldiers. These soldiers would have taken their job very seriously, because if they let Peter escape they were going to be executed in his place. There was no possible chance that Peter could escape, or that the Church could somehow hire some ninjas and mount a rescue. The situation was utterly hopeless.

However, that did not stop the Church. In their hour of need they cried out to God. They knew that the Lord was powerful enough to free Peter from this situation:

Acts 12:5: “Peter therefore was kept in prison: but prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him.”

The Church did not want to lose Peter. They did not want to see him killed, so they began to pray “without ceasing”. Prayer was made for Peter around the clock. Day and night, people were praying for Peter. This was an earnest and passionate time of prayer. The Church knew that Peter's life was literally at stake. If God did not intervene and do something then Peter would surely be killed.

God heard their earnest prayers. On the night before Peter was going to be brought out and executed (which means God waited until the last possible moment), the Lord did something amazing. Keep in mind that when God acted the situation was utterly hopeless:

Acts 12:6: “And when Herod would have brought him forth, the same night Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains: and the keepers before the door kept the prison.”

Peter was securely chained in prison and there were actually two soldiers at his side. Escape was *not* an option – but escape was exactly what was going to happen. The Lord was going to set him free. He accomplished this miracle by sending an angel to deliver Peter:

Acts 12:7: “And, behold, the angel of the Lord came upon him, and a light shined in

the prison: and he smote Peter on the side, and raised him up, saying, Arise up quickly. And his chains fell off from his hands.

8 And the angel said unto him, Gird thyself, and bind on thy sandals. And so he did. And he saith unto him, Cast thy garment about thee, and follow me.”

It seems that Peter was in such a deep sleep that the angel had to wake him up – and yet, the angel managed to do it in such a way that *only* Peter woke up. (Would you be sleeping that soundly if you knew you were going to be executed the next day?) No one else in the cell was alerted. Even though a light shined, only Peter could see the light; the 16 guards around him did not notice. (You could say that the guards were blinded to the light. The light shone in the darkness, but they did not comprehend it.)

By the mighty power of God, Peter's chains simply fell off. Peter was going to walk right out of prison. It was astounding and it was impossible, but God made it happen. Nothing is too hard for Him. It was so amazing that even *Peter* didn't believe it:

Acts 12:9: “And he went out, and followed him; and wist not that it was true which was done by the angel; but thought he saw a vision.”

Peter was so certain he was going to be executed that he thought he was seeing a vision. He didn't realize that what he was seeing was really happening, and that he was being set free. But he was free indeed:

Acts 12:10: “When they were past the first and the second ward, they came unto the iron gate that leadeth unto the city; which opened to them of his own accord: and they went out, and passed on through one street; and forthwith the angel departed from him.”

Notice once again the incredible power of God! The massive iron gates that were designed to keep Peter locked inside simply opened of their own accord. Peter walked by all of the guards, and none of them noticed what was going on. God blinded them all and took control of the situation. Peter was led out into the street, and he was free.

Peter finally understood what was going on:

Acts 12:11: “And when Peter was come to himself, he said, Now I know of a surety, that the Lord hath sent his angel, and hath delivered me out of the hand of Herod, and from all the expectation of the people of the Jews.”

Peter realized that the Lord had set him free. Against all the expectations of the enemies of the Lord, God had intervened and released Peter from prison. Peter was not going to be killed the next day – and it was all because of God.

The disciple now had to figure out what to do next:

Acts 12:12: “And when he had considered the thing, he came to the house of Mary the mother of John, whose surname was Mark; where many were gathered together praying.”

Peter decided that the logical thing to do was to go to the house where people were praying for him and let them know that he was free. Peter then went to the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark, and tried to get in:

Acts 12:13: “And as Peter knocked at the door of the gate, a damsel came to hearken, named Rhoda.”

At this house a lady named Rhoda was given the job of answering the door. Everyone else was praying for Peter's release, so Rhoda was tasked with opening the door. That was all she had to do: go to the door and open it. It was a very simple job – and yet when Rhoda saw who it was, she failed to open the door. Instead she left Peter standing out in the street, where he could be seen and arrested:

Acts 12:14: “And when she knew Peter's voice, she opened not the gate for gladness, but ran in, and told how Peter stood before the gate.”

Peter was probably *not* happy about this turn of events. After all, anyone could have seen him while he was standing out there! Peter was a wanted man, and he did not want to be put back in prison and executed. It was dangerous and risky for him to be standing out there. Rhoda, however, was so excited that she didn't bother to open the door and bring Peter in to safety. Instead she ran inside and told everyone that Peter was at the gate!

How did the believers respond? By telling her that she was out of her mind:

Acts 12:15: “And they said unto her, Thou art mad. But she constantly affirmed that it was even so. Then said they, It is his angel.”

Keep in mind that these people had been praying day and night for Peter to be released. Yet when God actually did release Peter and he showed up at their door, they refused to believe it! They simply refused to believe that God had answered their prayer and set him free. This means that even though they were praying without ceasing, *they did not actually think that God was going to answer their prayer*. They were praying earnestly, but they lacked faith.

Yet in spite of that God still answered their prayer. Even though they did not believe that God would grant their request, God was still gracious and granted their request. God was merciful to them and did as they asked, even though they did not believe. (If someone ever tries to tell you that God didn't answer your prayers because you didn't have enough faith, think about this passage.)

Peter, meanwhile, kept knocking on the door. He wanted someone to let him in:

Acts 12:16: “But Peter continued knocking: and when they had opened the door, and saw him, they were astonished.”

Finally, after what must have seemed like an uncomfortably long time, they finally got around to opening the door and seeing who was outside. When they saw Peter they were amazed. (Why were they amazed? Because they all earnestly believed that God wasn't going to answer their prayer. If they really thought that God was going to free him they would not have been so surprised. If you think that God is going to do something and He does it, are you really going to respond with complete shock?) Peter told them to be quiet for a minute and then explained to them what happened:

Acts 12:17: “But he, beckoning unto them with the hand to hold their peace, declared unto them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he said, Go shew these things unto James, and to the brethren. And he departed, and went into another place.”

Peter did not want to stick around because it was too dangerous. After all, the guards would find out pretty soon that Peter had escaped, and the first place they would look for him was in the company of his friends. Peter needed to get out of town. As soon as he had told them the great miracle that the Lord had done, he asked them to tell everyone else and then left to an undisclosed location. Peter wanted to flee to a place where Herod could not find him and arrest him again. In fact, Peter didn't even stick around long enough to tell everyone; he let the others do that. He just wanted to get to a place of safety.

Incidentally, the James that Peter wants everyone to notify is obviously *not* the same James who was executed by Herod. It was a different James – the one who wrote the book of James and who was the half-brother of Christ. He was a prominent figure in the early church and Peter wanted to make sure that he heard the news.

Meanwhile, back at the prison, things were not going well. Peter's disappearance had finally been noticed:

Acts 12:18: “Now as soon as it was day, there was no small stir among the soldiers, what was become of Peter.”

The soldiers were greatly upset. Sixteen people had been charged with guarding one man, and yet that one man was nowhere to be found. They knew that the penalty for letting him escape was death, and that was exactly what Herod commanded:

Acts 12:19: “And when Herod had sought for him, and found him not, he examined the keepers, and commanded that they should be put to death. And he went down from Judaea to Caesarea, and there abode.”

The keepers of the prison really had no defense. There were sixteen of them and just one prisoner. The prisoner was in chains and had been locked behind iron gates. There was no way he could have gotten away – and yet he was gone. So Herod commanded that they be put to death and then he left town.

Since Peter escaped, Herod went on to afflict someone else. It seems that Herod was upset with the citizens of Tyre and Sidon. The people knew it was a terrible thing to be on Herod's bad side; after all, Herod could execute anyone he wanted. So the people decide to make peace with him. They needed Herod's support in order to prosper:

Acts 12:20: “And Herod was highly displeased with them of Tyre and Sidon: but they came with one accord to him, and, having made Blastus the king's chamberlain their friend, desired peace; because their country was nourished by the king's country.”

What do they do? The people of Tyre and Sidon worshiped Herod and called him a god:

Acts 12:21: “And upon a set day Herod, arrayed in royal apparel, sat upon his throne, and made an oration unto them.

22 And the people gave a shout, saying, It is the voice of a god, and not of a man.”

Herod was doubtless glad to hear this. Politicians love hearing the praise of men, and they love having the support of the people. However, God was not pleased with this at all. Even though Herod was a pagan and not a Christian, God still required Herod to give God the glory. (You can refuse to believe in God, but that doesn't get you off the hook – God's commands apply to you whether you want them to or not.) The fact that Herod kept the glory for himself and did not stop them from worshiping him (which, remember, is what Peter did when Cornelius fell down before him), led to his painful death:

Acts 12:23: “And immediately the angel of the Lord smote him, because he gave not God the glory: and he was eaten of worms, and gave up the ghost.”

When did the angel smite him? *Immediately*. Herod was “eaten of worms” and died – after a reign of just four years. Now, being “eaten of worms” would not have been a good way to die. This is how one commentator put it:

“Herod does not refuse their homage. Immediately an angel of the Lord strikes him down and he is eaten by worms. He experiences pain in the heart and stomach--peritonitis from a perforated appendix, combined with intestinal roundworms, ten to sixteen inches long. (Bunches of these can obstruct the intestines, causing severe pain, copious vomiting and finally death.) This excruciating condition continues for five days until he dies.” (IVP New Testament Commentaries)

Herod, the man who executed James, met an untimely and very painful end. But what happened to the Church? It did not meet its end under the hatred and persecution of the priests. Instead it grew:

Acts 12:24: “But the word of God grew and multiplied.”

The word of God grew and multiplied. It did not meet its end at the hands of Herod; instead Herod met his end in the hands of an angry God. The world did indeed persecute the Church (just as Christ said that it would), but the world could not overcome them or defeat them. Instead, by the power of God, the word of God grew and multiplied.

ROMANS 16

It is time to bring our study of Romans to a close. We have reached the last chapter and the end of our incredible journey is in sight. Soon it will be time to move on to something else – a different book and a different topic. The last chapter of Romans is a fitting conclusion to its material and has some interesting things to say. It contains a number of verses that tend to be overlooked and yet can speak volumes to our lives. We need to hear what this chapter has to say.

Before we begin, though, we need to take a step back and understand what Romans actually is. We tend to call it the “book of Romans”, but in a way that is misleading. This is actually a letter that Paul wrote to the church that was in Rome. Calling it the “book of Romans” would be like if you sent an email to Knoxville and people started calling that email the “book of Knoxville”. This is a *letter*, and believe it or not this letter is actually personal. Paul had specific people in mind when he wrote it. This isn't a generic treatise on theology that was sent to a bunch of strangers; there are personal elements here. In a very real way, what we have been doing as we studied this book is reading someone else's mail.

Romans 16 is where Paul starts to get personal. Since Paul knows it's time to close the letter and put it in the mail, he wraps things up by taking the time to greet people. If you think about it, we tend to do the same thing. When we're on the phone talking to someone and the conversation is nearly over, we'll say things like “Oh by the way, say hello to Bob for me.” We want to greet people and tell them that we appreciate them. That is what Paul is doing here in this chapter.

Now, Paul does say a few other things as well. For example, in verses 17 and 18 Paul warns the Church against false teachers – and we could easily do a whole sermon just on that. (The Bible has a lot to say about false teachers, and none of it is positive.) But since you don't need me to tell you that false teachers are bad and we should avoid them, we're not going to go in that direction today. The overwhelming focus of this chapter is on personal greetings, so that's what we are going to focus on.

The tricky part about studying chapters like this is that they don't get very much attention. This is exactly the sort of chapter that people tend to skip over when they are studying the Scriptures. After all, take a look at some of these verses:

Romans 16:14: “Salute Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermas, Patrobas, Hermes, and the brethren which are with them.

15 Salute Philologus, and Julia, Nereus, and his sister, and Olympas, and all the saints which are with them.”

What we have here is a list of names. However, none of us have ever heard of any of these people. Do you know what we tend to do when we come across lists of names in the Bible? We ignore them. After all, what is there to gain from verses like this? Romans is a book that is rich in theology, but what we have here are names. What good is something like that?

One fact we need to realize is that the whole Bible is the Word of God. Every verse in the Scriptures is there for a reason, and all of the verses matter. The Bible is very clear about this point:

2 Timothy 3:16: “All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness:

17 That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.”

What portions of Scripture were given by God? *All of it*. What portions are profitable to us? *All of it*. There are no passages that we are allowed to skip, ignore, or pretend that they don't matter. Every single verse has a point and a purpose.

Still, let's be honest. If you were lying in the hospital and were gravely ill, and you desperately needed a word of hope and encouragement, I don't think you would ask for someone to read you Romans 16. After all, Romans 16 is just a list of names. How could that possibly encourage anyone? How could that lift up a person in their darkest hour? For that matter, how could this chapter possibly make a difference to anyone?

Believe it or not, Romans 16 actually *is* an incredibly uplifting chapter! It has a message of tremendous hope and encouragement, if only we have the eyes to see it. This is not boring material, nor is it dull; it is actually full of hope. You just need to know how to look at it.

One interesting thing that you may not realize is that although *you* may not have heard of these people, that doesn't mean their identities were lost in time. This letter is only about 2000 years old, and although that is pretty old it's *not* so old that all knowledge of that time period has been lost. History actually has a lot to say about the Roman era. Not only that, but Paul's letter to the Romans is not the only letter that survived from the days of the early Church. We actually have mail from other people as well, and that mail tells us some very interesting things.

Let's take a look at those names again:

Romans 16:14: "Salute Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermas, Patrobas, Hermes, and the brethren which are with them.

15 Salute Philologus, and Julia, Nereus, and his sister, and Olympas, and all the saints which are with them."

In verse 14, the first person Paul salutes is Asyncritus. It turns out that history actually records the identity of this person. He was not some random nobody; he was actually the bishop of Hyrcania. On top of that, he was also one of the 70 disciples that Jesus hand-picked and sent throughout Israel to prepare for His arrival (Luke 10:1). This person was not one of the 12, but he was one of the 70. This means that he knew Jesus personally and he worked with Him during His time of earthly ministry. He was a significant leader in the early church.

The next person who is mentioned in verse 14, Phlegon, was also one of the 70. The next person, Hermas, was the bishop of Philippi. Oh – and the last guy mentioned in verse 15, Olympas? Not only was he one of the 70, but he was also a martyr as well.

If you do a little digging you can actually find out who many of these people were. To us they might appear to be random, unimportant names, but in reality these were key people in the early Church. Some of these people knew Christ before the crucifixion and served Him during His earthly ministry. Others gave their lives for the faith. These are remarkable people with remarkable stories! Some of them wrote letters and other material that survives to this day. If you want to read it, that is actually an option. As I said earlier, Paul's letter to the Romans is *not* the only letter from the early Church that survives to this day. There's a lot of other mail that you can read too, if you're interested in learning a bit more about the people that God used to lay the foundation of His Church.

Even if all we had to go on was the material in Romans 16, though, there's still enough here to indicate that this is a remarkable group of people. Look at what Paul says about Phebe:

Romans 16:1: "I commend unto you Phebe our sister, which is a servant of the

church which is at Cenchrea:

2 That ye receive her in the Lord, as becometh saints, and that ye assist her in whatsoever business she hath need of you: for she hath been a succourer of many, and of myself also.”

Paul highly praises Phebe – a woman. That's rather remarkable, if you think about it. At this point in history women were rarely praised or held in high esteem, and yet the very first person Paul mentions is a woman. On top of that, look at what he praises her for: Phebe has gone out of her way to help Paul and the other apostles.

This may seem like a small act of kindness to us, but it's far more significant than that. Remember, the apostles were considered to be criminals during their day. In fact, the only disciple who wasn't executed for preaching the gospel was John, and he was sent into exile at Patmos. As far as the authorities were concerned Phebe was harboring dangerous fugitives, and that's the sort of thing that could have easily gotten her put in prison or executed. But that did not deter this remarkable woman. She faithfully served the Lord by trying to meet the needs of the apostles. Therefore, Paul praises her highly.

Would you have done what she did, if you were in her position? Would you have harbored the apostles if you knew it could get both you and your family killed? Would you have taken this risk for the gospel? Phebe did. She helped others at her own expense – and so Paul urges the church at Rome to do whatever they can to help Phebe.

This woman is not the only person who risked a great deal to help the apostles. There are others who also put their lives on the line:

Romans 16:3: “Greet Priscilla and Aquila my helpers in Christ Jesus:

4 Who have for my life laid down their own necks: unto whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles.

5a Likewise greet the church that is in their house...”

Priscilla and Aquila risked their lives for the sake of Paul. There's actually a fascinating story behind these two people. You see, this is not the only time this couple is mentioned in the Scriptures. This is what we find in the book of Acts:

Acts 18:2: “And found a certain Jew named Aquila, born in Pontus, lately come from Italy, with his wife Priscilla; (because that Claudius had commanded all Jews to depart from Rome:) and came unto them.”

This couple originally lived in Rome but were driven out of the city by Claudius Caesar. They then went to Corinth, where they met the apostle Paul. The apostle actually lived with them for a while because they were fellow tentmakers. Acts tells us that the couple followed Paul to Ephesus, where they met a man named Apollos. Priscilla and Aquila taught Apollos the gospel, and Apollos became a mighty preacher of the Word.

There's no telling how many times this couple risked their lives to help Paul. They were with him for some time, and they traveled with him for a while on his missionary journeys. I am sure they did a great deal for Paul that is not recorded. What we do know is that they were there when the apostle needed them, and they were willing to lay down their lives in order to save him. They were active in the early church and were instrumental in the conversion of one of its most prominent leaders, Apollos.

And if all that was not enough, we find that they had a church in their home. These were remarkable people.

But Paul has only just begun. There are more people he wants to greet:

Romans 16:5b: “Salute my well-beloved Epaenetus, who is the firstfruits of Achaia unto Christ.”

Who was Epaenetus? He wasn't just the first convert in Achaia; he was also one of the 70, and became the bishop of Carthage.

By this point it should be obvious that the people in this chapter are not “nobodys”. We know that Hebrews 11 contains the “heroes of faith” - the noteworthy people God worked through in mighty ways. What we have in Romans 16 is another list – a list of prominent people in the early Church who lived amazing lives and sacrificed a great deal for the gospel.

This chapter has leaders. It has people who knew the Lord personally. It has bishops. It has martyrs. It also has prisoners:

Romans 16:7: “Salute Andronicus and Junia, my kinsmen, and my fellow-prisoners, who are of note among the apostles, who also were in Christ before me.”

Being a Christian was a dangerous thing to be at this time in history (and in many parts of the world it remains a dangerous thing today). These two people had been Christians for a long time – in fact, they knew the Lord longer than Paul himself had. Apparently they had done remarkable work, for not only were the apostles familiar with them, but they had also been put in prison for their labors in the gospel.

History records that these people were not apostles themselves, but messengers. They had the dangerous job of going from city to city and relaying messages from church to church. Remember, back in those days if you wanted a copy of Romans you couldn't just go down to the local bookstore and buy one. Someone had to copy it by hand, and then someone else had to make the long and perilous journey to bring it to you. (Email was simply not an option.) People had to risk their lives to bring the words of God to the churches, and those people were held in high esteem. It was dangerous work – but it was work that Andronicus and Junia willingly did, and it enriched the lives of many.

But the list goes on:

Romans 16:8: “Greet Amplias my beloved in the Lord.
9 Salute Urbane, our helper in Christ, and Stachys my beloved.”

Who was Amplias? He was the bishop of Odysus. Urbane was the bishop of Macedonia, and is thought to be one of the 70. Stachys was the bishop of Byzantium and was also one of the 70. Note that Paul was very close to these people; they were dear friends of his.

As you can see, this is *not* a list of random, unimportant strangers. Instead these are key people in the early Church. This is the A-team. These people risked everything for the sake of the gospel, and some of them gave their lives. They are heroes of the faith, and their stories are still with us today.

There's something I'd like to point out, though. In verse 9, Paul calls Urbane “our helper in Christ”. I don't know about you, but I would be *thrilled* if one of the apostles called me a “helper in Christ”! Wouldn't you? How amazing would it be if one of the leaders of the early Church took the time to call you out *by name* and thank you for your service to the Lord?

Imagine how uplifting that would be. It's rare enough to be thanked for the work that we do, but to be thanked by someone of such prominence – someone held in such high respect – well, that would have been an incredible experience. If that thanks was then recorded in the *Bible itself*, that would really be a life-changing sort of thing. It's one of the greatest honors you could imagine, isn't it? I think if I had the choice between receiving a Nobel prize, and having one of the apostles thank me in the Word of God, I'd go for the second option.

That is *precisely* what God did for these people, isn't it? God took the time to stop and thank these amazing, devout people for their service to His kingdom. On top of that, He chose to do it in the Word of God itself, and thus give them an everlasting testimony to their faithfulness and devotion. You see, the Word of God will abide forever:

Matthew 24:35: “Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away.”

The Word of God is *everlasting*. Nations may fall and cities may collapse into ruin, but the Scriptures will endure forever. When the great Day of Judgment is over and the Lord has put a final end to sin and wickedness, the Word will still endure. It will be there for all the ages of time – which means that God's praise of these people will also last forever.

Paul took the time to thank these men and women for what they did. But what about us – do we ever thank those who are around us? There are so many people in this church who have done so much for the Lord. Have we ever thanked them for it? Do we show our gratitude? The Bible itself takes the time to thank people and recognize their service. Shouldn't we do the same?

Let's be honest, though. While it *is* nice to have the praise of men, it's much better to have the praise of God. There are so many times when we serve the Lord, and make sacrifices, and do the right thing, and it seems that our actions went unnoticed. Sometimes no one ever thanks us for it or even acknowledges what we did. We work hard in the service of God and we simply aren't recognized. It seems like no one notices or cares, and that can make it hard to keep going. We know that we shouldn't do our good works in the sight of others, and we know we shouldn't live in order to be praised, but encouragement really *does* make a difference. It can be hard to keep going when it seems that we're not appreciated.

Wouldn't it be nice if our names were listed in Romans 16? Wouldn't be amazing if we made that list of remarkable people? How happy would you be to see *your* name there, recorded forever in recognition of the things you had done? Of course we all know that is never going to happen – but it turns out that you did make *another* list.

We all know about the Book of Life. All those whose names are written in that Book will live forever with the Lord. They will not be cast into Hell and suffer the wrath of God; instead they will inherit eternal life and everlasting joy. That is one list that all Christians are on, and that is a very important list to make. You want your name to be on that list.

But what many Christians do not know is that there is *another* Heavenly book. In Malachi 3 we are told that the people had a complaint. There were those who faithfully served the Lord and did what was right in the midst of a wicked time and a wicked people, and yet their service was seemingly being ignored. The wicked were prosperous and happy and the righteous were suffering and oppressed, and it just seemed so unfair. Did God not see their righteous acts? Did God not care about their sacrifice and their service?

In response to their complaints, God did something. He created the Book of Remembrance:

Malachi 3:16: “Then they that feared the Lord spake often one to another: and the

Lord hearkened, and heard it, and a book of remembrance was written before him for them that feared the Lord, and that thought upon his name.”

What is God remembering? Not the *names* of the righteous, for those are recorded in the Book of Life. No, this is a different book and it has a different purpose. The reason the righteous were complaining was because they thought their deeds were being forgotten. So God commissioned a book *to record them*.

In Romans 16 we have a list of the A-team of the early Church. That list, however, is a small subset of a much greater list that can be found in Heaven – a list that *you* are on. You may not have made Romans 16, but if you are a Christian and you have served the Lord then your deeds are recorded in the Book of Remembrance as an everlasting testimony to your service to God. The Lord is never going to forget what you have done for Him! Your righteous acts and your sacrifices have been recorded, and they will be there for all of eternity as a testimony to what you have done. The good things that you have done will *not* be forgotten.

Interestingly, it appears that the Lord is recording something else about your life. The book of Psalms makes a passing mention of another book that God is keeping:

Psalm 56:8: “Thou tellest my wanderings: put thou my tears into thy bottle: are they not in thy book?”

We know that there is the Book of Life, which records the names of the saints of God. There is the Book of Remembrance, which records the righteous acts of the saints. This verse hints that there is also a Book of Tears, which records the trials, pains, and sufferings of the saints.

What all of this means is that *God has not forgotten about you*. You may think that you have been overlooked and that no one cares about you. It may seem like your deeds are unappreciated and your sacrifices have gone unnoticed, and that all of your work is in vain. But that is an illusion. Your sacrifices, your good deeds, and even your tears are being recorded and will *never* be forgotten. They will remain as a testimony to your life for the rest of time.

In fact, interestingly enough, these books will come into play on the Day of Judgment. On the last day the Lord will be seated on his Great White Throne and will perform the final judgment of mankind. During that judgment we are told that this event will take place:

Revelation 20:12: “And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God; and the books were opened: and another book was opened, which is the book of life: and the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works.”

One thing that a lot of people miss is that although the Book of Life is mentioned, there are other books mentioned as well – books that are clearly said to *not* be the Book of Life. I guess now we know what some of those other books are, don't we? We know which books are going to be opened. We can even see in this verse that those other books record *your works* – the things you did in life.

Now, the Book of Life is what will be used to determine whether you inherit eternal life or eternal damnation. The works that you have done will *not* play any role in that. You are not saved by your works; you are saved by the grace of God and the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. But your works *are* recorded. For the lost that is a bad thing, because God is going to condemn them for every sin that they have ever committed, and will punish them for every wrong they have done. The Bible even says that

they will be condemned for every idle word they have spoken (Matthew 12:36).

For the saints of God, though, it's a different story. What was recorded for them was their righteous acts, and they were recorded as an everlasting memorial of what they had done. For them the judgment will not be about pain and suffering; it will be about an eternal glory that will never fade away.

Romans 16 is a glorious chapter. Is it a list of names? Yes, it most certainly is – the names of amazing people whom God worked through in astonishing ways. It is a place where God has taken the time to thank these people and recognize their service. What is so encouraging about this chapter is the knowledge that these are *not* the only people whom God is going to recognize, nor are these the only people whose deeds were recorded as a memorial for them. God is also recording our righteous acts and our sacrifices. They are being written in a book that will last forever.

When we act and when we sacrifice, we can rest assured that what we are doing is not in vain, nor is it unappreciated, nor will it ever be forgotten. It is all being written down. God is paying close attention to what we are doing, and the day will come when we will stand before Him and He will praise us. In fact, Jesus even went so far as to say this:

Luke 12:35: “Let your loins be girded about, and your lights burning;
36 And ye yourselves like unto men that wait for their lord, when he will return from the wedding; that when he cometh and knocketh, they may open unto him immediately.
37 Blessed are those servants, whom the lord when he cometh shall find watching: verily I say unto you, that he shall gird himself, and make them to sit down to meat, and will come forth and serve them.
38 And if he shall come in the second watch, or come in the third watch, and find them so, blessed are those servants.”

Jesus said that when He returns, if He finds His saints watching for Him and serving Him, He will bless them richly. In fact, Jesus actually said in verse 37 that He would *serve them*! That is truly amazing. This means that when Jesus returns, you really, *really* want to be caught working. You want Jesus to catch you in the middle of watching for His return and advancing His kingdom. That is the sort of life you want to be leading, for that carries great reward and blessing.

But there is another side to this. If Jesus returns and catches you in sin, well, there are consequences for that too:

Luke 12:45: “But and if that servant say in his heart, My lord delayeth his coming; and shall begin to beat the menservants and maidens, and to eat and drink, and to be drunken;
46 The lord of that servant will come in a day when he looketh not for him, and at an hour when he is not aware, and will cut him in sunder, and will appoint him his portion with the unbelievers.”

It works both ways, doesn't it? If the Lord returns and finds you faithfully serving Him then He will reward you in astonishing ways. However, if Jesus returns and catches you leading an incredibly wicked life, oppressing others and doing great evil, then you will not face reward but wrath. The return of Christ will be a great day for the saints of God, but it will be a terrible day for the wicked.

It is encouraging to know that God is recording our righteous acts and our sacrifices, and that our deeds will remain as a memorial for all the ages of time. But that brings up a question: just what *have* you done? Have you actually done anything worthy of recording? It doesn't take much, you know. Jesus said that even giving a cup of water in His name was enough to earn a reward:

Mark 9:41: “For whosoever shall give you a cup of water to drink in my name, because ye belong to Christ, verily I say unto you, he shall not lose his reward.”

Not everyone can be an apostle, or one of the 12 disciples, or one of the 70. We can't all be the bishop of Smyrna. But we *can* serve Christ wherever we are, in whatever position He has given to us. Even small acts of service are held in great esteem by God and will not be forgotten. But I have to ask: what acts of service have you actually done? How have you worked to advance the gospel and the kingdom of God? When people turn to your section of the Book of Remembrance to see how you spent your life, what will they find?

It's something to think about, isn't it?

So the next time you read Romans 16, don't see it as a list of random names. See it as a list of heroes that God took the time recognize for what they had done – and don't forget that *your* deeds are being record as well. One day *you* will be the one who is recognized for your service, and that is a most encouraging thought. Let Romans 16 forever remind you that *God really does care about what you have done for Him.*

1 SAMUEL 30

Today our study of the book of 1 Samuel ends with a lesson on chapter 30. This is a strange place for the study guide to end, because 1 Samuel actually has 31 chapters. If you stop reading at chapter 30 then you will miss key parts of the narrative. I think it would be wise to cover the whole story, and *not* stop just before reaching the final chapter.

When chapter 30 begins David has just returned home. At this point in David's life he was on the run from King Saul. Since Saul was determined to find David and kill him, David took refuge inside Philistine territory. One day during his time in hiding the Philistines went to war against Israel. David tried to join them in their fight, but the Philistines were uneasy about having David in their midst. They remembered all the times David led Saul's army to victory against the Philistines. Rather than letting David fight for the Philistines against Israel, they made David go back home.

When David returned home, however, he found bad news. David and his men had left their families and possessions in the town of Ziklag – but when they arrived they found that *everything* was gone. The Amalekites had raided the town, kidnapped everyone, stolen all their goods, and then burned the town to the ground:

1 Samuel 30:1: “And it came to pass, when David and his men were come to Ziklag on the third day, that the Amalekites had invaded the south, and Ziklag, and smitten Ziklag, and burned it with fire;

2 And had taken the women captives, that were therein: they slew not any, either great or small, but carried them away, and went on their way.”

To David this must have seemed like an exceptionally cruel blow. When David was young he had been content to be a shepherd. Things were fine for a while, but then Samuel came and anointed him as the next king over Israel – and ever since that day his life had become increasingly difficult. For example, when he went to the front lines to bring food for his brothers, his older brother immediately started yelling at him – even though David hadn't done anything wrong:

1 Samuel 17:28: “And Eliab his eldest brother heard when he spake unto the men; and Eliab's anger was kindled against David, and he said, Why camest thou down hither? and with whom hast thou left those few sheep in the wilderness? I know thy pride, and the naughtiness of thine heart; for thou art come down that thou mightest see the battle.

29 And David said, What have I now done? Is there not a cause?”

Eliab refused to fight Goliath or take any kind of stand against Israel's enemies, but he *was* willing to yell at David. David ignored his older brother, fought Goliath, and killed him. When David went to celebrate his great victory over the giant, the people praised him – and that immediately caused King Saul to become suspicious of David:

1 Samuel 18:6: “And it came to pass as they came, when David was returned from the slaughter of the Philistine, that the women came out of all cities of Israel, singing and dancing, to meet king Saul, with tabrets, with joy, and with instruments

of musick.

7 And the women answered one another as they played, and said, Saul hath slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands.

8 And Saul was very wroth, and the saying displeased him; and he said, They have ascribed unto David ten thousands, and to me they have ascribed but thousands: and what can he have more but the kingdom?

9 And Saul eyed David from that day and forward.”

Keep in mind that David had just saved Israel from the Philistines. He had fought and killed Goliath – something no one else in the entire country was willing to do. As payment for this great act of heroism Saul had promised him the hand of his daughter in marriage. Did Saul keep that promise? Absolutely not! Instead of rewarding David, the *very next day* Saul tried to kill him:

1 Samuel 18:10: “And it came to pass on the morrow, that the evil spirit from God came upon Saul, and he prophesied in the midst of the house: and David played with his hand, as at other times: and there was a javelin in Saul's hand.

11 And Saul cast the javelin; for he said, I will smite David even to the wall with it. And David avoided out of his presence twice.”

After this incident Saul spent *the rest of his life* trying to kill David. We don't have the time to go over all the evil things that Saul did; it is a long list. The king forced David to run for his life, and after he was gone Saul took David's wife and gave her to someone else:

1 Samuel 25:44: “But Saul had given Michal his daughter, David's wife, to Phalti the son of Laish, which was of Gallim.”

Did the Mosaic Law really allow King Saul to take someone's wife and give her to another man? Of course not! Michal was David's wife, but Saul didn't care. He was determined to do whatever he wanted.

So David was forced into exile. He was the anointed king of Israel, but the only thing that title did for him was endanger his life. David had lost his home, his wife, and his possessions. He had to be constantly on the run because Saul was trying to kill him. It was a very bad life.

While he was hiding from the king he tried to do what was right. When the Philistines came against Keilah, Saul refused to defend them – he was too busy trying to kill David. So David defended the town and defeated the Philistines. In return, the men of Keilah decided to betray David to Saul and have him killed:

1 Samuel 23:12: “Then said David, Will the men of Keilah deliver me and my men into the hand of Saul? And the Lord said, They will deliver thee up.”

David could not find a home no matter where he went. Even when he risked his own life to save his fellow countrymen, those men immediately turned around and tried to get David killed. There was no place for him in Israel – so David abandoned Israel and fled to the country of the Philistines.

Amazingly, he was able to find refuge there. Israel would not let David live within her borders, and Israel's king was determined to murder this innocent man. However, a foreign country – the very country that David had fought in battle repeatedly – was willing to give him a place to live. David had

now lost his country on top of everything else, but at least he had a safe place to live.

David was the rightful, anointed king of Israel. That should have meant something – but in practice that promise only made David's life worse. David had lost everything and had been driven from his home, but at least David had a new place to call home. He might have lost his wife, but at least God had given him another one. Perhaps David could start over in the land of the Philistines. Perhaps there he would find peace.

Then he returned home to Ziklag and found that everything was gone.

Imagine how you would feel if you were in David's position. God had given you a magnificent promise, but instead of helping you that promise cost you everything and forced you to live in the land of your enemies. You tried to do the right thing, but your every act of goodness was rewarded with evil. You kept the law and risked your life to save your countrymen, but in return the government did its very best to murder you.

This was a devastating blow. David had now lost everything – *again*. It seems that once again God had taken everything from David and left him with nothing:

1 Samuel 30:3: “So David and his men came to the city, and, behold, it was burned with fire; and their wives, and their sons, and their daughters, were taken captives.”

It was all gone. Where was the mighty God who was supposed to watch over David? All David had seen was his enemies emerge victorious again and again! The wicked had won and David had lost. What good was being righteous? What good was following the Lord? Saul was still king over Israel, and David was still on the run. Saul had the entire nation and everything he wanted, while David had lost all he ever had – *twice* – and was utterly broken.

In response to this terrible tragedy, all the men could do was weep:

1 Samuel 30:4: “Then David and the people that were with him lifted up their voice and wept, until they had no more power to weep.”

David's followers were extremely upset. In fact, they were so upset over the loss of everything that they had ever loved and cared for that they wanted to kill David:

1 Samuel 30:6: “And David was greatly distressed; for the people spake of stoning him, because the soul of all the people was grieved, every man for his sons and for his daughters...”

Even the few allies that David had were now talking about murdering him. David had nothing left – no friends, no family, nothing. The whole world was against him. Where was God in David's hour of need?

It would have been very easy for David to have walked away from God at this point. It would have been easy for him to have lost faith and decided that God's promises were worthless. After all, up to this point in his life David had not seen a single one of God's promises come true. His life had only gotten progressively worse.

There are many people who have gone through times of tremendous suffering in their life. There are those who have suffered enormous hardships – people who have lost sons and daughters, and who have lost wives and beloved family members. There are times when all of life just comes crashing down and it seems that there isn't anything left. Even though we have faithfully served God and done

what is right, God has still taken everything we ever cared about. All we have to show for our lives of righteousness is pain and suffering and loss.

When this happens, some people choose to abandon God. Since God allowed that loved one to die instead of recover, God must not really exist – or if He exists then He is evil. When the great test of faith comes, some people turn against God. They decide that since God has not lived up to their expectations and done what they wanted Him to do, they are going to reject Him and go in a different direction.

The truth is God cares a great deal about our faith, and God is going to test it. The Lord wants us to see if our faith has any value to it at all. He wants us to know if we will trust Him no matter what, or if we will only trust Him as long as God does what we want Him to do:

1 Peter 1:6: “Wherein ye greatly rejoice, though now for a season, if need be, ye are in heaviness through manifold temptations:
7 That the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ:”

If we only trust God when things are going the way we want them to, then we don't really trust God at all. After all, the word “trust” has no meaning if we are happy with our life and God is only doing things that we enjoy and understand! The only time we need to actually trust someone is when something happens that we *don't* understand. Are we willing to trust God even when all of life goes against us? Are we willing to trust God when He takes from us the things that we love most, and leaves us with nothing? Are we willing to trust God even when it seems that all of life is against us and we have nothing left? Those are the moment when we find out if our faith is real.

Not all faith is real. God deliberately tests us – not so that *He* can discover the truth about our faith, but so that *we* can know what sort of faith we have. God, after all, knows all things; He already knows if our faith is just a fraud. But it is easy for us to deceive ourselves.

David was faced with an exceptionally difficult test. What would you have done if you were in his position? If God took from you your wife, and children, and all your possessions; if He took from you your country and friends; and if those who used to be your allies now sought to kill you – would you still trust God? Would you still believe in His promises? Would you still believe that God was good?

David had reached an exceptionally difficult part of his life. In his great hour of need he did something amazing. Instead of turning against the Lord, he actually *sought* the Lord:

1 Samuel 30:6b: “...but David encouraged himself in the Lord his God.”

When faced with times of great trial, there are many people who choose to turn *against* God. They reject Him and seek comfort elsewhere. David did exactly the opposite. When he lost everything and his friends were calling for his execution, David sought comfort *in the Lord*. In his hour of need David sought the Lord. This was exactly the right thing to do. David's source of strength was the Lord; he still trusted in God and he still had faith in Him. David believed that the Lord would give him the strength he needed in order to see this through to the end.

David had no idea what was going to happen. He did not know how his life would turn out or how the day would end. But he did trust the Lord, and in his hour of trial he sought the Lord. David did not know *what* to do, but he did know *who to turn to*. So he asked the Lord what to do next – and the

Lord gave him guidance:

1 Samuel 30:7: “And David said to Abiathar the priest, Ahimelech's son, I pray thee, bring me hither the ephod. And Abiathar brought thither the ephod to David.
8 And David enquired at the Lord, saying, Shall I pursue after this troop? shall I overtake them? And he answered him, Pursue: for thou shalt surely overtake them, and without fail recover all.”

David did not do whatever he thought was best; instead he stopped and asked the Lord what course of action he should take. Now, before we get too excited about this we need to put this into context. When this event took place the Bible was not yet completed. Most of the Old Testament (and all of the New Testament) had not been written. At this time the tabernacle was in operation and God had given Israel something called the Urim and the Thummim. The priests could use these mysterious objects to ask God questions and get specific answers back. Essentially, the people had the ability to send God a letter and receive a written reply. This is *completely different* from the modern practice of prayer.

We no longer have the ability to use the Urim and the Thummim to get text messages from God. The reason God has brought that system to an end is because He has given us something better – the completed Word of God:

1 Timothy 3:16: “All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness:
17 That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.”

This is one of the key verses in the Bible – and one that we need to take to heart. What part of the Bible is inspired? *All* of it. What part of the Bible is useful? *All* of it. What information does the Bible give us? Enough information to enable us to do *all* good works.

What this means is that the Scriptures have given us all the information we need in order to live a life that pleases the Lord. God does not need to tell us anything else because He has already told us *everything*. The Bible is not lacking any information that we need in order to live a life that pleases the Lord. Now, it's true that there are many additional things that we would *like* to know, but there is nothing that we *need* to know that we were not told.

In David's time the Bible had not yet been completed. He did not have access to the full revelation from God. No one did in those days – so God allowed people to ask Him questions, and He would respond with direct answers. The Lord no longer does that because He has put everything we need in His Word.

I realize it is a little disappointing that we don't have access to the Urim and Thummim anymore, but stop and think about it. If God continued to give us new divine revelation then that would mean His Word was insufficient. It would mean that we needed to know things that God left out of the Bible – which would mean that the Bible does *not* tell us everything we need in order to do all good works. But if that was true then 1 Timothy 3:16-17 would be a lie. Since we know that God does not lie, that means the Bible *is* sufficient. Therefore, when someone comes to us with something like the Book of Mormon and claims that God has given *other* revelation that we need in order to honor God, we immediately know that they are lying. We already have everything that we need!

Should Christians still pray? Absolutely! Prayer is vital. But we have to understand that when we pray God is not going to send us letters in the mail with new divine revelation. There are many

ways God watches over us and uses His providence to guide us, but God is never going to give us new revelation. There is simply no need – because God has already given us everything we need to know.

In response to David's inquiry, God told David that he should pursue the Amalekites, because if he pursued them he would recover everything that had been taken. That must have been very encouraging news to David and his men! They had suffered a great loss, but God promised that they would recover all that had been taken. But there was a problem. Some of David's men lacked the strength to go after the enemy:

1 Samuel 30:9: “So David went, he and the six hundred men that were with him, and came to the brook Besor, where those that were left behind stayed.

10 But David pursued, he and four hundred men: for two hundred abode behind, which were so faint that they could not go over the brook Besor.”

This is really not surprising. Imagine how devastated you would be if you came home and learned that you had lost everything. News like that could easily render a person completely immobile – it could sap all the strength right out of them and leave them unable to do anything at all. When a time of great crisis comes, some people are overcome by the crisis and are too weak to do anything about it. When that happens it is critical for those who are strong to care for those who are weak. Two hundred men were too weak to fight – so the rest of the men went on to fight on their behalf.

There may be times in our life when we are strong and can fight for others. When those times come we ought to take a stand for them and serve them in their hour of need. After all, there may come a time when we are the weak ones who need others to stand on our behalf! That is how the body of Christ ought to work – with its members taking care of one another and seeking to serve one another.

David and his men pursued the enemy, but they didn't know where the enemy was. The Lord provided for them by putting an Egyptian in their path:

1 Samuel 30:11: “And they found an Egyptian in the field, and brought him to David, and gave him bread, and he did eat; and they made him drink water;

12 And they gave him a piece of a cake of figs, and two clusters of raisins: and when he had eaten, his spirit came again to him: for he had eaten no bread, nor drunk any water, three days and three nights.

13 And David said unto him, To whom belongest thou? and whence art thou? And he said, I am a young man of Egypt, servant to an Amalekite; and my master left me, because three days ago I fell sick.

14 We made an invasion upon the south of the Cherethites, and upon the coast which belongeth to Judah, and upon the south of Caleb; and we burned Ziklag with fire.”

Notice the amazing providence of God! David and his men wanted to recover their families, but they had no idea where the enemy was hiding. The reason they found this Egyptian was because he had become sick three days ago and his master heartlessly abandoned him to die. When did he become sick? Three days ago – which is *before* David realized he had a problem. God was providentially moving to help David recover everything that had been taken *before David even prayed about it!* David had no idea he had a problem, and yet God was already working to resolve it. The illness of this Egyptian was not an accident.

Could this Egyptian show David where the Amalekites were encamped? He certainly could:

1 Samuel 30:15: “And David said to him, Canst thou bring me down to this company? And he said, Swear unto me by God, that thou wilt neither kill me, nor deliver me into the hands of my master, and I will bring thee down to this company.”

The Egyptian kept his word. He led David and his band of 400 people directly to the camp of the Amalekites. Now, an army of 400 is a very small army, but God is able to do great things through small groups. The Lord does not need a mighty force to provide mighty deliverance; in fact, it is often the case that God uses small people to do great things, for then it is clear that the victory was won by the arm of the Lord instead of the power of man. David and his men found the Amalekites – and at precisely the right time:

1 Samuel 30:16: “And when he had brought him down, behold, they were spread abroad upon all the earth, eating and drinking, and dancing, because of all the great spoil that they had taken out of the land of the Philistines, and out of the land of Judah.”

When David came upon the Amalekites they were not prepared for war. Instead of being in a defensive posture they were in the middle of a feast, and were drunk out of their minds. This made them easy targets. David and his men spent an entire day killing them, and only a few escaped:

1 Samuel 30:17: “And David smote them from the twilight even unto the evening of the next day: and there escaped not a man of them, save four hundred young men, which rode upon camels, and fled.”

This was an astounding victory. David's small force was vastly outnumbered, and yet they won. God did exactly what He said He would do: He gave them the victory. True to His word, every last thing was recovered:

1 Samuel 30:19: “And there was nothing lacking to them, neither small nor great, neither sons nor daughters, neither spoil, nor any thing that they had taken to them: David recovered all.”

God promised that everything would be recovered, and just as God had said, everything was recovered. You would think that this would be a cause of great rejoicing, and it was – but there was a problem. Four hundred men went with David to recover everything, but two hundred men were too weak to join the fight. When the battle was over and everyone was on their way home, the group of 400 tried to keep all the loot for themselves and leave the group of 200 with nothing:

1 Samuel 30:22: “Then answered all the wicked men and men of Belial, of those that went with David, and said, Because they went not with us, we will not give them ought of the spoil that we have recovered, save to every man his wife and his children, that they may lead them away, and depart.”

Keep in mind that the “spoil” that had been recovered was *the possessions of the people of Ziklag*. In other words, these wicked men wanted to keep the personal possessions of those 200 people!

They wanted to become like the Amalekites and take things from their neighbors that did not belong to them. They did not want to restore the things that had been stolen.

David refused to do that. He forced his men to give the 200 people their stuff back:

1 Samuel 30:23: “Then said David, Ye shall not do so, my brethren, with that which the Lord hath given us, who hath preserved us, and delivered the company that came against us into our hand.

24 For who will hearken unto you in this matter? but as his part is that goeth down to the battle, so shall his part be that tarrieth by the stuff: they shall part alike.

25 And it was so from that day forward, that he made it a statute and an ordinance for Israel unto this day.”

As you can see, the Lord was with David. It was true that David suffered a devastating loss, but the Lord was with him through every step of the way. The truth is that there are times when God does not prevent the hard times from coming – but when the trials of life come, God accompanies us through them. God helped David recover all that had been lost, and He put His plan in motion before David even discovered the loss in the first place. God gave David and his men a great victory and they recovered everything. This chapter may have started in loss, but it ended in victory – and the reason it ended in victory is because David never lost faith in God.

This, though, is not the end of the story. Although we are almost out of time, I'd like to point out that the chapter does not end at verse 25. After David and his men recovered everything that had been stolen, David took the opportunity to give gifts to the leaders of Judah:

1 Samuel 30:26: “And when David came to Ziklag, he sent of the spoil unto the elders of Judah, even to his friends, saying, Behold a present for you of the spoil of the enemies of the Lord;”

Why would David do this? Well, we need to remember that while David was fighting the Amalekites, Saul was busy fighting the Philistines. David won his battle against the Amalekites because the Lord was with him and gave him the victory. However, the Lord was *not* with Saul. When David inquired of the Lord he received an answer, but the Lord refused to answer Saul. So Saul did something incredibly wicked: he used witchcraft and sorcery to try to force the Lord to talk to him. The Lord did indeed talk to him (through the dead prophet Samuel) – but He had nothing good to tell that wicked man:

1 Samuel 28:16: “Then said Samuel, Wherefore then dost thou ask of me, seeing the Lord is departed from thee, and is become thine enemy?

17 And the Lord hath done to him, as he spake by me: for the Lord hath rent the kingdom out of thine hand, and given it to thy neighbour, even to David:

18 Because thou obeyedst not the voice of the Lord, nor executedst his fierce wrath upon Amalek, therefore hath the Lord done this thing unto thee this day.

19 Moreover the Lord will also deliver Israel with thee into the hand of the Philistines: and to morrow shalt thou and thy sons be with me: the Lord also shall deliver the host of Israel into the hand of the Philistines.”

Samuel told the king that the Lord had departed from Saul, that God was Saul's enemy, that

Saul was going to lose the battle the next day, and that Saul was going to be killed. That is exactly what happened. While David pursued the Amalekites, Saul fought the Philistines and lost:

1 Samuel 31:6: “So Saul died, and his three sons, and his armourbearer, and all his men, that same day together.”

By the time David returned to Ziklag with all of the loot, Saul was dead and Judah did not have a king. That is when David sent gifts to the leaders of Judah. Do you know what the leaders of Judah did in response? They made David king:

2 Samuel 2:4: “And the men of Judah came, and there they anointed David king over the house of Judah...”

In other words, David sent them all some really nice gifts, and in return they made David ruler over the country. I would say those gifts worked out really well for David.

When we read this chapter it's easy to overlook just how hard this must have been for David. We know how the rest of David's life turned out – but David didn't. David could not look into the future and see that he would become king and reign for 40 years. David had no way of knowing that on that very day his enemy Saul was going to die. David didn't know that his troubles were almost over, or that he was just days away from being made king over Judah. From where he stood it looked like he had lost everything – but this was actually the final test before God's promises came true. On the other side of this test was *victory*. From David's vantage point it looked like he had lost it all, but in reality David was very close to winning. The dawn was close at hand and the years of pain were almost over. There was just one more difficult day to get through, and then a whole new life would begin.

There was no way for David to know that, of course. God did not tell him that the trials were almost over. But God didn't have to tell David because *David trusted Him*. When times were difficult and all seemed lost, David encouraged himself in the Lord. When David was at his lowest point he went to the Lord, and that was where he found victory.

1 PETER 1:1-12

Today we are going to begin our study of the book of 1 Peter. This epistle contains a variety of instructions concerning the life and duties of a Christian – and it is very applicable to our life today. How should Christians respond to the world around them? What is the right way to handle suffering? What are the duties of elders? How should the young conduct themselves? 1 Peter answers all of these questions.

Before we dive into the actual text, though, let's take a moment to investigate the background of this letter. According to 1 Peter 1:1, this book was written by the apostle Peter. Scholars date this book to the early 60s AD – which means it was written a few years before Peter was executed by Nero in 67/68 AD. The letter was written to Christians who were scattered throughout the Roman Empire.

At the end of the book we are told that it was written from Babylon:

1 Peter 5:13a: “The church that is at Babylon, elected together with you, saluteth you;...”

There are a couple theories about this. Some people think that this verse is actually a symbolic reference to Rome, and that Peter was in Rome when he wrote this epistle. However, there are a few problems with this view. The first is that there is no evidence that anyone referred to Rome as Babylon until the book of Revelation was written. Revelation was written in the 90s AD, around 15 years after Peter died. The second problem is that 1 Peter is a very straightforward book. There is no use of symbolic language in chapter 5, or any indication that Peter is trying to be figurative here. If Peter was writing from Rome then he certainly could have said so, but he didn't.

The second possibility is that Peter really did write this letter from Babylon. In the first century Babylon still existed as a small town on the Euphrates river. The apostles traveled far and wide to spread the message of the gospel to as many people as possible. Peter may well have traveled to the city of Babylon in order to start a church there.

The letter itself is comprised of a series of exhortations. Peter earnestly desired to see Christians pursue a godly, holy life. As we just mentioned, the letter is written to other Christians who are scattered throughout the world:

1 Peter 1:1: “Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to the strangers scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia,”

The recipients of this letter may be strangers to the world – and even strangers to Peter – but they are not strangers to God. The Lord had saved them and was working in their lives to conform them to the image of Christ:

1 Peter 1:2: “Elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through sanctification of the Spirit, unto obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ: Grace unto you, and peace, be multiplied.”

There is a lot of truth packed into this verse. Let's take some time to delve into the topics that it raises.

The first thing this verse does is refer to Christians as the “elect”. This isn't something that we only find in 1 Peter; this same idea can be found throughout the Scriptures. In the book of Isaiah, Jesus is referred to as “elect”:

Isaiah 42:1: “Behold my servant, whom I uphold; mine elect, in whom my soul delighteth; I have put my spirit upon him: he shall bring forth judgment to the Gentiles.”

Later on the book of Isaiah, Israel is called the “elect”:

Isaiah 45:4: “For Jacob my servant's sake, and Israel mine elect, I have even called thee by thy name: I have surnamed thee, though thou hast not known me.”

When the book of Isaiah speaks of a future time when there will be great peace and prosperity, it refers to God's people as the “elect”:

Isaiah 65:22: “They shall not build, and another inhabit; they shall not plant, and another eat: for as the days of a tree are the days of my people, and mine elect shall long enjoy the work of their hands.”

When Jesus spoke of the coming time of great tribulation, when the whole world will experience the terrifying wrath of God, He said that the reason the tribulation would be shortened was for the sake of God's people – the “elect”:

Matthew 24:22: “And except those days should be shortened, there should no flesh be saved: but for the elect's sake those days shall be shortened.”

Jesus went on to say that the antichrist would do great miracles that would deceive the whole world, but they would not deceive His chosen people, the elect:

Matthew 24:24: “For there shall arise false Christs, and false prophets, and shall shew great signs and wonders; insomuch that, if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect.”

In the book of Romans the Bible says that God has justified His people, the elect, and their sins have been forgiven:

Romans 8:33: “Who shall lay any thing to the charge of God's elect? It is God that justifieth.”

I could go on – there are many more references – but I think I have made my point. The concept of election comes up quite a lot in the Bible. It can be found in the Old Testament and the New Testament. If you stop and think about it, election is something we are very familiar with! After all, we live in a democracy and we regularly *elect* our leaders. When we cast votes and elect a President we are *choosing* someone. It is an act of choice. When God referred to Israel as His elect, that was simply another way to say that Israel was His chosen people. God repeatedly said throughout the Old

Testament that He had chosen Israel to be a special people:

Deuteronomy 7:6: “For thou art an holy people unto the Lord thy God: the Lord thy God hath chosen thee to be a special people unto himself, above all people that are upon the face of the earth.”

God chose Israel and called them to be a holy people who were dedicated to the Lord – they were supposed to be a light to the nations. Sadly, Israel did not live up to their calling, but God did not abandon them. The Lord still loves Israel and He still has a plan to save them. Although Israel has been blinded in this age, they have not been cut off forever. God will never forget His people whom He loves.

God has not chosen just Israel, however. He has also chosen us as well. He has called us to be holy and righteous – a light to the nations. It is a great comfort and blessing to know that we are also God's people. We were once cast off from God and separated from Him, but God has made a way to bring us into His family. He has given us hope and a future, and He has transformed us into new creatures.

As 1 Peter 1:2 states, God is using His Spirit to sanctify us. Sanctification is the process through which God makes us more like His Son, Jesus Christ. When we become Christians God does not instantly transform us into sinless and perfect people. He does forgive our sins and make us into new creatures, but we still face temptations and trials. We are not yet perfect, but God wants us to be just like His Son. He wants us to hate sin, pursue holiness, and do what is right.

There are two aspects to this process of sanctification. First of all, God is the one who sanctifies us. 1 Peter tells us that the Holy Spirit is working in our lives to transform us. Since God is at work in our lives, it would be tempting to think that it is entirely His job and there is nothing for us to do. Some say “Well, I'll just sit back and relax and let God worry about it. There is no need for me to get involved.” However, this is an error! The Scriptures are full of exhortations of things that we need to be doing. For example, God tells us that we ought to be studying the Word:

2 Timothy 2:15: “Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.”

Notice that God does *not* say “Don't worry about studying or learning anything. The Holy Spirit will tell you everything you need to know.” Instead God commands us to study His Word so that we will know what it has to say. God expects us to know His word.

God also commands us to fight against the devil and resist him:

James 4:7: “Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.”

Notice that God does *not* say “Don't worry about the devil – the Holy Spirit will keep him at bay. You can just relax.” Instead we are told to put on the full armor of God so that we may withstand the temptations that come our way. We are told to fight back and resist the evil one.

As if all that were not enough, take a look at what Paul told the Corinthians:

2 Corinthians 7:1: “Having therefore these promises, dearly beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of

God.”

What did Paul command the church to do? To cast off all sin and wickedness and to pursue holiness. Notice that Paul did *not* say “Don't worry about fighting sin; God will take care of that. Just go about your lives without a care in the world and everything will be fine.” Instead he commanded us to fight the sin in our life. He commanded us to seek the things of God.

Yes, it is true that God's Holy Spirit is working within us to make us more like Christ. Without His Spirit there would be no hope at all! But it is also true that God has commanded us to get up and *work*. God has commanded us to seek Him, to fight the sin in our life, and to pursue the things that are good and right. We are not called to just “go with the flow”; we are commanded to seek the Lord with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength.

But there is still more truth packed into that second verse. Notice the key phrase “unto obedience”. Whole sermons could be preached about those two little words. You see, God did not save us so that we could go back to our sinful lives and do whatever we wanted. God did not give us a “get out of Hell free” card that allows us to sin as we please but not face any consequences. No, God saved us “unto obedience.” God saved us *from* sin! He forgave our sins and commanded us to *stop sinning*. This is something Jesus said throughout His ministry:

John 8:11: “She said, No man, Lord. And Jesus said unto her, Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more.”

The book of Hebrews contains a dire warning about people who think they can be saved without ever repenting of their sins:

Hebrews 10:26: “For if we sin wilfully after that we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remaineth no more sacrifice for sins,
27 But a certain fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation, which shall devour the adversaries.”

Sanctification is the process whereby we learn to overcome our sin. God commands all Christians everywhere to stop sinning and obey Him. As you can see, this is *absolutely vital!* There are some people today who believe that if they go to the front of the church and pray a short prayer, they can then do whatever they want for the rest of their lives. They want God to keep them from going to Hell but they completely reject the idea that God has any control over their lives. “Bring me to Heaven when I die”, they say, “but God, don't you dare tell me what to do. I will do as I please and live as I please.” That is *not* the gospel! In order to become a Christian you have to surrender your life to Christ. You have to wholly yield yourself to the Lord. Once you are a Christian, God is in complete control over you. He controls your actions. He controls the way that you think and the way you view the world. He controls how you live and the choices that you make. He even controls the things that you desire in life! He controls *all* of you He demands that you seek to obey Him in all things.

Now, no Christian can obey God perfectly. We still struggle with sin in our life. However, those who reject God and say “I refuse to obey the Lord and I am going to do whatever I want” *are not actually Christians*. The book of 1 John makes this very clear:

1 John 2:3: “And hereby we do know that we know him, if we keep his commandments.”

4 He that saith, I know him, and keepeth not his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him.”

We are not saved by our works; we are saved by the grace of God. But *genuine salvation always results in a transformed life*. If you are not seeking holiness, if you have rejected the authority of God, and if you are living as you please, then you are not a Christian. God commands all of His people to obey Him. This is *not optional*.

There is so much truth in each of the verses of this chapter. One lesson is far too short a time to cover so many verses! In order to make it through the rest of this passage we are going to have to pick up a little speed.

In verse three Peter blesses God and praises Him for the great things that He has done for His chosen people. What has he done for us? He has given us tremendous hope through the resurrection of Christ:

1 Peter 1:3: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which according to his abundant mercy hath begotten us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,”

When mankind sinned we became separated from God. We were guilty. There was absolutely nothing we could do to obtain forgiveness or pay for debt. All we had to look forward to was the eternal wrath of God that He was going to pour out upon all of the wicked – and *everyone* was wicked. There were no righteous people anywhere:

Psalm 53:3: “Every one of them is gone back: they are altogether become filthy; there is none that doeth good, no, not one.”

The best man who ever lived was still wicked in the sight of God. We had no hope at all.

But God changed all that. Now, God did not have to do anything for us. We did not deserve forgiveness; what we deserved was the wrath of God. God would have been perfectly justified if He had chosen to save no one and instead cast us all into Hell. But God didn't do that. Instead He sent His Son Jesus to this world to live a perfect life and then die a painful death on the cross. Since He was a perfect sacrifice He could suffer on our behalf. Jesus – and Jesus alone – could pay the debt that we owed. Jesus could die in our place and purchase our forgiveness with His own blood.

Because of this staggering act of love and compassion, we no longer face the wrath of God. Instead we have been forgiven. Our debt is paid! We do indeed have a lively hope, because we know what God has promised us. Just as Jesus was raised from the dead (showing that death had been defeated), so one day we will be raised from the dead as well. We are no longer facing the wrath of God. Instead we eagerly look forward to the great things that God has promised to us:

1 Peter 1:4: “To an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for you,”

The riches of this life are subject to all manner of misfortunes. They can be lost or stolen. They are here one day and gone the next. They are not reliable; they do not last. But the things that God has given to us are very different. In Heaven God has reserved for us an incorruptible inheritance. It is an inheritance that will never fade away and which will never be stolen from us. No matter what may

happen in this life we cannot lose it, for it is kept by the power of God Himself:

1 Peter 1:5: “Who are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.”

The reason Christians cannot lose their salvation is because our salvation is kept by the power of God. Who can possibly overcome God? Who can take any of us out of His hand? The answer is *no one*. God is the one who is keeping us safe, and if God is for us then who can be against us? God is never going to abandon us, or forget us, or cast us aside.

Now, it may seem to us that there are those who were once saved but who cast off their salvation and left God. But the Bible tells us that this is just an illusion. All those who have walked away from God were never actually saved in the first place:

1 John 2:19: “They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would no doubt have continued with us: but they went out, that they might be made manifest that they were not all of us.”

There are a number of people in this world who *seem* to be Christians, but in reality are not Christians at all. They are just putting on an act. They are fooling the people around them (and quite possibly themselves as well). It is the difference between fool's gold and real gold. Both of them may look quite convincing, but only one of them will pass the test.

This is why the Lord tries our faith and puts us through tests: in order to reveal if our faith is real or if it is a forgery. The disciple Judas looked very much like a real disciple for a number of years, but in the end he was shown to be a liar and a deceiver. God knew all along, and in due time God revealed Judas for who he really was. Judas was *not* a godly man who lost his salvation. At the very beginning of Jesus' ministry the Lord was quite clear that Judas was evil from the beginning:

John 6:70: “Jesus answered them, Have not I chosen you twelve, and one of you is a devil?”

Judas was *always* evil. He just hid it from everyone else for a time.

This is why the trials of our faith are so important. In fact, Peter tells us that they are actually a cause for rejoicing:

1 Peter 1:6: “Wherein ye greatly rejoice, though now for a season, if need be, ye are in heaviness through manifold temptations:

7 That the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ:”

The trial of our faith is what proves that our faith is real. It shows that we are a saint of God and not a traitor like Judas. When the difficult times come and our life becomes unbearably painful, that is when we discover what sort of people we really are. If we curse God and abandon Him then we show that our faith wasn't genuine – it was just a worthless house of cards. However, if we seek God in our hour of great trial and trust Him regardless of our circumstances, we show that our faith truly is genuine. God knew all along what sort of faith we had – but the trials reveal to *us* what sort of people

we are.

Our faith truly is much more precious than gold. Gold cannot purchase forgiveness for your sins or save you from the wrath of God. Gold cannot purchase everlasting life. Gold cannot buy you a ticket to Heaven. Only faith – genuine faith – can do those things. Without faith it is impossible to please God. Without faith it is impossible to be saved. Without faith there can be no forgiveness. Your faith is more valuable than all of your possessions. It is more valuable than your home, your job, your bank account, and even your very life. It is priceless – and it *must* be tested. It must be tried with fire. It must go through times of pain order to reveal its true character.

In Matthew 13 Jesus told the parable of the wheat and the tares. The wheat was valuable and needed to be saved, but the tares were worthless and only good for being burned. However, when the plants were young it was difficult to tell which was the wheat and which was the tares. The master of the field decided to wait and allow both the wheat and the tares to grow. As time went on and both of them matured, it became obvious which was good and which was bad. Time revealed their true nature. No wheat turned into a tare – there was no danger of that. Instead, the truth was being made known.

These trials will not last forever. We are in pain and great heaviness for a time, but that time has a limit. When the Lord Jesus Christ returns for us our time of pain and trial will forever come to an end. On that day our faith will be a cause of praise, honor, and glory. Since we know that day is coming, we can look forward to His return with eagerness and great joy:

1 Peter 1:8: “Whom having not seen, ye love; in whom, though now ye see him not, yet believing, ye rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory:
9 Receiving the end of your faith, even the salvation of your souls.”

We have never seen Christ, but we love Him. We have never walked with Him as His disciples once did, but we still serve Him and have dedicated our lives and our very being to Him. Even though we were not eyewitnesses to the crucifixion and resurrection, we still believe in who He is and what we did. Since we believe we rejoice with great joy. We have so much to rejoice about! Our sins have been forgiven and death has been conquered. We will one day live in a world without pain, without suffering, without disease, and without evil and sin:

Revelation 21:3: “And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God.
4 And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.”

God has given us salvation. We will not face the wrath of God; instead we will be given endless joy and peace! We have a great deal to look forward to. Even when the trials of our life are great and there are problems on every side, we still have much to rejoice about. We must never lose sight of that.

The plan of salvation is not something new. The Old Testament spoke about it time and time again. God told the world what He was going to do before He did it:

1 Peter 1:10: “Of which salvation the prophets have enquired and searched diligently, who prophesied of the grace that should come unto you:”

This is a reflection of God's great love and care for us. He did not want us to fall into despair, thinking that there would never be any salvation and that all hope was lost. He told the world that a Messiah was coming. He told His people that there was reason to hope, for God had taken pity on mankind. Long before Jesus was born in Bethlehem the Lord revealed what was going to take place. God does not want His people to be in the dark or to be lost and in despair. He wants us to know what He is doing:

Amos 3:7: “Surely the Lord God will do nothing, but he revealeth his secret unto his servants the prophets.”

Jesus expanded upon this very topic to His disciples:

John 15:15: “Henceforth I call you not servants; for the servant knoweth not what his lord doeth: but I have called you friends; for all things that I have heard of my Father I have made known unto you.”

If God wished He could have chosen to keep mankind completely in the dark. He could have kept His plans and purposes hidden – but He didn't. Instead He told us what He was going to do. He revealed His amazing plan to us. Why? Because God loves us. Notice how Jesus called us friends – friends of God. Servants are not brought into their master's confidence; they are not told his plans. God could have made us servants, but instead He chose to call us friends.

The prophets of old had a great deal to say about the coming of the Messiah:

1 Peter 1:11: “Searching what, or what manner of time the Spirit of Christ which was in them did signify, when it testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ, and the glory that should follow.”

There simply isn't time to go into the many prophecies of the Old Testament that spoke of Christ. The prophets foretold that Jesus would be a descendant of Abraham, of the tribe of Judah, of the line of David. They said He would be both God and man, born of a virgin in the city of Bethlehem. They said He would be a prophet, a priest, and a king. They said He would be rejected, sold for 30 pieces of silver, tried and condemned, suffer terrible things, and die a violent death. They said He would be buried in a rich man's tomb and would be resurrected. God gave His people an amazing picture of the person, work, and life of the Messiah hundreds of years before Jesus was born in Bethlehem! God told us the end from the beginning.

What had once been prophecy was now reality:

1 Peter 1:12: “Unto whom it was revealed, that not unto themselves, but unto us they did minister the things, which are now reported unto you by them that have preached the gospel unto you with the Holy Ghost sent down from heaven; which things the angels desire to look into.”

The people of Peter's day had heard the gospel from eyewitnesses of Christ. People of that era had actually seen the Old Testament prophecies fulfilled. The Messiah was no longer a prophecy; He truly had come and given His life for His people, and His disciples had seen Him after His resurrection. This is how Peter put it in his second epistle:

2 Peter 1:16: “For we have not followed cunningly devised fables, when we made known unto you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of his majesty.”

In the Scriptures we have firsthand, eyewitness accounts of the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. These letters were not written centuries later by people who were not involved. This letter that we are studying today was written by Peter himself. It was written by someone who knew Christ personally, who walked with Him, who talked with Him, and who saw Him after His resurrection. It was written by someone *who was actually there*. The gospel is not a clever fable or myth; it is the power of God to salvation for all who believe.

There is one last thing in verse 12. Peter tells us that the gospel is something that “the angels desire to look into”. That's a rather odd thing to say, isn't it? But it makes sense if you think about it. You see, mankind is not the only race that fell into sin. The Bible tells us that the race of angels fell as well. A third of the angels rebelled against God and tried to overthrow Him. Those angels – which included the devil – left their holy estate and became demons. After the fall there were two groups of angels: one group was holy and served the Lord, and the other group was wicked and hated God.

As we know, God put together a plan of salvation for mankind. He sent His Son to become a man and die in our place. However, God did *not* put together a plan of salvation for angels. The sacrifice of Christ was able to save men because Jesus became a man and died in the place of men. It is *not* able to save fallen angels because Jesus did not become an angel and die in the place of angels. There is no sacrifice that can save fallen angels. There is no way for them to be saved.

This means that God did something for mankind that He did not do for angels. What God did for us is unique. He gave us a special gift – and it is one that has grabbed the attention of the angels. Is it really so surprising that they would be interested in the great things that the Lord has done for us?

1 PETER 1:13-25

Today we will continue our study of the first chapter of 1 Peter. As we saw previously, this epistle is full of exhortations. Peter wants us to keep our eyes fixed on Christ and calls us to lay aside our sins and seek holiness. The culture around us may seek evil and all manner of depravity, but Christians must be different. We are commanded to be holy – and holiness is *not optional*.

It is high time for Christians to start taking life a little more seriously. It is all too easy to simply join our culture on its march to Hell. There is wickedness everywhere – in fact, it's so prevalent that it just seems normal. Some churches have stopped teaching about holiness altogether and have instead tried to find ways to fit into the culture. These churches try to be accepted by the world. That, however, is precisely the *wrong* thing to do. We can either be friends with the world or friends with God, but not both. If we are friends with the world then we are *the enemy* of God. We have to pick a side. It is time to sober up and realize what is going on:

1 Peter 1:13: “Wherefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and hope to the end for the grace that is to be brought unto you at the revelation of Jesus Christ;”

Some Christians sleepwalk their way through life. They don't really give much thought to how to honor the Lord with their lives. Sure, they might go to church, and they may even put money in the offering plate. They might volunteer now and then. But for the most part they live as they please. They do whatever they want to do, and aside from the occasional church visit they live exactly like the world. If you were to compare the life of these Christians to the life of the average lost person you really wouldn't be able to find much of a difference. These people have taken Christ and added Him to their lives. They might make time for Him occasionally so they can claim to be good Christians, but their main focus is on themselves.

But that is not how God has called us to behave. God is not interested in being a *part* of our life; He wants to be *all* of our life. He has purchased us with His own blood, and we belong to Him:

1 Corinthians 6:20: “For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's.”

Do you know what servants do? They serve their masters! They seek to do his will and work hard to please him. They actively try to advance his interests and do things that are profitable to him. They work for the good of his household. Their focus is on serving the one who is in authority over them.

That is exactly what God has commanded us to do. We must seek to do *His* will, not our own will. We must seek the things that please Him, not the things that please ourselves. We have to learn to have a wholly different outlook on life. Our goal must *not* be to live as we please and try to fit God in around the edges. Instead we should be wholly focused on serving the Lord and advancing His kingdom. We need to ask ourselves a simple question: how can we be profitable servants? God wants our lives, our actions, and our very thoughts to please Him. God wants to change the things that we do, the things that we say, and the things that we believe. He wants us to abandon our will and seek His will. He wants us to abandon our desires and seek His desires. He wants us to abandon our own way of thinking and learn to think the way that He does. He wants us to cast aside our own opinions and

instead see the world from His perspective. He wants to change us into something radically different – a holy people.

It is time for us to take a long and sober look at the way we are living. Do we realize that we are servants of the Most High God? In fact, we are to be more than just servants. We are commanded to be a living sacrifice:

Romans 12:1: “I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service.”

When an animal was given to be a burnt offering, do you know how much of the animal was put toward the sacrifice? *All* of it. The animal didn't make a small donation and then walk away. The *entire animal* was offered! It was complete dedication. That is exactly what God requires of us. He wants control over *all* of our lives. He wants us to wholly dedicate ourselves to Him. He wants all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength. He wants us to be focused on advancing His kingdom and pursuing His interests. He wants a life that is radically focused on Him. *That* is our “reasonable service” – but that is not the way that many Christians are living today.

It is time we laid aside the sins that so easily beset us:

1 Peter 1:14: “As obedient children, not fashioning yourselves according to the former lusts in your ignorance:”

What does God want us to be? *Obedient*. This is not just a recommendation; God *requires* us to obey Him. Many Christians today believe that obedience is not important. They think that since God will forgive them, they can do whatever they want and it doesn't matter. “After all, what is God going to do about it? It's not like He is going to send me to Hell or anything.” That sinful attitude comes from the devil. As we saw earlier in our study of 1 Peter, those who reject the authority of God and continue to sin willfully are not actually saved. All genuine Christians will strive to overcome the sin in their lives and pursue holiness. They will do their best to be obedient (even if they keep failing at it), because *holiness matters to them*.

Notice how clearly Peter says that when you become a Christian your life needs to *change*. You can't continue to do the wicked things you used to do. Yes, in the past you did all manner of evil. But you are in Christ now so that evil has to stop. Paul is very clear about this in his letter to the Corinthians:

1 Corinthians 6:9: “Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind,
10 Nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God.
11 And such were some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God.”

Paul tells the Corinthians that before they were saved they were guilty of all manner of evil. However, that is who they *used* to be. Now that they're saved they have put those sins behind them and seek obedience and holiness. They are new creatures in Christ. In fact, they are now *ashamed* of their

old lives. They are ashamed of all the evil things that they have done in the past, and they seek to honor God with their lives.

The problem is that many people want to go to Heaven but they don't want to stop sinning. They want eternal life but they don't want God to tell them what to do. They want salvation but they also want to keep lying, keep stealing, and keep engaging in sexual immorality. They demand the right to keep on being the same wicked person they used to be. Do you know what the Bible says about that? It says that those people *shall not inherit the kingdom of God*. Those people will never set foot in Heaven. All those who come to Jesus for salvation but who refuse to repent of their sins will *not* be saved. Repentance is required.

I realize that in this life we will never gain complete victory over sin. I realize that sin and temptation will continue to trouble us, but all genuine Christians will fight the sin in their life. Their sin grieves them and they seek holiness. Peter is quite clear that this is a requirement:

1 Peter 1:15: "But as he which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation;
16 Because it is written, Be ye holy; for I am holy."

Holiness is *not* optional. Obedience is not optional. It is true that we are not saved by our works; we are saved by grace. But genuine salvation will always result in good works. It will always result in obedience and holiness. If there is no obedience and no desire for holiness then there is no salvation either:

1 John 1:6: "If we say that we have fellowship with him, and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the truth:
7 But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin."

If we reject holiness and obedience and continue to walk in evil then *we do not know the Lord*. We might claim to know Him, but we are lying. God is holy, and those who are His disciples must be holy as well.

There are some people who imagine that being a Christian means that life has no consequences. You can do as you please and live as you please, and in the end it won't make any difference. After all, God will forgive you, and when you die you're going to go to Heaven. What difference does it make? If you spend your whole Christian life doing absolutely nothing for God then it's not going to matter.

That is precisely the attitude that Peter addresses. He reminds people that the Lord will hold them accountable:

1 Peter 1:17: "And if ye call on the Father, who without respect of persons judgeth according to every man's work, pass the time of your sojourning here in fear:"

Peter tells us that God will hold us accountable for the way we have lived our lives. We will stand before God and be judged for the things we have done. Even though we are Christians and have been forgiven, God will still judge our works. In fact, this judgment is so significant that Peter tells us to literally *be afraid*. We ought to fear God because He is going to judge us impartially. There will be no respect of persons in that judgment.

Every one of us will be required to stand before the judgment seat of Christ:

2 Corinthians 5:10: “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad.”

We are the servants of God, and God will hold His servants accountable for the way they have lived their lives. Peter tells us that this should actually fill us with *fear*. There is a judgment coming and we are *not* exempt from it. There is a day approaching when God will examine the way we have spent our life and will judge us for what we have done. Have we been faithful servants or have we been wicked? Did we use our time wisely or poorly? Did we advance God's kingdom or did we seek our own?

What will God have to say to us when that day comes? Will He call us good and faithful servants, or will He have a very different message for us? Yes, it's true that our sins have been forgiven, but *we will still be held accountable*. Our actions matter and there are real consequences.

If we are doing good then we should continue to do good and not lose heart:

Galatians 6:9: “And let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not.”

However, if we are doing evil then we need to change our life. We need to pursue holiness. Since we are still alive there is time to change. There is time to seek after the Lord and live a life that pleases Him. We can still be profitable servants.

Peter commands us to remember the enormous price that Christ paid in order to purchase our salvation:

1 Peter 1:18: “Forasmuch as ye know that ye were not redeemed with corruptible things, as silver and gold, from your vain conversation received by tradition from your fathers;

19 But with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot:”

Sin is *not* a game. It is not something that doesn't really matter. The world may not take sin very seriously; in fact, the culture may laugh at the very concept. But God takes sin *extremely* seriously. Sin is so evil that it results in death. It is so wicked that all those whose sins are not forgiven will face the wrath of God for all of eternity:

Matthew 25:46: “And these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal.”

There are some people who claim that the wrath of God is not everlasting. They say that God will punish people for a time but will eventually let everyone into Heaven. That, however, is *not* what Jesus said. Jesus said that there are two things that will last for all of eternity: the everlasting life of the saints, and the everlasting punishment of the wicked. Sin is so bad – so terrible – that it has to be punished *forever*. That is how serious it really is.

The Puritans had a saying about this:

Let me never forget that I have an eternal duty to love, honor, and obey thee,
that thou art infinitely worthy of such;
that if I fail to glorify thee I am guilty of infinite evil that merits infinite punishment,
for sin is the violation of an infinite obligation.

God sees sin for what it truly is, and He paid a very high price to deliver us from sin. We were not bought with silver and gold; instead our salvation was purchased by the blood of Christ. He shed His own blood so that we might be forgiven. He was tortured to death so that we might be saved from the wrath of God. He offered Himself as a living sacrifice. God paid a high price to save us from sin. We *cannot* continue to walk in sin as we once did. We must repent and seek the things of God.

In the next verse Peter gives us an amazing truth. God planned our salvation from the very beginning:

1 Peter 1:20: “Who verily was foreordained before the foundation of the world, but was manifest in these last times for you,”

Here we get into some very deep waters. What Peter is saying is that the sin of Adam and Eve did not catch God by surprise. Before God created the world He knew what was going to happen. He knew that the Fall would take place and that man would choose sin over God. He knew that in order to be saved Christ would have to take on the form of a man and die in our place. He knew how things would turn out and He knew what the price of our salvation would be. God knew all of these things before He created the world – and so before God created the world He decided to save us:

2 Timothy 1:9: “Who hath saved us, and called us with an holy calling, not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began,”

Titus 1:2: “In hope of eternal life, which God, that cannot lie, promised before the world began,”

God knew our need *before we even had a need*, and He moved to save us *before we even needed saving*. God had the plan of salvation in place before the race of men even existed.

But this raises a question, doesn't it? Since God saw what was going to happen and knew that mankind would fall into sin, why did He create mankind in the first place? Why not create a different race that would not fall into sin? For that matter, why did God create anything? Look at how much Christ had to suffer on the cross in order to save us! Why would God do that?

Some claim that it is because we were worth it. They say that we were so valuable and so important that we deserved to be saved – but that is a blasphemous lie! The idea that wicked men are more valuable than the infinite, holy God is utterly blasphemous. We did *not* deserve to be saved. We are most certainly *not* more valuable than God. The cross is not a testimony to how great men are; it is a testimony to how much God loves us! God did not love us because we deserved it; instead He chose to love us *in spite* of the fact that we did not deserve it in the least. We were most definitely not worth saving, and yet God chose to save us anyway.

So why did God create the world? It's not because He was lonely, for God has no needs. We find the answer in Romans 9. The Lord created the world for His glory:

Romans 9:22: “What if God, willing to shew his wrath, and to make his power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction:
23 And that he might make known the riches of his glory on the vessels of mercy, which he had afore prepared unto glory,
24 Even us, whom he hath called, not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles?”

Before God created the world He had many attributes that could not be revealed. For example, it was impossible for God to demonstrate His mercy because no one had ever sinned. It was impossible for God to show His justice because no one had ever broken His commands. It was impossible for Him to demonstrate forgiveness, wrath, or compassion. God had all of those qualities but they were hidden for all of eternity.

Romans 9 tells us that God created the world in order to glorify Himself. He did it so that He might reveal who He really was. God is glorified by both the righteous and the wicked. The righteous allow God to demonstrate His forgiveness, His grace, His compassion, and His mercy. The wicked allow God to demonstrate His justice, His wrath, and His impartiality. The wicked may not want to glorify God and they may hate God, and yet God still uses them to reveal aspects of His character that were hidden until the creation of the world. God uses the righteous to bring glory to His name, and He also uses the wicked to bring glory to His name.

God does not exist to serve us; instead we exist to serve God. We were created to bring glory and honor to Him. The message of salvation is the greatest story that has ever been told:

1 Peter 1:21: “Who by him do believe in God, that raised him up from the dead, and gave him glory; that your faith and hope might be in God.”

Who raised Jesus from the dead? God did. Who gave Jesus His glorified, resurrected form and set him at the right hand of God? God did. Because of these things we have every reason to have faith and hope. After all, we believe that God can raise men from the dead *because we have seen Him do it*. Since God raised Christ from the dead, we have an excellent reason to believe that God will raise us up from the dead as well. After all, God has made us a promise and God always keeps His promises. We know what is coming because we know that God is faithful.

In our day the word “faith” is widely misunderstood. When people today say “have faith” what they usually mean is “believe in something even though there's no good reason to believe it”. They speak of “blind faith”. But that is *not* what faith means! Faith is a synonym of *trust*. God wants us to trust Him – but our trust is not blind. God has given us many reasons to trust Him. We have His Word, which testifies of Him. We have the eyewitness accounts of the apostles, who tell us of the many miracles they saw – and of the resurrection of Christ. We could spend hours studying all the ways God has given us good, solid reasons to trust in Him. Our faith in God is not blind; instead it is rooted in all the things that God has done. We are not trusting someone we do not know. In fact, our faith is extremely reasonable! We believe in God *because* of the things that He has done.

So what should be our response to all of this? Since God has done so much for us, we ought to pursue holiness and obedience. But Peter does not stop there. He has another exhortation for us:

1 Peter 1:22: “Seeing ye have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit unto unfeigned love of the brethren, see that ye love one another with a pure heart fervently:”

Peter commands us to love one another. He is not the only one to give us this command; in fact, we find it all throughout the Scripture. Jesus said the same thing:

Matthew 22:39: “And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.”

But Jesus went even further than that. He said that the world would recognize our faith by the way we love one another:

John 13:35: “By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another.”

This raises a question, doesn't it? Are our churches truly characterized by love? Is it obvious to the world that Christians love one another, or are we too busy fighting? Love is not always an easy thing to do; after all, Christians still struggle with sin and we often do things we shouldn't. It is easy to start arguments, cause problems, and create trouble. (I am not speaking here about defending the truth, which ought to be done no matter how divisive the truth may be. I am talking about the wars and fights that come from our sinful lusts and desires.) Churches divide all the time over things that should never have caused division in the first place. It is very natural – but it isn't right. God has called us to a higher standard. He has called us to choose love, even when love isn't easy.

There is one final topic that Peter raises at the end of this chapter. That topic is the Word of God:

1 Peter 1:23: “Being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever.

24 For all flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of grass. The grass withereth, and the flower thereof falleth away:

25 But the word of the Lord endureth for ever. And this is the word which by the gospel is preached unto you.”

Peter draws a sharp contrast between the glory of men and the glory of the Scriptures. Men live short lives and then die; their beauty, majesty, and glory do not last for very long. They may think that they are truly somebody, but death will come for them. They cannot endure throughout the ages. Their time is limited and their end is certain.

The Scriptures, however, are different. The Word of God is not temporary; it is eternal. It will abide forever. Throughout all the ages of time it will always exist:

Matthew 24:35: “Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away.”

The Bible is a powerful book. Not only is it eternal but it is sharp as well, able to uncover our hidden motives:

Hebrews 4:12: “For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.”

The Scriptures are able to make us wise:

2 Timothy 3:15: “And that from a child thou hast known the holy scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.”

All of the Scriptures are given by the inspiration of God, and every verse in the Bible is profitable:

2 Timothy 3:16: “All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness:

17 That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.”

As you can see, the Bible is a mighty book! Every word and verse that it contains is flawless and profitable for our instruction. The Scriptures are powerful enough to uncover our true motives, and able to make us wise unto salvation. It is an eternal book that will always be relevant and which will never pass away. It is a book that we ought to study diligently and hold in high regard.

In this book God has given us the plan of salvation. He has given us prophecies regarding things that have not yet taken place. He has told us about His Son. He has revealed His laws, His character, and His dealings in history. The Bible is the only source of specific divine revelation that exists. It contains all the truth that we need in order to be perfect and thoroughly furnished unto all good works. It is a tremendous treasure.

Yet in our day there are many who hold the Bible in low esteem. Some say that only parts of the Bible are inspired and the rest is of no value. Others disagree with the teachings of the Bible and claim that they are a reflection of their times, and things are different now. Many people can't be bothered to read the Bible at all. But God has made the truth plain: every word of God is flawless. Every word is inspired and is of tremendous value to us. The Bible is not a reflection of its times; it is instead a reflection of the person, will, and character of God. The Bible absolutely true, and God has commanded us to believe what it says and obey its commands.

1 KINGS 20

In this lesson we are going to take a look at one of the strangest stories in the Bible: there was a time when God used a wall to defeat the enemies of one of the most wicked kings of Israel. (Not one of the most righteous, but one of the most *wicked*.) The Lord did some very unexpected things and, in the process, teaches us an important lesson. Let's take a look and see if we can figure out what is going on.

This particular story takes place during the reign of Ahab, king of Israel. Ahab is one of the most vile and notorious kings in the Old Testament. Ahab introduced Israel to the worship of Baal:

1 Kings 16:30: “And Ahab the son of Omri did evil in the sight of the Lord above all that were before him.”

31 And it came to pass, as if it had been a light thing for him to walk in the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, that he took to wife Jezebel the daughter of Ethbaal king of the Zidonians, and went and served Baal, and worshipped him.

32 And he reared up an altar for Baal in the house of Baal, which he had built in Samaria.

33 And Ahab made a grove; and Ahab did more to provoke the Lord God of Israel to anger than all the kings of Israel that were before him.”

Ahab didn't stop at leading Israel into idolatry. He also hunted down and killed the prophets of God, and spent years trying to get his hands on Elijah so he could kill him as well. Ahab was the one who desired Naboth's vineyard and who took possession of it after his wife Jezebel had Naboth stoned. God was so angry with Ahab that in 1 Kings 21:21-24 He said that He was going to bring His judgment upon Ahab and his entire house. This judgment would be so complete and severe that there would be no survivors.

This is how God summed up the life of Ahab:

1 Kings 21:25: “But there was none like unto Ahab, which did sell himself to work wickedness in the sight of the Lord, whom Jezebel his wife stirred up.”

Was Ahab wicked? Absolutely. He was so incredibly wicked that he set himself apart from all the other kings of Israel. Ahab was a very evil king – and it's important to keep that in mind as we study this chapter.

There came a time in Ahab's reign when trouble came his way. God sent a three-year drought upon the entire country, but the nation did not repent. Even though Elijah confronted the false prophets of Baal at Mount Carmel and showed the Israelites that the Lord was God (in a spectacular, fiery display), nothing changed. Ahab continued in his wickedness, the people continued to serve Baal, and the idolatry remained. It should therefore come as no surprise that Ahab found himself in a lot of trouble with a ruler named Benhadad:

1 Kings 20:20: “And Benhadad the king of Syria gathered all his host together: and there were thirty and two kings with him, and horses, and chariots; and he went up and besieged Samaria, and warred against it.”

Ahab was attacked by a very powerful coalition of kings. Not only did Benhadad come against him, but he had 32 other kings at his side! Ahab did not stand a chance. He was tremendously outnumbered. Benhadad knew this and presented Ahab with his series of demands:

1 Kings 20:2: “And he sent messengers to Ahab king of Israel into the city, and said unto him, Thus saith Benhadad,
3 Thy silver and thy gold is mine; thy wives also and thy children, even the goodliest, are mine.”

What Benhadad is doing is demanding that Ahab surrender unconditionally. He wanted a legal title over everything that Ahab possessed. If Ahab agreed to this he would become Benhadad's servant and rule over Israel in Benhadad's name. Now, Ahab knew that he was outnumbered and had no hope of defeating the enormous army that was arrayed against him, so he did the only thing he could do. He surrendered:

1 Kings 20:4: “And the king of Israel answered and said, My lord, O king, according to thy saying, I am thine, and all that I have.”

Now, let's be honest: none of us are rooting for King Ahab. He was a wicked king who introduced horrific idolatry to Israel and who hunted down and murdered the prophets of God. He was definitely a villain – in fact, even among wicked kings he was notorious! To us this looks like Ahab is finally getting the justice that he so richly deserves.

In fact, the situation is about to get even worse. Benhadad was not content with just the title to Ahab's property. He actually wanted to show up at Ahab's house, *and the house of all the people*, and haul everything away:

1 Kings 20:5: “And the messengers came again, and said, Thus speaketh Benhadad, saying, Although I have sent unto thee, saying, Thou shalt deliver me thy silver, and thy gold, and thy wives, and thy children;
6 Yet I will send my servants unto thee to morrow about this time, and they shall search thine house, and the houses of thy servants; and it shall be, that whatsoever is pleasant in thine eyes, they shall put it in their hand, and take it away.”

In other words, Benhadad wanted to send his servants into Israel and loot everything they found! His servants were going to come and take away everything they wanted, no matter what it was or who it belonged to. This included both goods *and* people. Benhadad was not content with just a legal title; he wanted to take physical possession of everything – including people's wives and children.

Needless to say, Ahab was not very happy about this development. He immediately complained to his council that Benhadad was being mean and unfair:

1 Kings 20:7: “Then the king of Israel called all the elders of the land, and said, Mark, I pray you, and see how this man seeketh mischief: for he sent unto me for my wives, and for my children, and for my silver, and for my gold; and I denied him not.”

It's true that Benhadad was being awful to Ahab, but let's not forget that Ahab had done everything in his power to persecute the prophets of God and remove all opposition to Baal worship.

He was a wicked man – and if another wicked man showed up at his doorstep and took away his property, it's kind of hard to feel very sorry about it. After all, if anyone deserved this fate it would be Ahab. (Note that while the king was very upset when people tried to take *his* possessions, he somehow wasn't nearly as concerned when *he* was the one who took things that belonged to others. Somehow Ahab was only outraged when he was the victim.)

The elders of Israel agreed that Benhadad's latest demand was completely unreasonable:

1 Kings 20:8: “And all the elders and all the people said unto him, Hearken not unto him, nor consent.”

The people were not happy to hear that Benhadad wanted to take the riches of the king *and* the property of the people as well. It turns out that the Israelites did not want Benhadad to take their wives, children, and goods. Therefore, with the support of the nation, Ahab told Benhadad that he would not agree to his latest demand:

1 Kings 20:9: “Wherefore he said unto the messengers of Benhadad, Tell my lord the king, All that thou didst send for to thy servant at the first I will do: but this thing I may not do. And the messengers departed, and brought him word again.”

Ahab was willing to give Benhadad a legal title over Israel, but he was *not* willing to give him physical possession of Israel's property. That was where Ahab drew the line.

So how did Benhadad respond to this? Not very well:

1 Kings 20:10: “And Benhadad sent unto him, and said, The gods do so unto me, and more also, if the dust of Samaria shall suffice for handfuls for all the people that follow me.”

Benhadad told Ahab that not only was he going to invade Israel, but his army was so incredibly large that it outnumbered even *the dust of the ground*. Since Ahab refused to surrender unconditionally, Benhadad was going to use his army to crush Israel – and then the Syrians would take whatever they wanted.

When Ahab heard this he sent back an insult of his own:

1 Kings 20:11: “And the king of Israel answered and said, Tell him, Let not him that girdeth on his harness boast himself as he that putteth it off.”

This is basically an ancient version of the proverb “Don't count your chickens before they hatch.” How did Benhadad respond to this? Once again, cooler heads did not prevail:

1 Kings 20:12: “And it came to pass, when Ben-hadad heard this message, as he was drinking, he and the kings in the pavilions, that he said unto his servants, Set yourselves in array. And they set themselves in array against the city.”

As we are about to see, Benhadad decided to wage this war while drunk. He gave the command to go to battle while he was drinking, and when Ahab sent his force out to meet him he was still getting drunk in his pavilion:

1 Kings 20:16: “And they went out at noon. But Benhadad was drinking himself drunk in the pavilions, he and the kings, the thirty and two kings that helped him.”

Yes, Benhadad had an enormous army. Yes, he had a coalition of 32 other kings with him. But when the time came for battle they were drinking themselves drunk. In other words, they were in no condition to go anywhere or do anything. Ahab was ready for war, but Benhadad was not.

This looks like it was shaping up to be an epic disaster. On the one hand you have a wicked king who led Israel to new lows of depravity and rebellion. On the other hand you have a coalition of kings that had an enormous army but who were completely drunk. There were no winners on either side. Yet, astonishingly, this is when God intervened. He decided to save King Ahab:

1 Kings 20:13: “And, behold, there came a prophet unto Ahab king of Israel, saying, Thus saith the Lord, Hast thou seen all this great multitude? behold, I will deliver it into thine hand this day; and thou shalt know that I am the Lord.”

We don't know who this prophet is, but it probably wasn't Elijah. Believe it or not there are actually a number of prophets in the Bible who showed up and did things and yet are never named. This was a servant of the Lord – and he probably wasn't very happy about what God called him to do. After all, Ahab went out of his way to kill the prophets of God. Ahab was an *enemy* of the Lord, and yet it was this prophet's job to go to Ahab and give *good news* to him. That in itself was an incredibly dangerous thing to do, and yet that is what this unnamed prophet did.

Imagine how frustrating it must have been to bring Ahab the news he wanted to hear. Ahab, the killer of the prophets of God and the chief idolater in the nation, was going to be spared. God was not going to kill him in battle that day. Instead God was going to give him a glorious, amazing victory. In this particular battle God was going to fight against Ahab's enemies – even though Ahab didn't ask for God's help!

God did exactly what He said He was going to do. When Ahab sent his troops out into battle, Benhadad responded by sending out a party of soldiers to arrest Ahab's men:

1 Kings 20:17: “And the young men of the princes of the provinces went out first; and Benhadad sent out, and they told him, saying, There are men come out of Samaria.

18 And he said, Whether they be come out for peace, take them alive; or whether they be come out for war, take them alive.”

Benhadad was drunk and decided the best thing to do was just arrest this opposing force. He didn't send his troops out to fight; instead he essentially sent them out to engage in some police work. What happened? His men was slaughtered:

1 Kings 20:20: “And they slew every one his man; and the Syrians fled; and Israel pursued them: and Benhadad the king of Syria escaped on an horse with the horsemen.

21 And the king of Israel went out, and smote the horses and chariots, and slew the Syrians with a great slaughter.”

Benhadad did not just lose; he lost *badly*. He had to flee for his life while Israel vanquished the Syrian troops. God gave Israel a tremendous victory. Israel only had a very small army, but God used it to win the battle – and in doing so He got the glory, for it was obvious that the victory was the Lord's doing.

But why would God intervene on Ahab's behalf? After all, Ahab was an incredibly wicked king. The answer can be found later in the chapter. After Benhadad went home in defeat he decided that the real reason he lost was because the Lord was the God of the hills:

1 Kings 20:23: “And the servants of the king of Syria said unto him, Their gods are gods of the hills; therefore they were stronger than we; but let us fight against them in the plain, and surely we shall be stronger than they.”

Here we find the key to everything that is going on. If Benhadad had defeated Ahab, he would not have considered that a victory over a foolish and wicked king. No, Benhadad would have seen that as proof that *his idols were stronger than the God of Israel*. Benhadad did not see this as a clash of armies; he saw it as a clash of religions. He wasn't fighting against Israel's soldiers; he was fighting against Israel's God. That is why God intervened – to show Benhadad that He was the God of the hills *and* the God of the valleys. When Benhadad came against Israel a second time, this is what the Lord had to say about it:

1 Kings 20:28: “And there came a man of God, and spake unto the king of Israel, and said, Thus saith the Lord, Because the Syrians have said, The Lord is God of the hills, but he is not God of the valleys, therefore will I deliver all this great multitude into thine hand, and ye shall know that I am the Lord.”

God did not intervene for Ahab's benefit; He intervened for His own glory. He wanted to show the Syrians that He was Lord over all creation. God was not on Ahab's side; instead He was on His own side! God is very passionate about defending His glory. He is not willing to share His glory with another:

Isaiah 42:8: “I am the Lord: that is my name: and my glory will I not give to another, neither my praise to graven images.”

The Lord was unwilling to allow the Syrians to think that their idols were stronger and mightier than Him. He refused to allow them to believe that their false gods were greater than the Most High God, so the Lord intervened – twice! – in order to show them who the *real* God truly was. The second time Benhadad came against Israel, the Syrian's defeat was so great that he lost *a hundred thousand men*:

1 Kings 20:29: “And they pitched one over against the other seven days. And so it was, that in the seventh day the battle was joined: and the children of Israel slew of the Syrians an hundred thousand footmen in one day.”

Why did the Israelites win? Because the Syrians claimed that the Lord was the God of the hills but *not* of the valleys. But God wasn't done. When the remaining survivors fled for their lives, God actually used *a wall* to kill them:

1 Kings 20:30: “But the rest fled to Aphek, into the city; and there a wall fell upon twenty and seven thousand of the men that were left. And Benhadad fled, and came into the city, into an inner chamber.”

God was teaching the Syrians a painful lesson: He was Lord over all. It didn't matter if the Syrians fought in the hills, the valleys, or the cities; the Lord's power extended over all of creation. There was nowhere that His arm did not reach.

This was not the only time that the Lord did this. In the days of Hezekiah, King of Judah, the Assyrian king came against Jerusalem and boasted that he was more powerful than the Most High God. When the Lord heard this man say that even God Himself could not save the Jews, the Lord responded in a very graphic manner:

2 Kings 19:33: “By the way that he came, by the same shall he return, and shall not come into this city, saith the Lord.

34 For I will defend this city, to save it, for mine own sake, and for my servant David's sake.

35 And it came to pass that night, that the angel of the Lord went out, and smote in the camp of the Assyrians an hundred fourscore and five thousand: and when they arose early in the morning, behold, they were all dead corpses.”

Since this Assyrian king was convinced that he was stronger than God, the Lord sent His angel into their camp *and killed them all*. This time the Lord didn't even use an army to do it. He did it Himself.

Our God is not a God to be trifled with. There is a reason we are told to fear the Lord. The Bible says that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of both wisdom (Proverbs 9:10) and knowledge (Proverbs 1:7). We tend to think of God as a God of love, and that is absolutely true. But we need to remember that God is *not* a big fuzzy ball of love. God is also a God of justice and a God of wrath. God wiped out the entire old world because of the wickedness of man. He destroyed the world with water, and He said that the day is coming when He will destroy the world again, but this time with fire (2 Peter 3:10-12).

God is a serious God and He means business. We tend to think that in the Old Testament God was full of wrath and in the New Testament God was full of love, but some of the most frightening verses in the entire Bible – verses of judgment and death and everlasting vengeance – are found in the New Testament. For example, take this verse from the book of Revelation:

Revelation 9:6: “And in those days shall men seek death, and shall not find it; and shall desire to die, and death shall flee from them.”

During one of God's judgments in the Tribulation period, things will become so bad that people will desperately seek death – but *God will not allow them to die*. Instead the Lord will force them to stay alive so that He can torment them with unbearable pain. Why is God doing this? Because He sent His servants over all the world to preach the gospel, but instead of listening to His servants and repenting the world put His servants to death. Since mankind refused the mercy of God, they will be forced to face God's wrath.

The truth is that God does not change. The Assyrians mocked God and His power, so He killed

their entire army. Ananias and Sapphira lied to the Holy Spirit, so God struck them both dead. God offers mercy and forgiveness, but if that offer is rejected there is nothing left but wrath and judgment.

In this chapter God did not act in order to save King Ahab; instead He acted to defend His glory. When we trifle with God – when we mock Him, and take His name in vain, and slander Him, and lie to Him – we are taking our life in our hands. Entire nations have fallen because of this; the Syrians are just one example.

God requires that each of us give Him the glory and respect that He is due. This brings up a question: do we actually do that? Do we care about God's glory? I can tell you this: *God cares*. He cares about it *tremendously*. Do not make the mistake of taking God lightly.

It's true that the world is filled with people who mock God. The Lord is often patient and withholds His wrath to give people a chance to repent. But the Lord's patience does not last forever.

Incidentally, this story does not have a happy ending for King Ahab. God wanted Ahab to kill Benhadad and put an end to the wickedness of the Syrians, but Ahab didn't do that. Instead he made peace with Benhadad and sent him home. God told Ahab that because of his disobedience, his fate was sealed: God would kill him in Benhadad's place. Although Ahab did not die immediately, the Lord did indeed lure Ahab into battle and kill him.

In the end Benhadad lost his army, Ahab lost his life, and God was glorified. That is how the story always ends. In modern times wickedness is everywhere – but the Lord is coming. When He returns He will pour out His wrath upon this wicked world, and when that day comes you do *not* want to be on the side of wickedness. Give God the glory He is due today, while there is still time. The wrath of man may be great, but the wrath of God is infinitely greater. When the story is over and God brings this world to its end, wickedness will be crushed and the Lord will be glorified. Men may scoff and rage for a time, but the Lord always wins.

PSALM 78

The book of Psalms is the longest book in the Bible by a wide margin. It has 150 psalms that cover a wide variety of topics. Half of these psalms were written by David, while the rest were written by a collection of other people. Besides David, the person who wrote the most psalms was a man named Asaph, who has 12 psalms attributed to him.

The Bible tells us that Asaph was a Levite who worked in the administration of King David. Not only was he a singer, but 2 Chronicles 29:30 tells us that he was also a prophet. This means we should not be surprised if we find prophetic content in his writings.

The psalm that we are studying today, Psalm 78, was written by Asaph. Now, when we think of the psalms we usually think of hymns of praise, or perhaps hymns that cry out to God for help and salvation in times of trouble. This psalm isn't either of those things – instead it is actually a history lesson. I realize that people don't usually think about history when it comes to the psalms, but in reality the psalms actually contains many different types of literature. In Psalm 78 Asaph gives us an overview of Israel's history from the time of the Exodus from Egypt until the reign of King David. The reason he does this is because he has a very important message that he wants to teach to the children of Israel.

I mean this literally: Asaph specifically wanted to teach the *children*. He wanted the next generation to know the great things that God had done for Israel:

Psalm 78:4: “We will not hide them from their children, shewing to the generation to come the praises of the Lord, and his strength, and his wonderful works that he hath done.”

You see, Asaph already knew what the Lord had done. His generation was familiar with the Lord and remembered their history – but unless someone taught that history to the children, they would grow up without knowing the Lord. They would not know the great things that God had done for them and they could easily be led astray by idolatry. Asaph knew that Israel was just one generation away from leaving God. That is why he wanted to raise the next generation up in the fear and admonition of the Lord. He did not want Israel to become apostate.

If you have ever read through the Old Testament then you know that God blessed Israel in countless ways. The Lord gave them gifts that He did not give to any other nation. Not only did God deliver them from their oppressors in Egypt but He also led them to Mount Sinai, where He gave them His law:

Psalm 78:5: “For he established a testimony in Jacob, and appointed a law in Israel, which he commanded our fathers, that they should make them known to their children:”

No other nation had the Ten Commandments. No other nation had the oracles of God. No other nation heard the voice of God speak to them from the darkness that surrounded Sinai. God gave Israel tremendous gifts – and the Lord commanded the people to pass them on to their children. After all, how would their offspring ever learn these things if no one taught them?

God wanted each generation to be taught about Him so that they might keep His commandments and walk in His ways:

Psalm 78:6: “That the generation to come might know them, even the children which should be born; who should arise and declare them to their children:

7 That they might set their hope in God, and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments:”

God has not changed His position on this matter. The Lord still requires us to teach our children about the great things the Lord has done. God commands us to teach each new generation His gospel and His commands so that they might love the Lord and walk in His ways. If we do not teach them then the world around us will – and the world has no intention of telling them about God's great power and love.

Asaph wanted to do more than just tell the next generation about Israel's history. He also wanted the children to learn from the example of their ancestors, so that they would not repeat their disastrous rebellion:

Psalm 78:8: “And might not be as their fathers, a stubborn and rebellious generation; a generation that set not their heart aright, and whose spirit was not steadfast with God.

9 The children of Ephraim, being armed, and carrying bows, turned back in the day of battle.”

In a few verses Asaph will begin to recount Israel's history, but first Asaph brings up one of the most painful moments of Israel's past. You see, God delivered the Israelites from Egypt using ten incredible, miraculous plagues. When the Lord freed them from slavery the nation *should* have been grateful – but they weren't. They *should* have served the Lord and trusted Him – but they didn't. Instead they complained, and whined, and tempted God, and were rebellious at every opportunity. When God brought them through the wilderness to the border of Canaan and told them to go in and possess it, the entire nation refused. Joshua and Caleb told them that the Lord would be with them and give them victory, but not a single person believed them. Instead the nation of Israel clamored to stone Moses to death and go back to slavery in Egypt. The nation was armed and ready for battle but they refused to fight. Instead of accepting the gift that God was offering to them, they turned back. They were stubborn and rebellious, and their faithlessness cost that entire generation the promised land. Every one of them was forced to wander around in the wilderness until they died. Their children inherited the land, and they lost it because they refused to trust in God. Asaph wanted the next generation to learn from this and not repeat the same mistake.

It's remarkable what short memories that generation had. The Lord did incredible things in the land of Egypt, but the Israelites forgot them immediately:

Psalm 78:10: “They kept not the covenant of God, and refused to walk in his law;

11 And forgot his works, and his wonders that he had shewed them.

12 Marvellous things did he in the sight of their fathers, in the land of Egypt, in the field of Zoan.”

No one alive today has ever seen God do anything like what He did in the land of Egypt. In a short span of time the Lord devastated that country by sending ten remarkable plagues that showed His divine power. If we skip ahead a few verses we will see that Asaph recounts the astonishing miracles

that God did in Egypt:

Psalm 78:44: “And had turned their rivers into blood; and their floods, that they could not drink.

45 He sent divers sorts of flies among them, which devoured them; and frogs, which destroyed them.

46 He gave also their increase unto the caterpillar, and their labour unto the locust.

47 He destroyed their vines with hail, and their sycamore trees with frost.

48 He gave up their cattle also to the hail, and their flocks to hot thunderbolts.

49 He cast upon them the fierceness of his anger, wrath, and indignation, and trouble, by sending evil angels among them.

50 He made a way to his anger; he spared not their soul from death, but gave their life over to the pestilence;

51 And smote all the firstborn in Egypt; the chief of their strength in the tabernacles of Ham:”

God turned all of the water in Egypt into blood – from the river Nile itself to the water in jars in houses. God brought a plague of frogs upon the land, and a plague of lice, and a plague of flies. The Lord killed all the cattle in Egypt. The Lord sent boils upon man and beast. He sent deadly hail mingled with fire. He sent a plague of locusts. He plunged the entire land of Egypt into supernatural darkness for three full days – and He killed all of the firstborn throughout the land, save for those who were protected by the blood.

That generation saw all of these astonishing miracles things firsthand. They were eyewitnesses to a demonstration of God's power that was greater than anything that had ever been seen in the history of the world. Yet, in spite of all that – in spite of seeing the tremendous wonders that God had done – they still refused to have faith in Him. They refused to trust Him. They refused to serve Him. They saw these mighty miracles but they refused to have faith. It didn't matter what miraculous things God did. They were never going to serve Him no matter what.

The miracles didn't stop after they left Egypt. This generation was treated to a display of God's power that was just staggering. In the Church Age we simply don't see anything remotely like this. We have to live by faith – but these people saw the power of God firsthand, over and over and over again. When Pharaoh chased them God literally parted the sea so that they could walk across on dry land:

Psalm 78:13: “He divided the sea, and caused them to pass through; and he made the waters to stand as an heap.”

God made the waters stand up as a heap so that His children could be saved from the Egyptians. God then drowned the Egyptian army that was chasing them *in those very same waters*. After a display like that you would think that Israel would have tremendous confidence in God and would believe that God could give them the victory over any enemy – but that's not what happened! Even though the Israelites saw God kill the *entire Egyptian army* without any of them having to lift a finger to fight, they still refused to believe that God would be with them in the battles in Canaan. They saw God's power but they refused to believe.

But God didn't stop there. None of us have ever seen God; we believe in a God that we have never seen, and we have faith in someone we have never met. But that wasn't the case for this generation. God led the Israelites through the wilderness with a pillar of cloud by day, and a pillar of

fire by night:

Psalm 78:14: “In the daytime also he led them with a cloud, and all the night with a light of fire.”

They could literally *see God leading them* through these miraculous manifestations and they still refused to believe. If anyone doubted they could have just looked at the pillar of miraculous fire that was *right there*, but it didn't make a difference. No miracle, however great, would ever make them believe.

But God didn't stop there. Even though Israel was in the wilderness He gave them water out of solid rocks:

Psalm 78:15: “He clave the rocks in the wilderness, and gave them drink as out of the great depths.

16 He brought streams also out of the rock, and caused waters to run down like rivers.”

When His people were thirsty He gave them water from a *rock*, and yet the nation still refused to trust Him. They literally did not care that God was miraculously keeping them alive in a land that had neither food nor water. Even that wasn't enough to get them to trust in God.

How did the people respond to all of these miracles? Why, by sinning against Him:

Psalm 78:17: “And they sinned yet more against him by provoking the most High in the wilderness.”

The Israelites decided it wasn't enough to get water from rocks and food from Heaven. They demanded more – arrogantly acting as if God was their butler and they had every right to push the Most High around:

Psalm 78:18: “And they tempted God in their heart by asking meat for their lust.

19 Yea, they spake against God; they said, Can God furnish a table in the wilderness?

20 Behold, he smote the rock, that the waters gushed out, and the streams overflowed; can he give bread also? can he provide flesh for his people?”

God was giving them *food from Heaven* and yet they still spoke against God. They were like a bully taunting someone on the playground: “Sure, you can do that, but can you do this other thing as well or are you some kind of loser?” They weren't asking in faith or being humble. They weren't grateful for *the miraculous food that was keeping them alive*. They were rebellious and wicked, and were determined to attack God no matter what He did for them. So God punished them:

Psalm 78:21: “Therefore the Lord heard this, and was wroth: so a fire was kindled against Jacob, and anger also came up against Israel;

22 Because they believed not in God, and trusted not in his salvation:”

The Lord was indeed angry with them. He killed them by the thousands – but they still refused to fear Him and repent. They still refused to take God seriously. He did miracles, but the people

ignored them. God poured out His wrath upon them, but the people ignored that as well. It didn't matter what God did; they weren't going to take the Lord seriously, and they *certainly* weren't going to put their faith in Him or obey Him.

Asaph points out that the Israelites were literally eating the food of angels:

Psalm 78:23: “Though he had commanded the clouds from above, and opened the doors of heaven,

24 And had rained down manna upon them to eat, and had given them of the corn of heaven.

25 Man did eat angels' food: he sent them meat to the full.”

God gave them plenty of food to eat – and the very best food, at that – and made sure that no one went hungry or starved. God miraculously provided the entire nation with food every single day, in a place where there was no food. He gave them the corn of heaven, the food of angels – and in response the Israelites only despised God even more. They didn't care that they were getting free food from Heaven. They just demanded more, like a spoiled brat. They demanded that God provide them with meat – and so He did:

Psalm 78:26: “He caused an east wind to blow in the heaven: and by his power he brought in the south wind.

27 He rained flesh also upon them as dust, and feathered fowls like as the sand of the sea:

28 And he let it fall in the midst of their camp, round about their habitations.”

God used His great power and might to provide all of the millions of Israel with meat to eat. This was miraculous meat in a wilderness where there was no food; it was meat they did not have to work to obtain. So what did the Israelites do in response to this magnificent gift? Why, they sinned even more:

Psalm 78:29: “So they did eat, and were well filled: for he gave them their own desire;

30 They were not estranged from their lust. But while their meat was yet in their mouths,

31 The wrath of God came upon them, and slew the fattest of them, and smote down the chosen men of Israel.

32 For all this they sinned still, and believed not for his wondrous works.”

The Israelites ate and were filled – and responded by continuing their sin. So God poured out His wrath upon them and killed some of them. Israel responded by *sinning even more*. Israel sinned when God blessed them and Israel sinned when God punished them. That generation was never going to follow the Lord.

Oh, they would pretend to repent – for a short while. They would do just enough to get God to stop killing them. But their heart was never in it:

Psalm 78:34: “When he slew them, then they sought him: and they returned and enquired early after God.

35 And they remembered that God was their rock, and the high God their redeemer.
36 Nevertheless they did flatter him with their mouth, and they lied unto him with their tongues.

37 For their heart was not right with him, neither were they stedfast in his covenant.”

When God punished them, what did they do? They lied to God. They flattered the Lord. They had a lot of great and flowery words to say but their heart wasn't in it. Their heart was not right with God, nor did they care about the covenant they had made with Him. They were willing to say all the right things, but their words were just lies.

God knew all of this, of course. It is impossible to deceive God. Yet the Lord still had mercy on them, in spite of their great wickedness:

Psalm 78:38: “But he, being full of compassion, forgave their iniquity, and destroyed them not: yea, many a time turned he his anger away, and did not stir up all his wrath.

39 For he remembered that they were but flesh; a wind that passeth away, and cometh not again.”

God knew they weren't sorry and yet He still had pity on them. God knew that they didn't trust in Him and yet God still drew back His hand. God could have killed them all in the wilderness; He could easily have struck them dead, but He didn't. He had mercy on them. He gave them chance after chance to repent of their sins and trust in Him. He gave them many opportunities to obey Him and put their faith in Him. He led them all the way to the promised land and urged them to go in – but they refused. That was when He condemned them to die in the wilderness and gave the promised land to their children.

These people saw firsthand the power of God, but they would not step into Canaan. This was in spite of the fact they had seen God destroy their enemies in Egypt:

Psalm 78:40: “How oft did they provoke him in the wilderness, and grieve him in the desert!

41 Yea, they turned back and tempted God, and limited the Holy One of Israel.

42 They remembered not his hand, nor the day when he delivered them from the enemy.”

It had only been a short time ago when these very same people had been delivered from the Egyptians and saw God kill the entire Egyptian army, and yet they still refused to believe that God would keep His promise and give them the land of Canaan. Since they did not have faith in God they lost the promise and it was given to another generation. That new generation inherited the land, just as God said:

Psalm 78:55: “He cast out the heathen also before them, and divided them an inheritance by line, and made the tribes of Israel to dwell in their tents.”

God had promised to give them the land of Canaan and God did exactly that. God showed Israel His mighty power and gave them all of the blessings that He promised to give them. So what did the

Israelites do in return, once they were in the land and living a bountiful and blessed life? They forgot the Lord and turned to idols:

Psalm 78:56: “Yet they tempted and provoked the most high God, and kept not his testimonies:

57 But turned back, and dealt unfaithfully like their fathers: they were turned aside like a deceitful bow.

58 For they provoked him to anger with their high places, and moved him to jealousy with their graven images.”

Israel knew how powerful and great God was and yet they *still* abandoned Him for idols. The only reason they were in the land of Canaan at all was because God had delivered them from slavery through mighty miracles and had defeated the nations that used to live in the land, and yet they still abandoned the God who saved them for useless idols that were incapable of saving anyone. They exchanged the glory and power of a God who loved them for a stone idol that could not see or hear or save.

What did God do? He punished them:

Psalm 78:59: “When God heard this, he was wroth, and greatly abhorred Israel:

60 So that he forsook the tabernacle of Shiloh, the tent which he placed among men;

61 And delivered his strength into captivity, and his glory into the enemy's hand.”

Asaph is talking about something that happened in 1 Samuel 4. This took place when Samuel was still young and Eli was the high priest. At this time Israel was given to idolatry, and Eli's two sons (Hophni and Phinehas) were wicked people who despised the offerings of the Lord and used His sacred sacrifices as an all-you-can-eat buffet. God warned Eli but Eli refused to do anything about it – and so God promised to judge the people for what they had done.

One day the Philistines invaded the land of Israel. When that happened the Israelites decided to use the Ark of the Covenant as a good-luck charm to magically win the battle for them. Eli's two sons carried the Ark into battle – but God was not with them. God was angry at their idolatry and lack of faith. God killed Eli's two sons in battle and allowed the Philistines to capture the Ark. Due to Israel's sin, God forsook the tabernacle of Shiloh (which is where the tabernacle was in those days) and allowed His Ark to be captured by the enemy. God gave the land over to the Philistines and used Israel's enemies to send wrath upon that wicked generation:

Psalm 78:62: “He gave his people over also unto the sword; and was wroth with his inheritance.

63 The fire consumed their young men; and their maidens were not given to marriage.

64 Their priests fell by the sword; and their widows made no lamentation.”

Eli and his two sons all died on that day. (Interestingly, 1 Samuel 4 tells us that the widow of Phinehas really *didn't* mourn for her husband – because on that day she died in childbirth.) But the story does not end there. In spite of everything the Israelites had done, God did not abandon His people. Instead He raised up a new king for them – one out of the tribe of Judah:

Psalm 78:67: “Moreover he refused the tabernacle of Joseph, and chose not the tribe of Ephraim:

68 But chose the tribe of Judah, the mount Zion which he loved.”

King Saul had come from the tribe of Benjamin. His great sins against God cost him and his children the kingdom, and God replaced him with someone else. When God chose a different king He selected one out of the tribe of Judah. The man that He chose was David:

Psalm 78:70: “He chose David also his servant, and took him from the sheepfolds:

71 From following the ewes great with young he brought him to feed Jacob his people, and Israel his inheritance.”

David was a shepherd – one of the lowest of the people. David was so despised that when Samuel came to visit his family his father didn't even think to include him. David was held in low esteem, and yet God used His power to raise him up and put him on the throne of Israel.

The reason Asaph is telling us all of these things is so that we would remember what God has done for us and would learn from Israel's example. Israel saw the miracles of God and refused to believe, and so they lost the promises. Their lack of faith cost them the promised land. It was given to someone else – someone who *did* believe. The same is still true today. God has done great things for us. If we believe then we will inherit the promises – promises of forgiveness and everlasting life. But if we do *not* believe – if we ignore God's miracles and live as we please – then we will lose the promises as well. Instead of a life and joy and peace we will face the endless wrath of an angry God.

Asaph does not want us to be faithless idolaters, like the generation that lost the promises. He wants us to learn from their example so that we will not share in their fate.

PSALM 23

Psalm 23 is probably one of the most well-known chapters in the entire Bible. A great deal has been said about it. This psalm can be found everywhere – on pictures, and on pillows, and in funeral homes. It is probably the only chapter of the Bible that is commonly known by heart. People know this psalm, they understand it, and they have heard it taught countless times.

This makes my job very difficult. What is there to say that hasn't already been said? If given a choice I would rather teach a psalm that is not well-known or understood. Since there are so many psalms it makes more sense to teach one that is *not* known, as opposed to one that people already know extremely well. But since this is the psalm that has been chosen for this Sunday, it is what we will be discussing.

The opening verse of Psalm 23 is very famous:

Psalm 23:1: “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.”

One fact about this verse that tends to get glossed over is that if the Lord is David's shepherd, that can only mean that David is calling himself a sheep. Given that David was the king of Israel, that is a remarkably humble statement to make! There aren't many kings who will willingly lower themselves and identify as a rather foolish and weak animal. Kings love to glorify themselves and boast about how wonderful and impressive they are. Nebuchadnezzar is a great example of this. When he looked over the city of Babylon he boasted in his own greatness:

Daniel 4:30: “The king spake, and said, Is not this great Babylon, that I have built for the house of the kingdom by the might of my power, and for the honour of my majesty?”

That is what kings do – they boast about themselves. But David does not do that. David instead calls himself a *sheep*. Now, sheep are not particularly great animals. They need a shepherd to lead them into good pastures, or else they will starve (or poison themselves by eating something they shouldn't). They need a shepherd to lead them to still waters, or else they will be swept away and drown. Sheep have no ability to protect themselves from wolves or other predators. If a bear comes to tear them to pieces they are pretty helpless. Without a shepherd to watch over them they are as good as dead.

That's a remarkable thing for David to say about himself, isn't it? David, remember, was king over a whole nation. He had vast wealth, too. Take a look for yourself at the donation that David made toward the construction of the First Temple:

1 Chronicles 22:14: “Now, behold, in my trouble I have prepared for the house of the Lord an hundred thousand talents of gold, and a thousand thousand talents of silver; and of brass and iron without weight; for it is in abundance: timber also and stone have I prepared; and thou mayest add thereto.”

How much is 100,000 talents of gold? Well, a talent is 75 pounds. This means that David donated *7.5 million pounds of gold* to the temple. At today's prices that would be worth around *\$11 billion dollars*. That would be an unbelievable donation even by modern standards! No one gives that

much money to anyone. But David freely gave a vast, staggering fortune to the temple. In order to do that, of course, he had to have that much gold in the first place.

David controlled an entire country and had armies at his disposal. Some of his soldiers were supermen. 2 Samuel 23:8-12 tells us that three of David's mighty men each single-handedly defeated an entire army, because God was with them:

2 Samuel 23:8: "These be the names of the mighty men whom David had: The Tachmonite that sat in the seat, chief among the captains; the same was Adino the Eznite: he lift up his spear against eight hundred, whom he slew at one time.

9 And after him was Eleazar the son of Dodo the Ahohite, one of the three mighty men with David, when they defied the Philistines that were there gathered together to battle, and the men of Israel were gone away:

10 He arose, and smote the Philistines until his hand was weary, and his hand clave unto the sword: and the Lord wrought a great victory that day; and the people returned after him only to spoil.

11 And after him was Shammah the son of Agee the Hararite. And the Philistines were gathered together into a troop, where was a piece of ground full of lentiles: and the people fled from the Philistines.

12 But he stood in the midst of the ground, and defended it, and slew the Philistines: and the Lord wrought a great victory."

The Lord used each of these individuals to crush *entire armies!* As you can see, David was incredibly powerful and unbelievably wealthy. He could easily have boasted in his greatness or his power, but he didn't. He could have talked about the great things he accomplished and his amazing victories over the Philistines, but he didn't do that either. Instead he did the one thing that kings never do: he called himself *a sheep*.

It is incredibly hard for a rich man to humble himself and see his need for God. After all, if you're rich then what need do you have for someone else to save you? You've got it made! You have everything you could ever want and you can make any problem just go away. The poor see their desperate need for a savior, but the rich so easily see themselves as gods. That is why Jesus said this:

Matthew 19:23: "Then said Jesus unto his disciples, Verily I say unto you, That a rich man shall hardly enter into the kingdom of heaven.

24 And again I say unto you, It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God."

A rich man's great wealth is actually an *obstacle* to salvation. It tempts him to think that he is much greater than he really is. But David never trusted in his wealth or his strength. He instead saw himself as a sheep who was in need of a shepherd.

David was right – the Lord is our shepherd. Jesus said this Himself:

John 10:11: "I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep."

Jesus is our shepherd. He is the one who makes us lie down in green pastures and who leads us to still waters. He is the one who restores our soul and who protects us from our enemies. He is the one

who makes our cup run over even in the midst of terrible times. Jesus does all of these things because *He cares for us*. He loves us. In fact, He loves us so much that He actually *died* for His sheep.

Stop and think about that for a minute! You would have to care a *lot* about sheep in order to die for them. We are talking about *sheep*, after all. There is no shortage of sheep in the world. Why would anyone ever sacrifice their own life in order to keep a few sheep from getting eaten by bears? It's not like sheep are exceptionally valuable or wise. You simply *cannot* argue that the lives of a few disposable sheep are worth more than the life of their shepherd.

Likewise, it is simply beyond question that the life of God is worth infinitely more than the life of any of His creations. God, after all, is completely holy and just and perfect. He is an eternal being who lives from everlasting and to everlasting. We, on the other hand, are *guilty*. We deserve to be condemned. We are not innocent. No one is:

Isaiah 53:6: "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all."

Since God's life is worth infinitely more than all of our lives put together, it makes sense that *we* should be the ones to die. Since God is innocent and we are guilty, it makes sense that *we* should be punished. But that is not what God did. Jesus is the good shepherd who did indeed lay down His life for His sheep. He didn't do it because we deserved it, for we did *not* deserve it. He didn't do it because we were valuable, for our value is nothing compared to the life of the eternal God. He did it because He loved us:

John 3:16: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life."

We were saved by the great love of God. While we were yet sinners Christ died for us. He took upon Himself the punishment that we deserved. Since God has punished Christ on our behalf, we may go free. All those who repent of their sins and believe on Jesus will be saved. They will not face the wrath of God; instead they will be forgiven.

That is what the good shepherd does: He gives His life for the sheep. But not all shepherds are good. Jesus warned of another type of shepherd who cared only for himself:

John 10:12: "But he that is an hireling, and not the shepherd, whose own the sheep are not, seeth the wolf coming, and leaveth the sheep, and fleeth: and the wolf catcheth them, and scattereth the sheep.

13 The hireling fleeth, because he is an hireling, and careth not for the sheep."

When the good shepherd sees trouble coming he stands his ground and defends his flock. He refuses to budge. He cares so much about the lives of his sheep that he is willing to risk his own life in order to protect them. He will stand up to tremendous danger in order to safeguard his flock. The hireling, though, is different. All the hireling cares about is his next paycheck. He's not going to take any risks on behalf of his sheep. As verse 13 says, he doesn't actually care about the sheep – he only cares about himself. He will take care of the sheep as long as it doesn't cost him anything, but if a predator comes and danger arises he is going to step back and let the sheep be destroyed.

This is still true today. There are some pastors who are good shepherds, and there are other pastors who are hirelings – and there is a vast difference between the two. The hirelings take the easy

route. They know their sheep need green pastures and still waters, but they aren't going to risk their careers to provide it. They're more interested in keeping the peace and preserving their own jobs than teaching the truth. They aren't going to make waves or do anything that might get them fired. Standing up to evil is dangerous, so it isn't done. Teaching hard truths is dangerous, so it isn't done. Leading the sheep to places they *need* to go but don't *want* to go is too risky, so it isn't done.

But Jesus did all of these things because He was the good shepherd. He taught hard truths that people did not want to hear:

John 6:60: “Many therefore of his disciples, when they had heard this, said, This is an hard saying; who can hear it?

61 When Jesus knew in himself that his disciples murmured at it, he said unto them, Doth this offend you?”

Jesus taught hard doctrines because they needed to be taught. Sheep don't always like the things that are good for them, but the good shepherd cares so much about his sheep that he gives them what they *need*, not what they want. Jesus did this even though there were consequences:

John 6:66: “From that time many of his disciples went back, and walked no more with him.”

Incidentally, isn't it amazing that John 6:66 (666) says that some people left Jesus and chose wickedness instead? That is what happens sometimes when the truth – the whole truth – is proclaimed. When Jesus taught the people things that they desperately needed to hear, they chose to reject Him and leave. But that did not stop the good shepherd. Jesus led them to green pastures and still waters; they simply refused to partake.

There are many hirelings in the world today. The world is full of people who care more about their jobs than the health of their sheep. Jesus was willing to sacrifice *His own life* for His sheep. He didn't hold back on His message in order to maximize the size of His audience; instead He fearlessly taught the whole counsel of God no matter how many people it offended. How many pastors today are willing to put their future in jeopardy in order to tell the sheep what they need to hear? How many are simply hirelings?

Jesus was the good shepherd – but He is not the only shepherd. You see, He came unto His own and His own received Him not. When the people of Israel rejected Him, Jesus told them that one day someone else would come that they *would* accept:

John 5:43: “I am come in my Father's name, and ye receive me not: if another shall come in his own name, him ye will receive.”

Jesus came to save His people from their sins – but Israel wasn't interested in that kind of a savior. They wanted a military hero who would save them from their enemies and restore the kingdom to them. The Bible tells us that one day a very different man will come and offer Israel peace. We find him in the book of Zechariah:

Zechariah 11:15: “And the Lord said unto me, Take unto thee yet the instruments of a foolish shepherd.

16 For, lo, I will raise up a shepherd in the land, which shall not visit those that be

cut off, neither shall seek the young one, nor heal that that is broken, nor feed that that standeth still: but he shall eat the flesh of the fat, and tear their claws in pieces.
17 Woe to the idol shepherd that leaveth the flock! the sword shall be upon his arm, and upon his right eye: his arm shall be clean dried up, and his right eye shall be utterly darkened.”

This is a very specific passage that is talking about a very specific person. Since Israel rejected the good shepherd, God will one day raise up an evil shepherd. Jesus cared for the poor, healed the sick, and fed the hungry – and Israel rejected Him. So God is going to send them a shepherd who will care *nothing* for the poor or the sick. Instead of feeding the hungry he will tear them to pieces. Verse 17 goes on to say that he will have a deadly wound that was healed, which brings to mind another passage of Scripture:

Revelation 13:3: “And I saw one of his heads as it were wounded to death; and his deadly wound was healed: and all the world wondered after the beast.
4 And they worshipped the dragon which gave power unto the beast: and they worshipped the beast, saying, Who is like unto the beast? who is able to make war with him?”

I think the wicked shepherd is the antichrist. You see, Israel is still looking for peace. They have been beset by war and problems since the day they became a nation again, and they desperately want to put an end to the endless war that they have been fighting. Because of this they are going to make a covenant – but this is going to be a covenant with death:

Isaiah 28:14: “Wherefore hear the word of the Lord, ye scornful men, that rule this people which is in Jerusalem.
15 Because ye have said, We have made a covenant with death, and with hell are we at agreement; when the overflowing scourge shall pass through, it shall not come unto us: for we have made lies our refuge, and under falsehood have we hid ourselves:”

This passage is clearly talking about Israel, for it speaks of those who are ruling over the people who live in Jerusalem. Israel refused to make a covenant with Jesus, but they will make one with the antichrist. This covenant is not forced upon them, for verse 15 says that they are *in agreement* with the other party of this treaty. But this covenant will not be made with someone who has their best interests at heart. It is not being made with God; instead it will be made with death. Instead of being made with Heaven it is made with Hell. It will be made on a basis of lies and falsehood. Israel is going to agree to it because they think that it will bring peace – but God will not be impressed. Their covenant with the antichrist is not going to start an era of safety and security. Instead it will begin the time of great tribulation:

Daniel 9:27: “And he shall confirm the covenant with many for one week: and in the midst of the week he shall cause the sacrifice and the oblation to cease, and for the overspreading of abominations he shall make it desolate, even until the consummation, and that determined shall be poured upon the desolate.”

The evil shepherd is going to confirm a covenant with Israel that is supposed to last for seven years. Israel thinks that this covenant will bring peace, but instead it will begin the tribulation. When this evil shepherd goes into the temple and declares himself to be God, Israel will finally realize that they had been tricked – but by then it will be too late. They will already be halfway through the tribulation, and will be facing even worse times than what had already taken place.

Israel is going to make a treaty with the devil. They will try to find peace, but God will bring them war instead:

Isaiah 28:17: “Judgment also will I lay to the line, and righteousness to the plummet: and the hail shall sweep away the refuge of lies, and the waters shall overflow the hiding place.

18 And your covenant with death shall be disannulled, and your agreement with hell shall not stand; when the overflowing scourge shall pass through, then ye shall be trodden down by it.”

Israel choose the evil shepherd over the good shepherd and it will cost them many lives. Instead of finding peace they will find destruction. Instead of escaping they will be caught.

Many churches today make a similar mistake. Although they have not signed a treaty with the devil, as Israel will one day do, they *have* chosen hirelings over true shepherds. The New Testament warns us against doing this:

2 Timothy 4:2: “Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all long suffering and doctrine.

3 For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears;

4 And they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables.”

A good shepherd teaches the truth when it is in season *and when it is out of season*. He doesn't care if the sheep *want* to hear it because he knows that they *need* to hear it. The hireling, though, only cares about his job. He is only going to teach what the sheep will accept because he knows he lives in a time when the sheep will not endure sound doctrine. Jesus was the good shepherd who always taught the truth no matter how many or how few sheep wanted it. He commands us to follow His example and reprove, rebuke, and exhort with all longsuffering. He commands us to teach all doctrine and leave nothing unsaid.

Do you remember what Psalm 23 says? Let's take another look:

Psalm 23:2: “He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.

3 He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.”

Jesus is the good shepherd who will lead us into green pastures and still waters. He will guide us in the paths of righteousness. The question is this: *is that what we actually want?* Do we want green pastures, or do we want messages that make us feel good? Do we want still waters, or would we prefer a hireling who won't upset us with truths that we don't want to hear? Do we want the paths of

righteousness, or have we rejected that and instead chosen the pleasures of sin? What is it that we *really* want?

Which shepherd do we choose – the good shepherd, who tells us things we do not want to hear and urges us to walk in a path that is not easy or comfortable, or the hireling? Would we rather make a covenant with the good shepherd who died for His sheep, or with the evil shepherd who only cares for himself? What choice are we going to make? Will we endure sound doctrine or will we reject it?

Do we want Jesus or do we want the antichrist? It is either going to be one or the other.

PSALM 138

In this lesson we find ourselves in Psalm 138. The header text above this psalm identifies it as a psalm of David. As we will see when we read through it, this is a psalm of thanksgiving.

David starts this psalm with heartfelt praise to the Lord:

Psalm 138:1: “I will praise thee with my whole heart: before the gods will I sing praise unto thee.”

Before we get into the meat of this text I'd like to take a moment to discuss the second half of this verse. What did David mean when he said that he would sing “before the gods”? After all, the Bible clearly tells us that there is only one God:

Isaiah 44:8: “Fear ye not, neither be afraid: have not I told thee from that time, and have declared it? ye are even my witnesses. Is there a God beside me? yea, there is no God; I know not any.”

Now, there are some cults that like to teach that there are many gods. Mormonism teaches that if you live a good life and join their cult you can become a god yourself. They even teach that Jesus was once a man like us who rose to godhood by making good life choices. But the Bible is extremely clear: there is only *one* God, and *there are no others*. So what is Psalm 138 telling us?

I looked up the word that is translated “gods” in verse 1. It is Strongs #430. It can actually have a wide variety of meanings. In its plural form (which is what we see here) “it refers to rulers or judges with divine connections... pagan gods... and probably angels”. This means that David is talking about people who have some position of authority. In verse 4 David speaks of kings, so perhaps he is simply saying that he will sing the praises of God in front of everyone, no matter how high or lofty their position might be.

There are a *lot* of psalms of thanksgiving in the Bible. Psalm 75:1 says “Unto thee, O God, do we give thanks”. Psalm 107:1 *and* Psalm 136:1 both tell us to “give thanks unto the Lord, for He is good”. Psalm 67:3 says “Let the people praise thee, O God”. Psalm 30:4 says “Sing unto the Lord, O ye saints of his, and give thanks at the remembrance of His holiness”. I could go on (there are so many more!) but you get the point. The psalms are *full* of hymns of praise.

David says that he would praise the Lord with his whole heart. If you stop and think about it, David really had a lot to be thankful for. In his early days he was a lowly shepherd that no one really cared about. When Samuel went to his father Jesse to anoint one of his children as Israel's next king, Jesse brought together all of his children *except* for David. That was how little his own father valued him:

1 Samuel 16:10: “Again, Jesse made seven of his sons to pass before Samuel. And Samuel said unto Jesse, The Lord hath not chosen these.

11 And Samuel said unto Jesse, Are here all thy children? And he said, There remaineth yet the youngest, and, behold, he keepeth the sheep. And Samuel said unto Jesse, Send and fetch him: for we will not sit down till he come hither.”

Don't miss the undertones in these verses. Jesse proudly showed all of his children to Samuel *except* for David. When Samuel asked if a son was missing, Jesse couldn't even be bothered to tell the prophet his name; he just said that “the youngest” wasn't there, and made a point of saying that he was a shepherd. Jesse went out of his way to boast about the seven children that he liked, while painting David in the poorest light possible.

David's own brothers didn't like him any more than his father did. One day Jesse sent David to the front line to bring some food to his brother. As soon as David showed up his brother immediately began berating him:

1 Samuel 17:28: “And Eliab his eldest brother heard when he spake unto the men; and Eliab's anger was kindled against David, and he said, Why camest thou down hither? and with whom hast thou left those few sheep in the wilderness? I know thy pride, and the naughtiness of thine heart; for thou art come down that thou mightest see the battle.

29 And David said, What have I now done? Is there not a cause?”

From verse 29 we can see that David was apparently used to being attacked when he hadn't done anything wrong. Eliab accused David of pride and wickedness, but the only wickedness on display here was from Eliab. David was the one who actually fought the giant and killed him. Eliab did absolutely nothing – except for falsely accusing an innocent man.

The hits just kept coming against David. After he killed Goliath, Saul took him into his house – and then immediately grew jealous of him and started trying to kill him. David spent years on the run for his life and Saul spent years trying to hunt him down. Whenever David stopped to help people and save their lives from those who were attacking them, the people he saved immediately turned around and betrayed David to his enemies.

But David never lost hope. Whenever he was in trouble he trusted in the Lord:

Psalm 28:7: “The Lord is my strength and my shield; my heart trusted in him, and I am helped: therefore my heart greatly rejoiceth; and with my song will I praise him.”

David never looked around at his situation and decided that it was hopeless and all was lost. He didn't sit around and accuse God of being unfair to him. Instead David trusted the Lord. When his enemies were closing in on him and trying to take his life, David looked to God for strength. When David was being attacked he looked to God for a shield. When he was cast down he trusted in the Lord.

In the end God did defeat David's enemies. Saul was killed in battle and David became the king over Israel. All of David's enemies were put to shame. The Lord delivered David in a mighty way, and David responded with hymns of thanksgiving. God had done great things for David and so David praised Him for it. David wanted to tell *everyone* – no matter how high and lofty their position might be – what God had done for him. He wanted everyone to sing God's praises.

The truth is that God has done great things for us as well. What the Lord has done for us is nothing short of astonishing:

Romans 5:6: “For when we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly.

7 For scarcely for a righteous man will one die: yet peradventure for a good man

some would even dare to die.

8 But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.”

As Paul points out, there may be some cases in history where someone would be willing to die for a person who was exceptionally good. A man might be willing to die for his friends – but he would *never* die for his enemies. But that is exactly what Jesus did for us! He didn't die for righteous men, or for good men. He died for the *ungodly*. He died to save wicked sinners who were on the road to Hell. He died to save people who *deserved* the wrath of God. He did not die for the innocent; He died for people who were unquestionably guilty. He died for *sinners*.

There was nothing compelling God to save any of us. After all, we truly were guilty. God would have been just in condemning all of us to Hell. When the angels sinned God did not launch a plan of salvation for them. God is not required to have mercy on those who have rebelled against Him. Yet God chose to love us. He is the one who made the first move:

1 John 4:19: “We love him, because he first loved us.”

If God had not chosen to love us when we were unlovable – if He had not chosen to die for wicked sinners who deserved His wrath – then all would have been lost. But that is exactly what He did: He died for the unworthy.

We definitely did not deserve it. After all, God is of infinite value and we were condemned sinners worthy of death. All of our lives put together aren't worth even a tenth of the value of God. We were not worthy of the sacrifice that He made, and yet He made it all the same. He gave His life for people who were worth infinitely less than Him, and He did it with great love and compassion. He chose to love us and die for our sins. He chose to take upon Himself the punishment that we deserved. All those who repent of their sins and believe on Jesus will have everlasting life. They will not face the wrath of God but will inherit everlasting joy and peace.

David had a lot to be thankful for – and so do we. David praised the Lord with his “whole heart” and we should do the same. After all, do you remember what the greatest commandment is? It is to love the Lord *with all our heart*:

Mark 12:29: “And Jesus answered him, The first of all the commandments is, Hear, O Israel; The Lord our God is one Lord:

30 And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment.”

We are not just to love the Lord casually, or occasionally, or from time to time. No, God wants us to love Him with *all* of our heart. The thing about love is this: when you truly love something with all of your heart, you want to tell other people how great it is. You *want* to sing its praises. When you find something that excites you it's only natural to want to share it with others. When you see something great and awesome you want to run up to the nearest person and say “Did you see that amazing thing?” It's perfectly natural to want to boast about the object of your love and sing its praises.

If we truly love the Lord with all of our heart then we will *want* to sing His praises. We will want to make sure that all the people of the world know who God is and what He has done. We will want to share this great love that we have for God. In fact, it will be impossible to keep it to ourselves!

Our love will result in more than just praise. It will also result in worship:

Psalm 138:2: “I will worship toward thy holy temple, and praise thy name for thy lovingkindness and for thy truth: for thou hast magnified thy word above all thy name.”

I'd like to pause here and point out something that's extremely significant. We know that the Lord has given Jesus a name that is above every name – that at the name of Jesus every knee would bow and every tongue would confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. There is no name that is greater than the name that Jesus has – and yet this verse tells us that God has magnified His Word *above* His name.

Do you realize how significant that is? That tells us just how much God values His Word! It indicates how much the Scriptures are worth – and how much we should treasure them. His Word is not a light thing that we can casually toss aside. It is of indescribable value! We should read it, study it, take it seriously, and obey it. It is absolute folly to magnify our own desires and thoughts above that of the Word. Our name is *not* greater than God's, nor are our thoughts greater than His. We should have tremendous respect for the Scriptures, and we must *obey* them. If we reject them and do as we please then we are actually magnifying ourselves *above* His Word – which means we are making ourselves to be greater than God. That is a serious sin.

You see, there are two different responses that men can have to the Word of God. There are some who humble themselves when they hear it. King Josiah was a great example of this. When the Scriptures were rediscovered in the temple and the king heard what they had to say, he trembled:

2 Kings 22:10: “And Shaphan the scribe shewed the king, saying, Hilkiyah the priest hath delivered me a book. And Shaphan read it before the king.

11 And it came to pass, when the king had heard the words of the book of the law, that he rent his clothes.

12 And the king commanded Hilkiyah the priest, and Ahikam the son of Shaphan, and Achbor the son of Michaiah, and Shaphan the scribe, and Asahiah a servant of the king's, saying,

13 Go ye, enquire of the Lord for me, and for the people, and for all Judah, concerning the words of this book that is found: for great is the wrath of the Lord that is kindled against us, because our fathers have not hearkened unto the words of this book, to do according unto all that which is written concerning us.”

Josiah realized immediately that the Israelites had not been keeping the Law. They had abandoned God and gone their own way, and he knew that God would not allow their sin and wickedness to continue. The Word brought great fear and trembling upon him. He immediately wanted to keep the Word and walk in its light. He knew that God would not be mocked, and he did not want the wrath of the Lord to come upon his nation.

God saw his humility and repentance, and the Lord told him that he would be spared:

2 Kings 22:18: “But to the king of Judah which sent you to enquire of the Lord, thus shall ye say to him, Thus saith the Lord God of Israel, As touching the words which thou hast heard;

19 Because thine heart was tender, and thou hast humbled thyself before the Lord, when thou heardest what I spake against this place, and against the inhabitants thereof, that they should become a desolation and a curse, and hast rent thy clothes.

and wept before me; I also have heard thee, saith the Lord.

20 Behold therefore, I will gather thee unto thy fathers, and thou shalt be gathered into thy grave in peace; and thine eyes shall not see all the evil which I will bring upon this place. And they brought the king word again.”

Because Josiah humbled himself and repented – because he feared the Lord – he was told that God would spare him. He would not face the wrath of God; instead he would die in peace. The wrath would not come during his lifetime.

The same is still true today. If we humble ourselves and repent, and if we fear the Lord and tremble at His Word, then we will not face the wrath of God. We will instead receive mercy and salvation. But those who harden themselves and reject God's Word will face a very different fate.

We can find an example of this in the life of King Jehoiakim. During his reign the tribe of Judah was engaged in all sorts of idolatry and evil. They were about to be invaded by King Nebuchadnezzar and destroyed. God sent Jeremiah to warn the king to repent, because if they repented they would be saved. But look what the king did to the Word of God:

Jeremiah 36:21: “So the king sent Jehudi to fetch the roll: and he took it out of Elishama the scribe's chamber. And Jehudi read it in the ears of the king, and in the ears of all the princes which stood beside the king.

22 Now the king sat in the winterhouse in the ninth month: and there was a fire on the hearth burning before him.

23 And it came to pass, that when Jehudi had read three or four leaves, he cut it with the penknife, and cast it into the fire that was on the hearth, until all the roll was consumed in the fire that was on the hearth.

24 Yet they were not afraid, nor rent their garments, neither the king, nor any of his servants that heard all these words.

25 Nevertheless Elnathan and Delaiah and Gemariah had made intercession to the king that he would not burn the roll: but he would not hear them.”

God commanded the king to repent because judgment was coming – and in response the king literally *burned the Word of God in the fire!* He wasn't afraid of God. He didn't repent. He cared nothing for what God had to say. He just tossed the Scriptures into the flames to be burned. It made no impression on him at all.

But God would not be mocked. Since Jehoiakim would not repent, God said He would send judgment:

Jeremiah 36:30: “Therefore thus saith the Lord of Jehoiakim king of Judah; He shall have none to sit upon the throne of David: and his dead body shall be cast out in the day to the heat, and in the night to the frost.

31 And I will punish him and his seed and his servants for their iniquity; and I will bring upon them, and upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and upon the men of Judah, all the evil that I have pronounced against them; but they hearkened not.”

God told the king that since he refused to repent, he would be killed and his dead body wouldn't even be buried. None of his descendants would ever sit on the throne of David. All of the terrible judgments that God threatened to send against the land of Judah would come – and that is exactly what

happened.

Josiah repented when he heard the Word, and he was spared. He humbled himself and God saved him. Jehoiakim, though, rejected the Word. He burned it in the fire and mocked it. As a result God cursed him and poured out wrath upon him and his nation. Those who repent and believe will be saved; those who do not repent will not be saved and will face the endless wrath of God. That is still true today. We might not take our Bibles and throw them into the flames the way that Jehoiakim did, but if we reject it and go our own way then the results are the same. Only those who humble themselves and fear God will be spared His everlasting wrath. Those who cry out to God will be saved:

Psalm 138:3: “In the day when I cried thou answeredst me, and strengthenedst me with strength in my soul.”

If you read through the psalms you will quickly see that this is what David *always* did whenever he was in trouble. David had entire armies at his disposal, but whenever he was threatened or in danger he always went to God for salvation. David never trusted in himself for salvation. It would have been easy for his power and victories to go to his head – after all, he had killed the giant Goliath. But David always believed that salvation only comes from the Lord. He always looked to God for help in his time of need, because he knew that only God could save him.

The same is still true today. The Lord is near all those who call upon Him. He is the one who watches over us. It is foolish for us to worry about what might happen. Instead of being afraid we should cry out to the Lord and trust in Him for deliverance:

Psalm 127:1: “Except the Lord build the house, they labour in vain that build it: except the Lord keep the city, the watchman waketh but in vain.
2 It is vain for you to rise up early, to sit up late, to eat the bread of sorrows: for so he giveth his beloved sleep.”

It is a foolish and vain thing to spend sleepless nights worrying about what may or may not happen. God is watching over us; He knows what is going on in our lives and He knows what we face. In fact, He knew the troubles we would encounter long before we were ever born. It is far better to trust in the Lord. We will not be saved by our sleeplessness or our worrying; it is God who will deliver us.

David always looked to God for deliverance. When the Lord delivered him, he was not content to keep it to himself. Instead he wanted to tell everyone what God had done for him. In other words, David wanted to testify:

Psalm 138:4: “All the kings of the earth shall praise thee, O Lord, when they hear the words of thy mouth.
5 Yea, they shall sing in the ways of the Lord: for great is the glory of the Lord.”

David wanted to tell everyone what God had done *so that everyone would praise the Lord*. David did not keep God's greatness and His wonders to himself. He wanted everyone to praise God – even the kings of the earth.

One of the things about kings is that they typically aren't interested in the “little people”. Kings usually spend their time with other kings, or with the great men of the world. Rich people usually spend their days hanging around other rich people. That is the way the world works. Why would a rich man care about the poor? Yet we find that God is *not* like that at all. Even though God has all power

and all authority, and even though He is infinitely greater than we can even imagine, God still cares about those who humble themselves before Him:

Psalm 138:6: “Though the Lord be high, yet hath he respect unto the lowly: but the proud he knoweth afar off.”

The Lord is *tremendously* high. It is amazing that God would give us any of His time and attention; we are less than ants in comparison to Him. Yet God *does* care about us. He loves us and watches over us and deliver us – as long as we are humble, like King Josiah was. But if we choose the route of pride and haughtiness (like King Jehoiakim) then we have a very different situation. The psalm says that God knows the proud “afar off”. In other words, God doesn't want to get anywhere near them! Those who humble themselves will find mercy and salvation; those who reject God and exalt themselves above Him will face rejection and wrath.

When David was in trouble he chose to trust in the Lord:

Psalm 138:7: “Though I walk in the midst of trouble, thou wilt revive me: thou shalt stretch forth thine hand against the wrath of mine enemies, and thy right hand shall save me.

8 The Lord will perfect that which concerneth me: thy mercy, O Lord, endureth for ever: forsake not the works of thine own hands.”

It is a wonderful blessing that the mercy of the Lord endures forever. It is fantastic that His love never changes and that He is faithful even when we are not. Where would we be if we could not cry out to the Lord in times of trouble? Where would we be if we had to depend upon our own might in order to save ourselves? Imagine for a moment if our future and eternity really *did* depend upon ourselves. Can you protect yourself from the evils of the world? Can you raise yourself from the dead? Can you grant yourself everlasting life? I think not.

The Lord is indeed worthy of all praise and honor and glory, for He has had pity upon us. He has chosen to love us and save us. He has given us mercy and grace and forgiveness – gifts we never could have earned. The Lord has done great things for us. We should tell the whole world what He has done, so that all the peoples and nations will sing His praises!

Psalm 51

In this lesson we are going to take a look at Psalm 51. Some of the psalms in the Bible provide us with no information about the identity of its author or the time period in which it was written. This particular psalm, though, is a striking exception. If you find this psalm in your Bible and look at the text right above verse 1, you will see this:

To the chief Musician, A Psalm of David, when Nathan the prophet came unto him, after he had gone in to Bath-sheba.

This tells us a great deal! Not only do we know that this psalm was written by David, but we also know the context: it was written after the prophet Nathan confronted David about the sin he had committed with Bathsheba.

Since the psalm is about repentance, we need to understand what happened before we can dive into the text. Everything started when the king of Ammon died and his son Hanun gained the throne. Since David had been friends with Hanun's father, David tried to comfort Hanun for the loss he had just suffered:

2 Samuel 10:1: "And it came to pass after this, that the king of the children of Ammon died, and Hanun his son reigned in his stead.

2 Then said David, I will shew kindness unto Hanun the son of Nahash, as his father shewed kindness unto me. And David sent to comfort him by the hand of his servants for his father. And David's servants came into the land of the children of Ammon."

David was genuinely trying to comfort the son of a man that he respected. The son, however, decided that the best way to respond to David's gesture was to be as insulting and rude as possible:

2 Samuel 10:4: "Wherefore Hanun took David's servants, and shaved off the one half of their beards, and cut off their garments in the middle, even to their buttocks, and sent them away."

Hanun went out of his way to humiliate David's servants and send them home naked. He then decided that since he had already insulted David, he might as well hire an army of mercenaries and send them to kill David:

2 Samuel 10:6: "And when the children of Ammon saw that they stank before David, the children of Ammon sent and hired the Syrians of Bethrehob and the Syrians of Zoba, twenty thousand footmen, and of king Maacah a thousand men, and of Ishtob twelve thousand men."

Things had rapidly gone from bad to worse. David tried to comfort Hanun over the loss of his father, and in return Hanun declared war on him. This war, though, did not go in Hanun's favor. The mercenaries that he hired were killed and the ones who survived refused to work for Hanun again:

2 Samuel 10:18: “And the Syrians fled before Israel; and David slew the men of seven hundred chariots of the Syrians, and forty thousand horsemen, and smote Shobach the captain of their host, who died there.

19 And when all the kings that were servants to Hadarezer saw that they were smitten before Israel, they made peace with Israel, and served them. So the Syrians feared to help the children of Ammon any more.”

At this point David had defeated Hanun's hired mercenaries but he hadn't dealt with Hanun himself yet. The battle had been won but the war was not finished. After the year was over, the armies of Israel went out to attack Hanun and defeat the Ammonites once and for all. David, however, made a critical mistake. Instead of joining his army he stayed home:

2 Samuel 11:1: “And it came to pass, after the year was expired, at the time when kings go forth to battle, that David sent Joab, and his servants with him, and all Israel; and they destroyed the children of Ammon, and besieged Rabbah. But David tarried still at Jerusalem.”

As the passage explains, this was the time of year when kings went out to battle. David had unfinished business with Hanun – but instead of dealing with it himself, he sent someone else and stayed home. David should have gone out with his armies but he didn't. David should have been the one to confront Hanun, but he wasn't. Instead of doing his job he sent other people out to fight his battles, and he stayed home.

If David had been out in the field with his soldiers, he would never have seen Bathsheba and none of the subsequent events would ever have happened. David was only tempted because he wasn't where he should have been.

Since David was at Jerusalem he saw something he should never have seen:

2 Samuel 11:2: “And it came to pass in an eveningtide, that David arose from off his bed, and walked upon the roof of the king's house: and from the roof he saw a woman washing herself; and the woman was very beautiful to look upon.”

Should David have been watching this woman bathe herself? Absolutely not! David should have immediately gone back inside. The only reason he could see her at all is because he lived in a palace, and his palace was taller than all of the surrounding buildings. Bathsheba thought that she had some privacy – but David violated it.

At this point David could have walked away, but he didn't. He made things worse. Even though he already had multiple wives, he decided that he wanted Bathsheba as well:

2 Samuel 11:3: “And David sent and enquired after the woman. And one said, Is not this Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite?”

David was told that this woman was *married*. In fact, he was married to Uriah the Hittite – one of David's famous mighty men. She was the wife of one of David's most committed and loyal soldiers. She was also the granddaughter of Ahithophel, David's trusted counselor. In other words, *she was not available*.

At this point David could still have walked away from this – but he didn't. He decided that he

didn't care that she was a married woman. He didn't care that she was the wife of one of his most loyal soldiers. He didn't care that her husband was risking his life on the battlefield in order to fight David's war. David wanted to have sex with her, and so he took her:

2 Samuel 11:4: “And David sent messengers, and took her; and she came in unto him, and he lay with her; for she was purified from her uncleanness: and she returned unto her house.”

Keep in mind that David had a *lot* of wives. Yet in spite of that he still choose to forcefully take someone else's wife. David thought that no one would ever find out what he had done, but he soon learned that she was pregnant:

2 Samuel 11:5: “And the woman conceived, and sent and told David, and said, I am with child.”

David knew he had a problem because Uriah would never believe that the child was his. After all, Uriah was currently on the battlefield fighting in Joab's army. Instead of confessing what he had done, David decided to hide his sin by making Uriah think that the child was his. He called Uriah home from the battlefield and tried to get him to go home to his wife, but Uriah was too honorable to do that. Since David couldn't trick Uriah he decided to have him murdered:

2 Samuel 11:15: “And he wrote in the letter, saying, Set ye Uriah in the forefront of the hottest battle, and retire ye from him, that he may be smitten, and die.”

As you can see, it took a lot of sins to get to this point. All of this started when David refused to go out and fight his own battles, and decided to stay at home while his soldiers were dying on the battlefield. He then decided to spy on a woman who was taking a bath, and then he had sex with her even though she was married to someone else. He then tried to deceive one of his most loyal soldiers, and when that failed he decided fix everything by murdering him. In all of these terrible sins David was successful. He killed Uriah and took Bathsheba to join his large collection of wives. No one was the wiser:

2 Samuel 11:27: “And when the mourning was past, David sent and fetched her to his house, and she became his wife, and bare him a son. But the thing that David had done displeased the Lord.”

David deceived a lot of people, but he was unable to deceive the Lord. God saw what David had done and God was *not* pleased. Since David was obviously not going to repent on his own, the Lord sent Nathan the prophet to confront the king. God was not going to allow David to get away with this. He was not going to cover up David's sin. What David had done was exceptionally evil, and God was going to confront David and punish him.

Now, usually when God's prophets confronted kings with their sin, the kings rejected it. The only king who ever repented of his sin and turned from it after being confronted by a prophet was actually David. In all other cases the prophet was rejected, or put in prison, or killed. But this time – this one time – the king listened.

Nathan first used a story to get David to understand the great evil that he had done, and then he

told the king what the Lord had to say:

2 Samuel 12:7: “And Nathan said to David, Thou art the man. Thus saith the Lord God of Israel, I anointed thee king over Israel, and I delivered thee out of the hand of Saul;

8 And I gave thee thy master's house, and thy master's wives into thy bosom, and gave thee the house of Israel and of Judah; and if that had been too little, I would moreover have given unto thee such and such things.

9 Wherefore hast thou despised the commandment of the Lord, to do evil in his sight? thou hast killed Uriah the Hittite with the sword, and hast taken his wife to be thy wife, and hast slain him with the sword of the children of Ammon.”

God had blessed David *tremendously*. David was the king over the entire nation. He had started out in life as a lowly shepherd, despised by everyone – even his entire family. Now David was an honored king with a long line of victories on the battlefield. He lived in a palace and had riches and honor and glory. He even had a wife – in fact, he had *multiple* wives. David had everything he desired, and if he wanted more God said that He would have given him more.

Yet instead of being grateful for the immense riches that he possessed, David decided to steal from someone much poorer than himself! Uriah wasn't nearly as rich as David. Uriah was not a king and did not live in a palace, but he did have a wife that he loved dearly. David should have let him keep his wife, but instead David callously murdered him and took his wife for himself. This was a horrific, wicked thing to do.

God was not going to let David go unpunished:

2 Samuel 12:10: “Now therefore the sword shall never depart from thine house; because thou hast despised me, and hast taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be thy wife.

11 Thus saith the Lord, Behold, I will raise up evil against thee out of thine own house, and I will take thy wives before thine eyes, and give them unto thy neighbour, and he shall lie with thy wives in the sight of this sun.

12 For thou didst it secretly: but I will do this thing before all Israel, and before the sun.”

Since David brought trouble into the house of Uriah, God decided to bring trouble into the house of David. God did exactly what He said He would do. God raised up Absalom, David's son, who launched a rebellion against David. Absalom raped David's wives in broad daylight, in the sight of all Israel. Since David took Uriah's wife, God took David's wives. God did to him what he had done to Uriah.

That brings us back to Psalm 51. Unlike all the other kings, David sincerely repented when God confronted him with his sin. This did not spare David from the consequences of his actions, but he did find forgiveness. Look at what David wrote:

Psalm 51:1: “Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy lovingkindness: according unto the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions.

2 Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity, and cleans me from my sin.

3 For I acknowledge my transgressions: and my sin is ever before me.”

As you can see, David confesses his sin. He doesn't hide it or pretend that it was just a mistake. He is open and honest with God. David repents of his sin and humbly asks for mercy. David doesn't demand forgiveness; instead he humbly asks for it. He appeals to the love and mercy of God.

David also wants to be cleansed from his sin. He doesn't want to obtain forgiveness just so he can go right back and do it again. David views his sin with horror and wants to be cleansed of it. He doesn't want to be a slave to sin; instead he wants to be freed from it. He wants to be a new person.

It is critical to understand that in order to obtain forgiveness *we must repent*. There can be no salvation apart from repentance. Jesus was very clear about this:

Matthew 4:17: “From that time Jesus began to preach, and to say, Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

Matthew 9:13: “But go ye and learn what that meaneth, I will have mercy, and not sacrifice: for I am not come to call the righteous, but sinner to repentance.”

Matthew 11:20: “Then began he to upbraid the cities wherein most of his mighty works were done, because they repented not.”

Jesus came to command people everywhere to *repent*. David is a great example of this. When he was confronted with his sin he acknowledged it, asked God to forgive him, and asked God to cleanse him from his sin. David no longer wanted sin to have any part in his life. He wanted to be a servant of righteousness, not a servant of sin. David abhorred what he had done and did not want to ever do it again. That is what genuine repentance looks like.

Some people like the idea of forgiveness but they don't believe in repentance. What they want is for God to give them a free pass. They believe that they can come to God without ever admitting that they have done anything truly wrong. These people have no intention of turning from any of their wicked deeds. They love their sin and have no intention of changing – and so they are not going to be forgiven.

Do you think that God would have forgiven David if the king told Nathan that he wasn't sorry and had no intention of changing his behavior? In order to be saved you have to repent of your sins! You have to declare war on your sin. Those who cling to their sin will not find forgiveness:

1 John 2:3: “And hereby we do know that we know him, if we keep his commandments.

4 He that saith, I know him, and keepeth not his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him.

5 But whoso keepeth his word, in him verily is the love of God perfected: hereby know we that we are in him.”

Those who are genuinely saved will try to keep God's commandments. This doesn't mean that they will never sin or that they will always keep them perfectly, but it *does* mean that they abhor sin and are seeking holiness. It means that they are seeking to do what is right. Those who refuse to repent, who are not sorry for what they have done, and who continue to pursue sin are not saved. The Bible is very clear about this. David only obtained forgiveness because he repented.

After David confesses his sin he says something that at first seems a little strange:

Psalm 51:4: “Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight: that thou mightest be justified when thou speakest, and be clear when thou judgest.”

David said that the only one he sinned against was God. But didn't David murder Uriah? Didn't David take Bathsheba? Why did David think that the only person he had sinned against was God when all of these other people were involved?

Well, in order to answer that question we have to step back a moment and understand what sin actually is. Why was it wrong for David to murder Uriah? Because it was a violation of God's commandment. Why was it wrong for David to take Bathsheba? Because it was a violation of God's commandment. Sin is a violation of the commandments of *God*. The laws David had broken were not Uriah's laws or Bathsheba's laws. They were God's laws.

We must also notice that David doesn't call his sin a “mistake” or an “error”, as so many people do today. No, David says that what he did was *evil*. We need to call sin what it really is and not try to make light of it.

Not only does David confess his sin, but he goes further and confesses that he is a sinner:

Psalm 51:5: “Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me.”

David isn't saying that he was the product of adultery, or that his mother was sinning when she got pregnant. What David is saying is that he inherited the sin of Adam. He was already a sinner before he was even born – from the moment of conception. You see, the truth is that there was never a moment in our lives when we were sinless and perfect. We did not become a sinner from the moment we first sinned; we were already guilty from our very first moment of life! The New Testament explains that we all inherit the guilt of Adam:

Romans 5:18: “Therefore as by the offence of one judgment came upon all men to condemnation; even so by the righteousness of one the free gift came upon all men unto justification of life.

19 For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous.”

The reason it is possible for us to be saved by one man is because we were made guilty by one man. It is the offense of *one* that caused all of us to be condemned. We were *already* condemned the moment we were conceived – and that makes it possible for Christ to save us. Since one man's actions condemned us, one man's actions can make us righteous. Our salvation depends upon us inheriting the guilt and condemnation of Adam.

David's confession is not done. He goes on to bring up another critical point:

Psalm 51:6: “Behold, thou desirest truth in the inward parts: and in the hidden part thou shalt make me to know wisdom.”

It is easy to live a lie. It's easy to make everyone around you think that you're a good person when in reality you're not. It's not that difficult to show up to church on Sunday morning and act like a

righteous child of God, when in fact your heart is very far from the Lord. Remember, Judas managed to trick everyone into thinking that he was one of Christ's most loyal disciples – but Jesus knew right from the start that he was evil. You can fool the people around you but you can't fool God.

God isn't interested in an outward display of religion. He isn't looking for people who can fake it for an hour or two on Sunday morning. What He wants is a heart that is perfect toward Him. He wants the *real thing*. He wants sincerity. Putting on a convincing outward show while staying the same wicked person you've always been is not going to save you. It is impossible to deceive God.

So how do you find righteousness? Well, you can't obtain it by your own works. You can't earn it or create it yourself. Righteousness only comes from the Lord:

Psalm 51:7: “Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean: wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.”

If the Lord forgives us then we will be forgiven indeed. If the Lord cleanses us from our sins then that settles the matter for all of eternity. However, if we try to obtain our righteousness somewhere else – through our own good deeds, for example – then we will be found guilty when we stand before God and are judged. There is only one way to be made clean, and David knew exactly what it was.

David actually felt *guilt* over his sin:

Psalm 51:8: “Make me to hear joy and gladness; that the bones which thou hast broken may rejoice.”

Another word for this is *conviction*. People who are not sorry for their sins and who feel no remorse over them are not going to even look for forgiveness. Why would God forgive you if you're not sorry, and if you think that God has no right to tell you what to do in the first place? David was *crushed* by his sin. All of the joy was gone out of his life. That is why he asked the Lord to forgive him and restore the joy that he used to have.

David doesn't put any blame on anyone else. He owns his sin and takes full responsibility for it. When David seeks forgiveness he doesn't go to a priest or to anyone else; instead he goes directly to God. Only God can forgive sins.

We can see that David wanted his sins to be forgiven. But he also wanted something else:

Psalm 51:9: “Hide thy face from my sins, and blot out all mine iniquities.
10 Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me.”

David wanted God to change his heart so that he would not return to wickedness. He didn't want to repeat what he had done. Notice that David doesn't promise to try harder or to change himself; instead he asked *God* to change him. He asked God to give him a new heart so that he no longer even had the desire to sin. He wanted to be a different person.

God granted David's request – and God will also grant that request of all who ask of Him, and who seek it with all their heart. For the rest of David's life he never again took someone else's wife or murdered anyone. He really was a changed man. His repentance was sincere and he truly did turn from his sin with all his heart.

During David's confession and repentance he asked God to not take the Holy Spirit from him:

Psalm 51:11: “Cast me not away from thy presence; and take not thy holy spirit

from me.”

During the church age it's impossible for us to lose the Holy Spirit, because He is sealed within us (2 Cor 1:22, Eph 1:13, Eph 4:30). We can grieve the Holy Spirit (which is a serious matter) but God will never take Him from us. However, in the Old Testament that was not the case. Very few people in the Old Testament were ever given the Spirit, and if they sinned they were in grave danger of losing Him. A great example of this is Samson. When he violated his Nazarite vow, God removed His Spirit from him and Samson lost his great strength:

Judged 16:20: “And she said, The Philistines be upon thee, Samson. And he awoke out of his sleep, and said, I will go out as at other times before, and shake myself. And he wist not that the Lord was departed from him.”

David knew that he was one of the few people of his day who actually had the Spirit, and he was worried that God would remove the Spirit from him because of the terrible sin he had committed. That is why he asked God to let him keep the Spirit. Since there is no indication that God did remove His Spirit from David, it seems that God granted this request.

We've seen that David confessed his sin, repented of it, and asked God for mercy. But David didn't stop there. He also promised to teach other people the ways of God so that they would turn from their sin as well:

Psalm 51:13: “Then will I teach transgressors thy ways; and sinners shall be converted unto thee.”

David doesn't just want to address the sin in *his* life; he also wants to help the people who are around him. Once David had cast the beam out of his own eye, he was in a position to help others. This is a natural consequence of repentance: when you come to hate the sin in your own life you start wanting to help other people to overcome sin as well. Sin is a horrible thing with deadly consequences; it's only natural to want to see your friends and loved ones cured of it before it's too late! How can anyone hate sin and yet be unconcerned about the affect it has in the lives of others?

As you can see, David confronted his sin very aggressively. Do you know what he did once God forgave him? He sang God's praises:

Psalm 51:14: “Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God, thou God of my salvation: and my tongue shall sing aloud of thy righteousness.
15 O Lord, open thou my lips; and my mouth shall shew forth thy praise.”

David was *grateful* – so grateful that he wanted to sing about what God had done for him! He praised the Lord for the tremendous mercy and grace that God had shown to him. We have to understand that it is very expensive for God to forgive our sins. Since God is just He cannot sweep our sins under a rug and pretend that they never happened. Sin *has* to be punished. That means the only way we can be forgiven is if God punishes an innocent person in our place. The only innocent and sinless person is Christ – and so Jesus died in our place and took upon Himself the wrath that we deserved. The fact that God is willing to forgive us at all – and willing to pay such a high personal price in order to do it – speaks volumes about the tremendous love and mercy of God. We should definitely be singing the praises of God and thanking Him for His tremendous gift of forgiveness and salvation!

We have so much to be thankful for.

David understands what forgiveness is all about. He knows that what God is looking for is a repentant heart:

Psalm 51:16: “For thou desirest not sacrifice; else would I give it: thou delightest not in burnt offering.

17 The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise.”

David knew that he couldn't just sacrifice an animal and walk away. We can't purchase forgiveness through good deeds, or giving money to the church, or helping the poor. What God requires is *repentance* – a heart that is broken over its sin and seeks to turn from it and do what is right in the sight of God. The person who does that will obtain forgiveness and everlasting life. Those who refuse to repent and who try to bribe God through gifts will not find the righteousness that they seek.

David ends this psalm with a peculiar request. Look at what David asks for:

Psalm 51:18: “Do good in thy good pleasure unto Zion: build thou the walls of Jerusalem.

19 Then shalt thou be pleased with the sacrifices of righteousness, with burnt offering and whole burnt offering: then shall they offer bullocks upon thine altar.”

At first glance this seems strange and out of place. Why would this be included in a psalm about repentance and forgiveness?

Well, let's take a step back and think about it. Today Jerusalem is surrounded by a wall that is more than two miles long, but that wall did not always exist. In David's time the city of Jerusalem was not surrounded by a wall. It wasn't protected the way it was in the days of later kings. This was a cause for concern because it meant that Jerusalem was open to attack. Remember, this entire episode with Bathsheba started when Hulan decided to attack David. A military threat against Israel began the chain of events that led to the writing of this psalm.

Do you know who built the wall around Jerusalem? It was Solomon – the son of David and Bathsheba:

1 Kings 3:1: “And Solomon made affinity with Pharaoh king of Egypt, and took Pharaoh's daughter, and brought her into the city of David, until he had made an end of building his own house, and the house of the Lord, and the wall of Jerusalem round about.”

In David's prayer of repentance he asked God to build the wall around Jerusalem – and God answered that prayer through Solomon, the son of Bathsheba. Solomon built the wall. He also built the first temple, in which burnt offerings and sacrifices were made. God did indeed build up Jerusalem and created a place in the city for the offering of sacrifices – and He did it through Solomon.

This psalm provides a very picture of what genuine repentance looks like. God is able to forgive all our sins, if we will come to Him and confess our sin and repent. If we do not – if we choose to continue to walk in our sins and refuse to separate ourselves from them – then we will not find forgiveness. Genuine repentance is a matter of the heart. The Lord will not despise a heart that is broken and contrite. God resists the proud, but He gives grace to the humble.

EXODUS 12

We all know the story of the plagues of Egypt – how the Lord brought terrible disasters upon the land that had enslaved Israel for hundreds of years until they finally let God's people go. When the last plague struck Pharaoh called Moses and Aaron and demanded that they leave:

Exodus 12:29: “And it came to pass, that at midnight the Lord smote all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh that sat on his throne unto the firstborn of the captive that was in the dungeon; and all the firstborn of cattle.

30 And Pharaoh rose up in the night, he, and all his servants, and all the Egyptians; and there was a great cry in Egypt; for there was not a house where there was not one dead.

31 And he called for Moses and Aaron by night, and said, Rise up, and get you forth from among my people, both ye and the children of Israel; and go, serve the Lord, as ye have said.

32 Also take your flocks and your herds, as ye have said, and be gone; and bless me also.”

This chapter is one of the most famous ones in the Bible. We know it well. The angel of death was going to come upon the land, and only those who had been covered by the blood of the lamb would be spared. Since the Egyptians were not prepared, their firstborn died. When death came there was a great cry throughout the land – but it was too late. After this judgment the Israelites were finally set free from their oppressors and began their journey to the promised land.

I suspect that all of you could do a good job of retelling this famous story, so rather than tell you what you already know I'm going to go in a slightly different direction. One fact that is easy to overlook is that the Old Testament is more than just a series of history lessons. The events that happened are not random; they were orchestrated by God. Paul tells us that they are examples:

1 Corinthians 10:11: “Now all these things happened unto them for examples; and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come.”

The story of the Exodus is not simply the story of how God rescued Israel from slavery in Egypt. It has a number of striking parallels to another event – the Tribulation.

Water Becomes Blood

The first plague that God sent upon Egypt was turning the water of Egypt into blood:

Exodus 7:19: “And the Lord spake unto Moses, Say unto Aaron, Take thy rod, and stretch out thine hand upon the waters of Egypt, upon their streams, upon their

rivers, and upon their ponds, and upon all their pools of water, that they may become blood; and that there may be blood throughout all the land of Egypt, both in vessels of wood, and in vessels of stone.

20 And Moses and Aaron did so, as the Lord commanded; and he lifted up the rod, and smote the waters that were in the river, in the sight of Pharaoh, and in the sight of his servants; and all the waters that were in the river were turned to blood.

21 And the fish that was in the river died; and the river stank, and the Egyptians could not drink of the water of the river; and there was blood throughout all the land of Egypt.”

Pharaoh, however, was not impressed by this miracle. Since his magicians were able to replicate it he refused to let the people of Israel go. If Pharaoh had listened to the Lord, the nation of Egypt would have been saved a terrible series of disasters – but he would not let them go. So the disasters kept coming.

Interestingly, during the Tribulation the Lord is going to turn the waters into blood again. But this time it is not just going to be limited to the land of Egypt. No, during the Tribulation God is going to act on a worldwide scale:

Revelation 8:8: “And the second angel sounded, and as it were a great mountain burning with fire was cast into the sea: and the third part of the sea became blood;”

God going to turn a *third of the sea* into blood! If that wasn't horrifying enough, the Bible tells us that the two witnesses will also have the power to turn water into blood whenever they wish:

Revelation 11:6: “These have power to shut heaven, that it rain not in the days of their prophecy: and have power over waters to turn them to blood, and to smite the earth with all plagues, as often as they will.”

In spite of all of this, mankind is not going to listen. Although some people will be saved during the Tribulation there will be many people who will not repent at the teaching of the two witnesses. When the antichrist finally rises up and murders them, the whole world will rejoice and give presents to one another. They will be glad that these two men of God are dead – until the Lord raises them up from the dead three days later.

But the Lord is not done. Since the world martyred the saints of God, the Lord is going to give them blood to drink:

Revelation 16:4: “And the third angel poured out his vial upon the rivers and fountains of waters; and they became blood.

5 And I heard the angel of the waters say, Thou art righteous, O Lord, which art, and wast, and shalt be, because thou hast judged thus.

6 For they have shed the blood of saints and prophets, and thou hast given them blood to drink; for they are worthy.”

The first time this happened it was the *second* angel who turned the waters of the sea into blood. The second time it is the *third* angel who turns the rivers into blood. The Lord does this as punishment for all the Christians that the antichrist murdered. Since the world hunted down the children of God and

slaughtered them, the Lord is going to poison their water supply and turn it into undrinkable blood.

What the Lord did in Egypt in the Old Testament will be done again during the Tribulation – but this time on a global scale.

Frogs

The second plague that God sent upon Egypt was a plague of frogs:

Exodus 8:5: “And the Lord spake unto Moses, Say unto Aaron, Stretch forth thine hand with thy rod over the streams, over the rivers, and over the ponds, and cause frogs to come up upon the land of Egypt.

6 And Aaron stretched out his hand over the waters of Egypt; and the frogs came up, and covered the land of Egypt.”

These frogs went everywhere and greatly annoyed Pharaoh. He told Moses that if he would make the frogs go away, he would let the Israelites go. Of course, Pharaoh then went back on his word – and so God sent more devastating judgments.

During the Tribulation there will also be a plague of frogs. But this one will be much worse:

Revelation 16:13: “And I saw three unclean spirits like frogs come out of the mouth of the dragon, and out of the mouth of the beast, and out of the mouth of the false prophet.

14 For they are the spirits of devils, working miracles, which go forth unto the kings of the earth and of the whole world, to gather them to the battle of that great day of God Almighty.”

This takes place toward the end of the Tribulation. The Bible tells us that there will be three demonic spirits, “like frogs”, that will go and persuade the kings of the world to gather them together at Armageddon. In this battle there will be a massive slaughter. The kings and their armies will be killed and their dead bodies will be given to birds to eat. The devil's plan was to gather the armies of the world together in order to wipe out Israel, but instead *they* are the ones who will be killed.

In ancient Egypt the frogs were just annoying. During the Tribulation they will lead the combined armies of the *entire world* to their deaths. As you can see, the plague will be much worse the second time.

Lice and Flies

When Pharaoh refused to let Israel go after the plague of frogs, the Lord sent lice upon the land of Egypt:

Exodus 8:16: “And the Lord said unto Moses, Say unto Aaron, Stretch out thy rod,

and smite the dust of the land, that it may become lice throughout all the land of Egypt.”

The lice tormented the Egyptians – but Pharaoh refused to let the people go. When Pharaoh would not listen to the plague of lice, the Lord sent flies to torment the Egyptians. However, the Lord put a difference between those who were His people and those who were not. The flies would only be a plague to the Egyptians, not to Israel:

Exodus 8:20: “And the Lord said unto Moses, Rise up early in the morning, and stand before Pharaoh; lo, he cometh forth to the water; and say unto him, Thus saith the Lord, Let my people go, that they may serve me.

21 Else, if thou wilt not let my people go, behold, I will send swarms of flies upon thee, and upon thy servants, and upon thy people, and into thy houses: and the houses of the Egyptians shall be full of swarms of flies, and also the ground whereon they are.

22 And I will sever in that day the land of Goshen, in which my people dwell, that no swarms of flies shall be there; to the end thou mayest know that I am the Lord in the midst of the earth.

23 And I will put a division between my people and thy people: to morrow shall this sign be.

As we know, the Lord did send the plague of flies – but Pharaoh still refused to let the people go.

During the Tribulation the Lord is not going to send a plague of lice or a plague of flies to torment mankind. Instead He is going to do something *much worse*. He is going to send a plague upon men that is so severe they will try to kill themselves but will be *unable to die!* This plague, however, will only affect those who are not the children of God – putting a difference between those who are His and those who are not.

What is this plague? We'll get to it a little later on.

Livestock

When Pharaoh continued to not keep his word and didn't let God's people go, the Lord then killed Egypt's livestock:

Exodus 9:1: “Then the Lord said unto Moses, Go in unto Pharaoh, and tell him, Thus saith the Lord God of the Hebrews, Let my people go, that they may serve me.

2 For if thou refuse to let them go, and wilt hold them still,

3 Behold, the hand of the Lord is upon thy cattle which is in the field, upon the horses, upon the asses, upon the camels, upon the oxen, and upon the sheep: there shall be a very grievous murrain.”

The Bible tells us that when God sent this plague, all the cattle of Egypt died. All of them! Imagine what a terrible blow this must have been. A large portion of the nation's food supply had just

been wiped out. Not only would it have been a severe blow against their economy, but it would have put Egypt in a very precarious situation. Their supply of meat had been wiped out in a single day.

During the Tribulation the Lord is going to do more than just kill all of the cattle of Egypt. He is going to send a famine upon the entire world:

Revelation 6:6: “And I heard a voice in the midst of the four beasts say, A measure of wheat for a penny, and three measures of barley for a penny; and see thou hurt not the oil and the wine.”

When the Egyptians lost their cattle they did have other food sources to fall back upon. During the Tribulation, though, food will be scarce and extremely expensive. It will take a man's entire daily wage just to buy a single measure of wheat. This isn't just going to affect Egypt; this will be global in scale.

Oh – and in case you were thinking about going fishing during the Tribulation, the Lord is going to kill *every living thing in the oceans*:

Revelation 16:3: “And the second angel poured out his vial upon the sea; and it became as the blood of a dead man: and every living soul died in the sea.”

When all of the water in the world is turned to blood, all of the life that is in those rivers and streams and oceans is going to die. Food is going to become nearly impossible to find during the Tribulation – and yet, in spite of that, men are still going to refuse to repent.

Boils

When Pharaoh still refused to let the Israelites go, the Lord sent a painful plague of boils upon the Egyptians:

Exodus 9:10: “And they took ashes of the furnace, and stood before Pharaoh; and Moses sprinkled it up toward heaven; and it became a boil breaking forth with blains upon man, and upon beast.”

During the Tribulation the Lord is going to do exactly the same thing. He is going to inflict painful sores upon all those who worship the Beast and have taken the Mark:

Revelation 16:2: “And the first went, and poured out his vial upon the earth; and there fell a noisome and grievous sore upon the men which had the mark of the beast, and upon them which worshipped his image.”

In those days many people will take the Mark because they think that if they worship the antichrist and serve him they will be spared persecution and pain. After all, the antichrist is going to round up Christians and behead them, so taking the Mark looks like the road to an easy life. But that is simply not the case. When God sent His plagues upon Egypt He spared the Israelites because they were His people. During the Tribulation God will send painful boils upon those who take the Mark – but the

boils will *not* be sent upon His people.

In other words, God is going to deliberately single out those who took the Mark and will torment them. The boils, however, are just the beginning; there are more judgments to come upon those who worshiped the antichrist and took his mark.

Hail

When Pharaoh still refused to let Israel go, the Lord sent terrifying hail upon the land of Egypt. This hail was so terrible that it killed *everything that was outdoors*:

Exodus 9:18: “Behold, to morrow about this time I will cause it to rain a very grievous hail, such as hath not been in Egypt since the foundation thereof even until now.

19 Send therefore now, and gather thy cattle, and all that thou hast in the field; for upon every man and beast which shall be found in the field, and shall not be brought home, the hail shall come down upon them, and they shall die.”

Yet in spite of this, Pharaoh still refused to let the Israelites go.

During the Tribulation the Lord is once again going to send hail upon the world. But this time the hail is going to be much, *much* worse:

Revelation 16:21: “And there fell upon men a great hail out of heaven, every stone about the weight of a talent: and men blasphemed God because of the plague of the hail; for the plague thereof was exceeding great.”

I'm sure we've all seen hail before. Usually it's pretty small, but when the hail is the size of a marble (or, worse yet, a golf ball) it does tremendous damage. The hail that the Lord will send upon the world during the Tribulation, though, will be worse than any hailstorm the world has ever seen. Each one of these massive hailstones is going to weigh *seventy-five pounds!* To put that into perspective, the average cinderblock weighs about 28 pounds – which is about *one-third* of what these hailstones are going to weigh. Imagine if a storm of cinderblocks started to rain from the sky! Can you imagine the horror? Anything that was outside would *definitely* die. Buildings would be demolished and cars would be pulverized. This storm would cause mass death on a global scale.

Yet in spite of all that, many people will *still* refuse to repent of their sins. Instead of seeking the forgiveness and grace that God offers, they will just blaspheme His name even more. (That sounds like Pharaoh's response to the plagues, doesn't it?)

Locusts

When Pharaoh still refused to let Israel go, the Lord sent locusts upon the land of Egypt:

Exodus 10:12: “And the Lord said unto Moses, Stretch out thine hand over the land of Egypt for the locusts, that they may come up upon the land of Egypt, and eat every herb of the land, even all that the hail hath left.

13 And Moses stretched forth his rod over the land of Egypt, and the Lord brought an east wind upon the land all that day, and all that night; and when it was morning, the east wind brought the locusts.

14 And the locust went up over all the land of Egypt, and rested in all the coasts of Egypt: very grievous were they; before them there were no such locusts as they, neither after them shall be such.

15 For they covered the face of the whole earth, so that the land was darkened; and they did eat every herb of the land, and all the fruit of the trees which the hail had left: and there remained not any green thing in the trees, or in the herbs of the field, through all the land of Egypt.”

This was a *devastating* plague. Keep in mind that all of Egypt's livestock had already been killed. When Pharaoh went out and acquired more livestock (probably from other countries), those new animals were killed by the plague of hail. Anything that managed to grow since the hailstorm was eaten by the locusts. The land of Egypt was in ruins and their food supply was gone.

I said earlier that the Lord wasn't going to send plagues of lice and flies during the Tribulation, but was going to do something far worse – something that would make men try to kill themselves, but they would be unable to die. The Bible tells us that during the Tribulation the Lord is going to send **locusts** upon the world:

Revelation 9:2: “And he opened the bottomless pit; and there arose a smoke out of the pit, as the smoke of a great furnace; and the sun and the air were darkened by reason of the smoke of the pit.

3 And there came out of the smoke locusts upon the earth: and unto them was given power, as the scorpions of the earth have power.

4 And it was commanded them that they should not hurt the grass of the earth, neither any green thing, neither any tree; but only those men which have not the seal of God in their foreheads.

5 And to them it was given that they should not kill them, but that they should be tormented five months: and their torment was as the torment of a scorpion, when he striketh a man.

6 And in those days shall men seek death, and shall not find it; and shall desire to die, and death shall flee from them.”

The locusts in Egypt darkened the sky, and these will as well. In Egypt, though, the locusts attacked only plant life. During the Tribulation the locusts will attack something far more precious: they will torment men for five months. The torment will be so bad that men will desperately try to end their life but will be unable to do so. The Lord is going to force them to endure pain that is unendurable – but notice something. Who is going to be tormented? *Only those who are not the children of God*. Who was plagued by the locusts in Egypt? Only the Egyptians – the Israelites were spared.

If you read Revelation 9 carefully you will discover that these creatures are *not* simple insects. The description that John gives us of these monsters, which come from the bottomless pit, is terrifying and unlike anything we've ever seen. It's quite possible that these creatures are actually demonic. They

will be vastly worse than the plague of locusts that struck ancient Egypt.

Darkness

When Pharaoh refused to repent after the plague of locusts, the Lord sent a terrifying darkness upon the land of Egypt:

Exodus 10:21: “And the Lord said unto Moses, Stretch out thine hand toward heaven, that there may be darkness over the land of Egypt, even darkness which may be felt.

22 And Moses stretched forth his hand toward heaven; and there was a thick darkness in all the land of Egypt three days:”

For three days the land of Egypt was covered in a supernatural darkness – a darkness so thick that it could be felt. It must have been a truly terrifying experience. This was not the momentary darkness that comes from an eclipse; this was something far greater.

During the Tribulation the Lord is going to do something even worse. First, He is going to reduce the light that comes to this world by one third:

Revelation 8:12: “And the fourth angel sounded, and the third part of the sun was smitten, and the third part of the moon, and the third part of the stars; so as the third part of them was darkened, and the day shone not for a third part of it, and the night likewise.”

But that's not all. When men still refuse to repent, God is going to send a terrible and painful darkness upon the kingdoms that are ruled by the antichrist:

Revelation 16:10: “And the fifth angel poured out his vial upon the seat of the beast; and his kingdom was full of darkness; and they gnawed their tongues for pain,

11 And blasphemed the God of heaven because of their pains and their sores, and repented not of their deeds.”

This darkness isn't just the absence of light; it is something that is actively painful. Yet in spite of all this, men will *still* refuse to repent.

Firstborn

This brings us back to where we started – Exodus 12. When Pharaoh *still* would not let the Israelites go in spite of all the plagues the Lord sent upon Egypt, the Lord killed all the firstborn that were not covered by the blood of the lamb:

Exodus 12:30: “And Pharaoh rose up in the night, he, and all his servants, and all the Egyptians; and there was a great cry in Egypt; for there was not a house where there was not one dead.”

Here we have a midnight cry – but it is not a joyful one. The Egyptians were horrified to discover that the angel of death had come upon their land, and their cities were now full of dead men. Not one house was spared.

At the end of the Tribulation the Lord is going to once again strike those who are not covered by the blood of the Lamb – but this time it will be done on a much greater scale. When the armies of the world gather to destroy the remnant of Israel, Jesus will personally intervene and kill them all:

Revelation 19:19: “And I saw the beast, and the kings of the earth, and their armies, gathered together to make war against him that sat on the horse, and against his army.

20 And the beast was taken, and with him the false prophet that wrought miracles before him, with which he deceived them that had received the mark of the beast, and them that worshipped his image. These both were cast alive into a lake of fire burning with brimstone.

21 And the remnant were slain with the sword of him that sat upon the horse, which sword proceeded out of his mouth: and all the fowls were filled with their flesh.”

The combined armies of the world will be there, and they are all going to die. But that's not all. Once the antichrist is defeated and his armies are slaughtered, the Lord will gather the entire population of the world and judge them for their deeds:

Matthew 25:31: “When the Son of man shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then shall he sit upon the throne of his glory:

32 And before him shall be gathered all nations: and he shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divideth his sheep from the goats:”

In that day the Lord is going to divide the righteous from the wicked. He will separate those who are covered by the blood of the Lamb – by *His* blood – from those who are not. Those who are wicked (and who took the Mark of the Beast) will not survive this judgment:

Matthew 25:41: “Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels:”

This time it isn't just the firstborn who will be killed. It is *every single unsaved person in the entire world*. All of them will be cast into everlasting fire and tormented day and night, for all of eternity. The righteous will then go on to live in the glorious Millennial Kingdom:

Matthew 25:46: “And these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal.”

Those who are covered by the blood will be saved; those who are not will be lost.

Conclusion

I do not think these parallels are accidental. What the Lord did in ancient times in the land of Egypt will be done again – but on a much greater scale. The land of Egypt received terrible plagues because of their great wickedness. During the Tribulation God will punish the *entire world* with much greater plagues, and the world will experience a vastly higher loss of life.

The Lord has warned us in advance of what is coming. As Paul said, these things happened to them for examples. You do *not* want to go through the Tribulation! You do not want to experience these awful things. Now is the time to repent; now is the time to be saved, and to seek the Lord with all your heart. Seek Jesus now, while there is still time to be spared from the wrath to come.

THE WISE MEN

In this lesson I'd like to spend some time talking about Christmas. You see, the Christmas story is one of the most fascinating stories in the Bible and has all sorts of interesting characters and unusual events. Most importantly, it's one of the most pivotal stories in the Bible. Without Christmas there would be no Calvary, no resurrection, and no atonement.

It's also one of the most misunderstood stories in the Bible. People have all sorts of misconceptions about it. For example, nearly everyone believes that angels sang at the birth of Christ. We even sing songs about it – like “Hark, the Herald Angel Sings”. However, the truth is that angels don't actually do very much singing, and they did *not* sing to the shepherds on that fateful night in Bethlehem! The book of Luke is clear about this:

Luke 2:13: “And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying,
14 Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.”

The angels *said* “Glory to God”; they did not sing it. No angelic singing was done that night. Even though it's commonly believed that an angelic choir burst out into song, that didn't actually happen.

Although there are many aspects of Christmas that we could cover, what I'd like to address in this lesson are the wise men. They are some of the most fascinating and mysterious characters in the Bible – and are also some of the least understood. There is actually an amazing backstory to these men that few people are aware of. What I would like to do is share with you the real story of the wise men from the East.

The only gospel that records the tale of the wise men is Matthew. We find the account in Matthew chapter 2. This is how the story begins:

Matthew 2:1: “Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem,
2 Saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him.”

The first thing I'd like to point out is that the passage doesn't actually tell us how many wise men came to Jerusalem. The reason we assume there were three of them is because they gave three gifts, but that's a silly reason to come to that conclusion. After all, it's entirely possible for one person to give three gifts, or for twenty people to pool their resources and give three gifts! The truth is we have no idea how many wise men there actually were.

There's also the fact that the wise men probably did not travel alone. They had a long journey to make, and so they would have taken an entire caravan. They probably had camels, and servants, and luggage, and all sorts of things that they needed to survive the trip. These men did not journey across the world all by themselves.

So who were these wise men who came from the east? That question is actually easy to answer. Today we refer to the wise men as Persians, but technically that's not accurate. By the time Christ was born the Persian empire had been replaced by the Parthian Empire. This was an *enormous* empire that

was due east of Israel and took up pretty much all the territory to the east.

Parthia was *huge*. The tiny nation of Judah occupied about 1300 square miles, but the Parthian Empire occupied *a million* square miles. In other words, Parthia was about a *thousand* times larger than Judah – and they were not under Roman control. They were a powerful and influential nation.

When the Bible tells us that the wise men came from the east, it's saying that the wise men came from Parthia. However, in the ancient world it would have taken quite some time to travel from Parthia to Israel. Remember, in the days of Christ you couldn't just hop on a private jet and fly to Jerusalem. If you were going to travel across the world you either had to do it on foot, or on an animal like a camel (and let's face it: camels don't move very fast). That journey was going to take time – probably a lot of time.

Matthew tells us that the wise men saw the star in the east (meaning they were in the east when they saw the star), and they then made their way to Jerusalem. This journey did *not* happen in a single evening. The wise men would have had to put their affairs in order, and put together a caravan, and make the long trek across the country. Evidence later in this passage (which we'll get to) indicates that this journey probably took them at least a year to make.

That means that the wise men were *not* there on the night of Christ's birth. There's simply no possible way they could have arrived there that night – it just takes too long to travel from Parthia to Bethlehem! I realize that most manger scenes have wise men in them, but the wise men never made it to the manger. You just couldn't move that fast in the ancient world.

There's another question that we need to address: how did these wise men even know about Christ at all? After all, these were *Gentiles*, not Jews. These foreigners made a very long trip to see this Jew and worship Him. Why did they do that? How could they have even know about Him at all?

The answer to this question lies in the fact that, as we just explained, these wise men were from the Parthian Empire. The Parthian Empire was a descendant of the Persian Empire. In the Old Testament there was a wise man named Daniel who worked for several different administrations. When his career started he worked for King Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian Empire. After Nebuchadnezzar's death, Babylon was conquered by the Medes and the Persians (yes, *those* Persians) and Darius took over the kingdom.

Now, Daniel was the greatest wise man that the Babylonian Empire ever saw. Nebuchadnezzar was so impressed with him that he put Daniel in charge of all the other wise men – and Darius did the same thing. Nebuchadnezzar called him the “master of the magicians” and said he had the “spirit of the holy gods” in him (Daniel 4:8-9). Daniel was held in tremendous esteem. Not only was he wise, but he was also a prophet. In fact, the book of Daniel contains prophecies that foretell the major world events *and world empires* from the time of Daniel to the time of Christ.

If you were a Parthian wise man then you would have been very familiar with Daniel. After all, he was the greatest wise man in their Empire's history. Daniel's writings contained critical information foretelling *the rise and fall of world empires* – and Daniel was *always* right. His writings would have been diligently studied by future generations of wise men. I'm sure his works were required reading, especially since the Parthian empire came from the very same empire that Daniel used to work for.

Do you know what you would find if you studied the writings of Daniel? You would find Jesus. Not only did Daniel talk about what the Messiah would do, but he also talked about *when the Messiah would come*. This is what the angel Gabriel told Daniel:

Daniel 9:25: “Know therefore and understand, that from the going forth of the commandment to restore and to build Jerusalem unto the Messiah the Prince shall be seven weeks, and threescore and two weeks: the street shall be built again, and

the wall, even in troublous times.

26 And after threescore and two weeks shall Messiah be cut off, but not for himself: and the people of the prince that shall come shall destroy the city and the sanctuary; and the end thereof shall be with a flood, and unto the end of the war desolations are determined.”

In order to understand this prophecy you have to realize that the word “week” actually means a period of seven years. Gabriel said that it would be “7 weeks” (or 49 years) and “62 weeks” (or 434 years), starting from the commandment to rebuild Jerusalem. It took 49 years to rebuild Jerusalem (starting in 445 BC, when the edict was issued), and 434 years after the rebuilding was complete the Messiah was crucified. (For the record, if you use 360-day years – which is common in Biblical prophecy – then you arrive at 32 AD.) A generation later, in 70 AD, the Romans came and destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple – exactly as Gabriel foretold.

In other words, God told Daniel *exactly when Jesus was going to die*. This gave prophecy students a very good idea as to when the Messiah would be born. After all, Jesus would almost certainly die as an adult, which means He would have to be born around twenty to forty years before His death. Israel couldn't know the exact year of His birth, but they *could* know when to start looking for Him. The Messiah would have to be born in a pretty narrow range of years.

There's another thing you need to know about Daniel: he was a student of prophecy himself. Daniel 9:2 tells us that he was familiar with the work of Jeremiah, who lived a generation before he did. I have no doubt that Daniel was also familiar with Isaiah. The prophecies of Isaiah gave a very clear picture of the work of the coming Messiah. Look at what Isaiah said in just this one famous passage:

Isaiah 9:6: “For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace.

7 Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgment and with justice from henceforth even forever. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform this.”

Who did Isaiah say the Messiah would be? He would be *the mighty God*. That meant He was going to be deity. Where would the Messiah reign? He would reign on the throne of David – which meant He would be the king of the Jews.

If Daniel studied the works of Isaiah I have no doubt that his successors – the wise men of the Parthian Empire – would have been aware of this and studied the same works that he did. That meant they would have known that the Messiah was deity (which explains why they came to worship Him) and that the Messiah would reign as the King of the Jews. We can also see this knowledge in the gifts that they brought. As we all know, the wise men brought gold, which was a gift fit for a king, and they brought frankincense, which was incense one offered to a god.

But they also brought myrrh. Do you know what myrrh was used for? It was used to prepare the dead for burial. John 19:39 tells us that Nicodemus (the same man who came to see Jesus by night) brought myrrh and used it to prepare the crucified body of Christ for burial. Not only did these wise men know that this Jesus was both God and king, but they also knew why He came.

How could they possibly have known that? Because of the prophecies of Isaiah:

Isaiah 53:7: “He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth: he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth.

8 He was taken from prison and from judgment: and who shall declare his generation? For he was cut off out of the land of the living: for the transgression of my people was he stricken.”

The Parthian wise men knew that He came to die – and if they were familiar with Isaiah (which Daniel no doubt was) then they would have known *why* Jesus came to die as well. The reason they knew these things was because they were students of prophecy. All of these things were foretold. The wise men knew this important information about the Messiah *because they were paying attention.*

That explains a lot, doesn't it? These Parthian wise men knew in advance when the Messiah would come. They knew He was God, they knew He was going to reign over the Jews, and they knew He came to die. So when they saw His star – right when they would have expected it to appear – they knew what was going on.

So naturally, they came to Jerusalem (the capitol of Judah) to worship this new king. After all, surely the Jews would have known that their Messiah had been born, right? How could Christ's own people have missed such a momentous event? After all, mankind had been waiting for *thousands of years* for the birth of Christ, and now He was here! Surely the young Christ was in a castle somewhere. Surely the Jews received Him with gladness and rejoicing. Since the Gentiles were aware of His coming, how could the Jews have missed it?

Yet, we know that the Jews actually *did* miss it. The book of John tells us that Christ came unto His own, and His own received Him not. The Gentile wise men recognized His appearance *because they were watching for Him*, but His own people were caught off-guard.

In fact, the Jews were more than just off-guard. When the wise men showed up, Herod and all of Jerusalem was greatly upset:

Matthew 2:3: “When Herod the king had heard these things, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.”

Why were they so upset? Well, to understand that, you need to know how Herod obtained the title “King of the Jews” in the first place.

In 48 BC, Herod Antipater (Herod the Great's father) made an alliance with Julius Caesar and gave him some much-needed military assistance. With that assistance Caesar was able to defeat Pompey, who had declared war against him. As an act of gratitude Caesar appointed Herod Antipater as procurator over Judah. In 42 BC Antipater was murdered, which left his son Herod the Great in charge.

When Herod Antipas died, the Parthians invaded Judah in order to restore the Jewish rulers (who were their allies) back to power. They actually succeeded in putting Antigonus on the throne. Herod fled for his life and asked Rome to help him. In 40 BC the Roman senate gave Herod the title “King of the Jews”, and in 37 BC Herod returned to Judah and, with the help of the Romans, took Jerusalem back over.

However, the Jews hated him. After all, the Parthians had restored the rightful Jewish ruler to the throne, and Herod had come and stolen that throne. His title “King of the Jews” was enforced by Roman authority. The Jews did not support Herod and did not believe he had a legitimate claim to the throne. Herod became extremely paranoid and spent decades murdering anyone who he thought might

be a potential threat. In fact, Herod murdered his wife, two of his sons, his wife's brother, his wife's grandfather, and his wife's mother. Herod was afraid of anyone who might be a threat to his power.

So when a group of Parthian wise men came into town and asked about someone who had been *born* King of the Jews, that spelled trouble for Herod. After all, the Parthians had managed to remove Herod from power once before, and it took the might of Rome to get his throne back. Herod did have the title of “King of the Jews” but it was granted to him by the Roman senate. Now the Parthians were talking about someone who had been *born* with the rightful title. On top of all that was the fact that in Parthia, *the wise men were the ones who chose the rulers*.

This is why Herod and all of Jerusalem were troubled. The Parthians were saying that *someone else* had the right to sit on the throne of Judah, and that person was not Herod. The last time the Parthians came to town and put the Jewish king Antigonus on the throne, it had led to three years of war. The Parthians were a powerful people and they had succeeded in dethroning Herod before. Herod was convinced that he was in trouble.

That is why Herod took these wise men so seriously. Did you ever wonder why Herod agreed to see them at all? Why would Herod even care about what these people were doing? It all goes back to who they were. These were not unknown monks from a monastery somewhere; they were powerful officials from the court of the Parthians.

Now, Herod didn't have a lot of good options here. He had to be kind to them and agree to help them. After all, the last thing he wanted was another war with the Parthians. The last time they invaded he lost, and he only got his throne back with the help of Rome. If he lost his throne again *to those very same people*, Rome might decide that Herod was an incompetent fool and replace him with someone else. The Parthian Empire was a thousand times larger than his own kingdom, and he knew it. Herod had to treat these men with respect. If he just killed them he might wake up to find Parthian soldiers breaking down his door. This was a very delicate situation. If he wanted to avoid starting a war with Parthia he had to at least pretend to be agreeable.

Amazingly, Herod actually knew what they were looking for. The king immediately asked the religious leaders of his day about the coming of the Messiah:

Matthew 2:4: “And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he demanded of them where Christ should be born.”

Herod knew that these wise men were looking for the Messiah. (It's quite possible that the wise men themselves told him who they were looking for.) When he asked the chief priests where the Messiah was going to be born, the chief priests had the answer:

Matthew 2:5: “And they said unto him, In Bethlehem of Judaea: for thus it is written by the prophet,

6 And thou Bethlehem, in the land of Juda, art not the least among the princes of Juda: for out of thee shall come a Governor, that shall rule my people Israel.”

The chief priests *actually knew* that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem – but they still missed it. The Gentile wise men saw the star in the east and knew what it meant, but the chief priests had no idea that the Messiah had been born. Even though the prophecies of Daniel had foretold roughly when the Messiah would be born, the chief priests *still* missed it.

Why did they miss it? The reason is very simple: the wise men were watching for the appearance of the Messiah, and the chief priests were not. Now, the priests were told the news. They

should have known the Messiah had appeared. After all, when Christ was born the shepherds told the story far and wide (Luke 2:17). The chief priests should have been watching for the Messiah to come, but they weren't. When the news came out of Bethlehem that angels had announced His birth, the chief priests should have noticed – but they didn't. Since the chief priests *knew* that the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem that really should have tipped them off – but it didn't. The priests simply weren't interested in the coming of the Messiah. They may have appeared to be outwardly religious and holy, but in reality their hearts were very far from God.

Herod wanted to know how long it had been since the star appeared:

Matthew 2:7: “Then Herod, when he had privily called the wise men, enquired of them diligently what time the star appeared.”

So what was this star? That is an excellent question, and there are a number of different theories. Some people think that it might have been a comet; however, no comets were reported during that period of history, and no known comet's cycle would have caused it to appear at the time when Christ was born. Others have suggested that the star might have been a time when multiple planets lined up with each other. However, planetary conjunctions happen on a regular basis and they do not look like a star. The ancient world knew that planets were not the same thing as stars, and they would have recognized a planetary alignment as being a planetary alignment. Other scholars have suggested that the star might have been a supernova (an exploding star), but once again there are no known historical records of a supernova occurring at that time.

The biggest problem with all of the naturalistic theories is that the star *moved*. We are told in verse 9 that the star went before the wise men and led them to a specific house. Now, that is something that stars, comets, and supernova simply *do not do*. You are never going to find a star that guides you down a road and comes to rest over a specific house. That sounds a lot like a supernatural light.

It's worth noting that the wise men were apparently the only ones who saw this light. If this light had been visible to everyone then Herod wouldn't have had to ask the wise men when the star appeared, because *everyone* would have known about it. We also need to remember that God has a history of using supernatural lights to guide His people. (For example, during the period of the exodus God used a pillar of fire to guide Israel by night.) The most likely explanation for this mysterious star is that it was a special light sent by God in order to guide the wise men. After all, they were some of the only people *in the entire world* who had taken the prophecies seriously and who were watching for the appearance of His Son! They very much wanted to come and worship the Messiah – and God made sure that they reached Him.

Herod sent the wise men on their way:

Matthew 2:8: “And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, Go and search diligently for the young child; and when ye have found him, bring me word again, that I may come and worship him also.”

There are two things here that we need to comment on. First, Herod had no intention of actually going to worship the child. This is the same Herod who had spent years murdering his own family members in order to remove threats to his ill-gotten power. Herod believed that this new King of the Jews was a threat to his rule, and he wanted to find this Messiah and kill him.

However, Herod had to be careful. He couldn't just kill the Parthian wise men, because killing members of the Parthian high court would have probably led to war. The Parthians would have taken a

very dim view of the man who killed their own leadership, and Herod would have found himself in a lot of trouble. (Even Rome would have frowned upon a man who deliberately started a war with the Parthians.) What Herod wanted to do was go along with the wise men, pretend everything was fine, and find out where the child was. He could then murder the child when their backs were turned. That would eliminate the threat without inviting a war against a much larger adversary.

The second thing I'd like to point out is that the wise men went to Bethlehem *alone*. How many of the chief priests and Pharisees went with them? *Not a single one*. Now, the Scriptures had already told Israel roughly when Christ would be born, and the chief priests knew that these wise men had traveled a long distance specifically to see the Messiah. The priests even knew that the Messiah was supposed to be born in Bethlehem.

Yet *not a single priest* decided to go with the wise men to see if there was any truth to the prophecies! *None* of them were curious about whether the long-awaited Messiah had been born. None of the religious leaders of Christ's day cared *anything* about the coming of the Messiah. Jesus really did come unto His own and yet His own received Him not. The Gentile wise men traveled a great distance to come and worship the Messiah, but not *one* priest was willing to make the *five mile* journey from Jerusalem to Bethlehem to see Him. Even if you walked you could easily make the trip in a single day. The whole reason the sacrificial lambs were raised in Bethlehem was because Bethlehem was so close to Jerusalem and the Temple.

Think of it: the priests would not travel even five miles to go see the Messiah. Jesus spoke the truth when He said that these religious officials honored God with their lips, but their hearts were far from Him. These priests did *not* want to see Jesus. They did not care about the Messiah. The only people they cared about were themselves. They wanted the common people to think that they were righteous and holy and good, but their hearts were far from God.

It's easy to think that we would never act that way if we had been there, but I have my doubts about that. You see, the truth is that Christ is coming again. The Church *should* be excited about the return of its Savior, but that is simply not the case. Most churches don't even preach about the Second Coming anymore; they say that the topic is "divisive" and a "distraction". Many Christians dread the thought of Jesus coming back because that would interrupt their lives and prevent them from doing all the things they had planned. They actually *want* Jesus to stay away as long as possible so He doesn't interfere with what they have going on! A lot of people in the modern Church simply *do not want Jesus to come back*. I find it interesting that when I teach on prophecy and show people that Christ actually could come back in the near future, people respond with panic. Some Christians simply *do not* want Christ to come back and interrupt their lives. They believe that the return of Christ would be an utter disaster, and they want Him to stay away – just like the chief priests of old.

The attitude of the religious leaders of Christ's day is not really all that different from the attitude of the religious leaders of our own day. The priests of old had no interest in the coming of the Messiah, and today many people in the Church are openly hostile to the prospect of the return of that same Messiah. Things haven't really changed very much at all.

This is a bit off-topic, but there are many similarities between the First and Second Coming. God gave all kinds of warnings that the Messiah was about to be (and had been!) born in Bethlehem, but the priests and scribes still missed it. God has likewise given us all kinds of warnings that we are approaching the end of the Church Age, but the Church is simply not looking for the return of the Messiah. If Jesus came back today the Church would be caught completely off-guard – even though any serious student of prophecy could have told you that we are coming near the end of the Church Age. The ancient priests and scribes weren't interested in the coming of the Messiah, and the modern Church is equally uninterested in the return of that same Messiah.

It's true that there are some churches that still teach prophecy, and there are some Christians

who eagerly await the Lord's return. Yet those churches and people are the exception, not the rule. If Christ were to return today He would find all sorts of angry people who would denounce Him for daring to come back and interrupt their lives. Very few people would welcome His return – just as very few people welcomed Him at His first coming.

Getting back to the story, the wise men followed the star:

Matthew 2:9: “When they had heard the king, they departed; and, lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was.

10 When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy.”

It's worth noting that the passage doesn't actually say that the wise men went to Bethlehem. Herod did send them to Bethlehem, but what verse 9 actually says is that as soon as the wise men left the king they saw the star again, and that star led them to the place where the Messiah was. However, the passage *doesn't actually tell us the name of that place*. People commonly assume that it's Bethlehem because that is where Jesus was born, but remember that Mary and Joseph were only in Bethlehem so that they could be counted for tax purposes. Bethlehem was not their home (if it was then they wouldn't have had to journey there!), and there was no reason for them to stay there once they had been counted. It's entirely possible that when the wise men visited them they were living in Nazareth or some other city. We simply don't know.

What we do know is that the star led them directly to the Messiah:

Matthew 2:11: “And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense and myrrh.”

Notice that the wise men entered into *the house* where the young child was! They did not walk into a stable and see the young child lying in a manger. Since it had probably been at least a year since the child had been born, that makes sense: Mary and Joseph had returned home, and the wise men found them safe and sound in their own house.

When the wise men finally found the Messiah they did what they had been wanting to do for a long time: they fell down and worshiped Him. They gave the Messiah the honor that He was due – the honor that He *should* have received from the religious leaders of Judah. It is deeply sad that the Gentile wise men traveled a great distance across the world to worship the Messiah and give Him gifts, and yet the priests and scribes could not travel *five miles* to pay Him a visit.

We have already talked about the gifts that the wise men gave, and how they indicated that the wise men knew exactly who the Messiah was and what He came to do. The wise men gave a gift of gold, which recognized His kingship; they gave a gift of frankincense, which recognized His deity; and they gave a gift of myrrh, which recognized His coming sacrifice. The gifts that they gave were incredibly thoughtful. They truly were wise men, weren't they? The actions of these men reveal that they had remarkable intelligence and understanding.

By contrast, what did the priests and scribes give the Messiah? *Nothing whatsoever*. They couldn't even be bothered to pay Him a visit! The only people who gave the Lord any gifts to celebrate His coming were *Gentiles from another country*. That should tell you something about the hardness of Israel's heart. Their rejection of the Messiah didn't start at His ministry; as you can see, He was rejected

from birth.

The wise men then returned home – but they did not return to Herod. God was the one who had guided them to see the Messiah, and the Lord then guided them back home:

Matthew 2:12: “And being warned of God in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed into their own country another way.”

God knew that Herod wanted to kill the Messiah and He warned the wise men. The wise men then avoided Jerusalem and went back home on a different path, so Herod would not know where the child was. God then appeared to Joseph in a dream and told him to flee the country:

Matthew 2:13: “And when they were departed, behold, the angel of the Lord appeareth to Joseph in a dream, saying, Arise, and take the young child and his mother, and flee into Egypt, and be thou there until I bring thee word: for Herod will seek the young child to destroy him.

14 When he arose, he took the young child and his mother by night, and departed into Egypt:

15 And was there until the death of Herod: that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying, Out of Egypt have I called my son.”

Herod's evil scheme did not come as a surprise to God; in fact, it was actually the fulfillment of prophecy. God knew what Herod was going to do long before Herod was even born. The Lord commanded Joseph to flee to Egypt because Egypt was out of Herod's reach. The child would be safe there – and thanks to the expensive gifts of the wise men, Joseph and Mary would be able to afford to live there and set up a home. God had prepared everything. Herod would try to kill the one who was born King of the Jews, but he would not succeed.

When Herod saw that the wise men had tricked him, he did what he always did when his power was threatened. He resorted to murder:

Matthew 2:16: “Then Herod, when he saw that he was mocked of the wise men, was exceeding wrath, and sent forth, and slew all the children that were in Bethlehem, and in all the coasts thereof, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had diligently inquired of the wise men.”

It should come as no surprise that a man who was willing to murder his own family and children would also be willing to murder the children of others. Herod was willing to do whatever it took to stay on the throne, and if that meant mass murder then so be it. The wise men must have told him that the star had appeared around two years ago, because Herod had all the children two years old or younger killed. He didn't know which child was the Messiah, so he took the appalling route of *killing all the children, just to be safe*.

This horrible massacre was also a fulfillment of prophecy. God had warned Jeremiah about this centuries earlier:

Matthew 2:17: “Then was fulfilled that which was spoken by Jeremiah the prophet, saying,

18 In Rama was there a voice heard, lamentation, and weeping, and great

mourning, Rachel weeping for her children, and would not be comforted, because they are not."

For the record, the prophecy that Matthew is quoting can be found in Jeremiah 31:15.

Herod's appalling atrocity failed. He was unable to kill the Messiah because God was watching over Him. The Messiah survived and accomplished the will of God. Jesus came and died for our sins so that we might be forgiven. All those who repent of their sins and believe in Him will not perish, but will have everlasting life.

When Christ came the first time the world was not happy to see Him. The kings of the world did not welcome Him with open arms; instead they plotted against Him and did their very best to murder Him. They hated Christ so much that they actually killed anyone who *might* be Him!

Did the religious leaders object to this blatant attempt to murder the Messiah? Absolutely not. None of them spoke up for the Messiah. None of them were even willing to make the five-mile trip to Bethlehem (where they thought He was) to see him. The chief priests and scribes did not begin hating the Messiah when He began His ministry; no, their hatred of Him started at His birth. They did not have a problem with Herod's attempt to assassinate the Messiah. The priests and Herod were on the same page and wanted the same things.

The priests and scribes did not want to bow down and worship the Messiah and give Him the honor He was due – but Gentiles from a foreign land had a different attitude. The wise men of the Parthian Empire were powerful and respected. No one expected them to make the long journey to Judah to worship a Jewish king, but they did anyway. It was Gentiles who came and recognized the birth of Christ. It was Gentiles who worshiped Him, who accepted Him as the true King of the Jews, and who gave Him gifts that accurately reflected who He was and what He came to do. These Gentiles truly were wise men. They had a heart for God, and they proved their faith by the actions that they took.

The question each of us needs to ask ourselves is this: where do we stand? One day this Messiah will come back. Are you looking forward to His return, or are you dreading it? Are you hoping that He will stay away so that He won't interfere with your life (on the grounds that your life is *way* more important than anything Jesus has going on), or do you eagerly await the return of the One you deeply love and have passionately served?

Do you care about the return of this Messiah? Have you studied the prophecies and done everything in your power to learn about His coming? Or are you like the priests and scribes of old, who were utterly indifferent to His return? Is it possible that you don't really care about His return at all?

Jesus is coming again. He promised to come back and He always keeps His promises. When He came the first time His own people missed it. When He comes the second time will *you* miss it? Will you be caught off-guard and unprepared, or will you be ready? Who are you like: the wise men, or the priests?

PREPARE THE WAY

When people think about Christmas, one fact that is often overlooked is that Jesus did not simply appear out of nowhere. God spent thousands of years preparing the way for the appearance of His Son. It's true that John the Baptist played a role, but God was at work long before he was even born.

What I would like to do is take a little bit of time to explore some of the different ways God prepared the way for the appearance of His Son. It's quite amazing to step back and realize how much effort God put into making sure that when His Son appeared, people would recognize Him as the Messiah! Those who ultimately rejected Him had no excuse.

Messianic Prophecies

When Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden of Eden, the Lord told them that one day He would send someone to save them. He promised that one day someone would come who would crush the head of the serpent:

Genesis 3:15: “And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel.”

This was the first Messianic prophecy. Now, it's true that it didn't reveal very much. God didn't say who the Messiah would be, or how He would accomplish His mission, or when He would appear. All Adam and Eve were told was that deliverance was coming.

As time went on, the Lord revealed a lot more about the Messiah who would one day save the world. God told mankind that:

- He would be a descendent of Abraham (Genesis 22:18)
- He would be born from the tribe of Judah (Genesis 49:10)
- He would be a son of David (Jeremiah 23:5-6)
- He would be both God and Man (Isaiah 9:6-7)
- He would live for all of eternity (1 Chronicles 17:10-14)
- He would be the Good Shepherd (Zechariah 13:7)
- He would be born of a virgin (Isaiah 7:14)
- He would be preceded by a herald (Malachi 3:1)
- He would be born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2)
- He would be a king (Genesis 49:10), a priest (Psalm 110:4), and a prophet (Deuteronomy 18:15)
- He would be rejected (Isaiah 53:3)
- He would be sold for 30 pieces of silver (Zechariah 11:12-13)
- He would suffer (Isaiah 52:13-14)
- He would be condemned to death (Isaiah 53:7-8)
- He would die (Psalm 16:9-10)
- He would die for the sins of others (Isaiah 53:5)

- After He died, Jerusalem and the Temple would be destroyed (Daniel 9:26)
- He would be buried in a rich man's tomb (Isaiah 53:9)
- He would be resurrected (Psalm 16:10)
- He would justify all those who believed on Him (Isaiah 53:11-12)
- He would bring salvation to the Gentiles (Isaiah 49:6)

As you can see, the Messiah was not a strange mystery man who suddenly appeared on the world stage. God gave His people a *tremendous* amount of information about Him in advance! Who was He? He was the Son of God – fully God and yet fully man as well. Where would He come from? He would be born of a virgin in the city of Bethlehem. What would He do? He would suffer and die for the sins of mankind, and then be raised back to life again. He would bring salvation to all who believed – including the Gentiles.

All of these things were revealed centuries *before* Christ was born in Bethlehem. The people of His day had no excuse for not recognizing Him. Jesus fulfilled all of the prophecies concerning Him, and He was exactly who God said He was going to be. His life, ministry, and death should not have come as a surprise. After all, God told them in advance what was going to happen – and He told them in great detail.

The Time Of His Appearing

Not only did God tell Israel what the Messiah was going to be like, the Lord also told them *when* the Messiah was going to appear. This is what the angel Gabriel told Daniel:

Daniel 9:25: “Know therefore and understand, that from the going forth of the commandment to restore and to build Jerusalem unto the Messiah the Prince shall be seven weeks, and threescore and two weeks: the street shall be built again, and the wall, even in troublous times.

26 And after threescore and two weeks shall Messiah be cut off, but not for himself: and the people of the prince that shall come shall destroy the city and the sanctuary; and the end thereof shall be with a flood, and unto the end of the war desolations are determined.”

In order to understand this prophecy you have to realize that the word “week” actually means a period of seven years. Gabriel said that it would be “7 weeks” (or 49 years of 360 days) and “62 weeks” (or 434 years of 360 days), starting from the commandment to rebuild Jerusalem. It took 49 years to rebuild Jerusalem (starting in 445 BC, when the edict was issued), and 434 years later (in 32 AD) the Messiah was crucified. A generation later, in 70 AD, the Romans came and destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple – exactly as Gabriel foretold.

In other words, God told Israel *exactly when Jesus was going to die*. This gave them a very good idea as to when the Messiah would be born. After all, Jesus would almost certainly die as an adult, which meant He would probably be born twenty to forty years before His death. Israel couldn't know the exact year of His birth, but they *could* know when to start looking for Him. The Messiah would have to be born in a pretty narrow range of years.

This meant that Israel had no excuse for being caught off-guard by His sudden appearance. He

came exactly when God said He would come, He did exactly what God said He was going to do, and events unfolded exactly as God foretold. The Lord did not keep these things a secret.

The Sacrificial System

God did not stop there. For more than a thousand years before the coming of the Messiah, the nation of Israel lived under the sacrificial system of the Mosaic Law. In that system an innocent animal was sacrificed in order to pay for the sins of others. People brought lambs, bulls, and goats to the Temple and killed them there in order to obtain forgiveness for their sins.

Through this system God taught Israel that forgiveness could only come through the sacrificed blood of an innocent party. People could not earn their salvation through their good works; it had to be bought by blood. Forgiveness required the substitutionary death of someone who was innocent. That innocent person had to die in the place of the guilty. Only then could the guilty person be forgiven.

All of this pointed to what the Messiah was going to do. Do you remember how John the Baptist introduced Christ? This is what he said of Him:

John 1:29: “The next day John seeth Jesus coming unto him, and saith, Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world.”

John the Baptist said that Christ was the “Lamb of God”. How did lambs take away people's sins? They were *sacrificed*. They had to be killed, and their blood shed for the sins of the person who was guilty. John was pointing out that the Messiah was the Lamb of God. He came to die for the people and shed His own blood for their sins so that they might be forgiven. Jesus was the fulfillment of the entire Old Testament sacrificial system! That system was leading up to Christ and pointing to what He would accomplish.

This is what Jesus said about His blood during communion with His disciples:

Matthew 26:28: “For this is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins.”

Jesus was the Lamb of God. It is through His blood that we have forgiveness:

Colossians 1:14: “In whom we have redemption through his blood, even the forgiveness of sins:”

Israel should have recognized who Christ was and what He came to do. After all, they had been sacrificing lambs for a thousand years. They were *very* familiar with lambs, sacrifices, and the process of atonement. Here, at last, was the Lamb of God! The Lord did not keep the Messiah's ministry or purpose a secret. Jesus came to die so that mankind might be saved.

Once again we see that God did not keep this a secret. He told them what the Messiah had come to do. In fact, on the road to Emmaus, Jesus told two of His disciples this:

Luke 24:25: “Then he said unto them, O fools, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken:

26 Ought not Christ to have suffered these things, and to enter into his glory?
27 And beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself.”

God told the story of Jesus in the Old Testament centuries before it happened. Moses and the prophets had already revealed it! The problem wasn't that God kept it a secret; the problem was that the people simply refused to believe what God had told them.

Pax Romana

There was another way that God prepared the way for the Lord, and that has to do with choosing the time when the Messiah came. To understand that, however, we need to step back and take a quick history lesson.

When the Old Testament came to a close with the book of Malachi, the Israelites were back in the land but had started abusing the sacrificial system. When the New Testament began 400 years later, Caesar Augustus decreed that all the world should be taxed. The events of that four century gap are not recorded in our Bibles, but they are important. God used those years to prepare the way for the coming Messiah.

Interestingly, God told the prophet Daniel what would happen during those 400 years. This prophecy can be found in Daniel 8. God began by showing Daniel a ram with two horns:

Daniel 8:3: “Then I lifted up mine eyes, and saw, and, behold, there stood before the river a ram which had two horns: and the two horns were high; but one was higher than the other, and the higher came up last.

4 I saw the ram pushing westward, and northward, and southward; so that no beasts might stand before him, neither was there any that could deliver out of his hand; but he did according to his will, and became great.”

Gabriel later explained that this ram was the Medo-Persian Empire:

Daniel 8:20: “The ram which thou sawest having two horns are the kings of Media and Persia.”

This Empire ruled over Judah during the time of Daniel. It did indeed push westward, and northward, and southward, growing in strength and dominating the nations around it. However, this dominance did not last. The ram was defeated by a goat:

Daniel 8:5: “And as I was considering, behold, an he goat came from the west on the face of the whole earth, and touched not the ground: and the goat had a notable horn between his eyes.

6 And he came to the ram that had two horns, which I had seen standing before the river, and ran unto him in the fury of his power.

7 And I saw him come close unto the ram, and he was moved with choler against him, and smote the ram, and brake his two horns: and there was no power in the

ram to stand before him, but he cast him down to the ground, and stamped upon him: and there was none that could deliver the ram out of his hand."

Gabriel explained what this goat actually was:

Daniel 8:21: "And the rough goat is the king of Grecia: and the great horn that is between his eyes is the first king."

The goat and its great horn represented Alexander the Great. During his life, Alexander was an unstoppable force who conquered much of the world. He crushed the Medo-Persian Empire and took its place. However, when Alexander was at the height of his power he died unexpectedly:

Daniel 8:8: "Therefore the he goat waxed very great: and when he was strong, the great horn was broken; and for it came up four notable ones toward the four winds of heaven."

Alexander died at the age of 32. Since he left no heir, his empire was broken up amongst his four generals and became four different kingdoms. This is how Gabriel explained it:

Daniel 8:22: "Now that being broken, whereas four stood up for it, four kingdoms shall stand up out of the nation, but not in his power."

Israel was eventually conquered by the general Ptolemy. This period (called the Egyptian period, because Ptolemy ruled over Egypt as well) lasted from 323 BC to 204 BC.

In 204 BC Antiochus invaded Judah and conquered them. This began what is called the Syrian period, which lasted until 165 BC. Things became especially bad for the Jews when Antiochus Epiphanes IV (175 – 164 BC) began his reign of terror. This is how the book of Daniel describes what happened:

Daniel 8:9: "And out of one of them came forth a little horn, which waxed exceeding great, toward the south, and toward the east, and toward the pleasant land.
10 And it waxed great, even to the host of heaven; and it cast down some of the host and of the stars to the ground, and stamped upon them.
11 Yea, he magnified himself even to the prince of the host, and by him the daily sacrifice was taken away, and the place of the sanctuary was cast down."

Antiochus Epiphanes IV did all of these things. Under his reign the Temple was desecrated, the sacrifices were abolished, and a pig was sacrificed on the altar. The Temple was even rededicated as a pagan temple to the false god Jupiter.

This horrific desecration of the Temple angered the Jews so much that they launched the Maccabean revolt (167 – 160 BC). Judas Maccabeus assembled an army and recaptured Jerusalem, cleansed the Temple, and resumed the sacrifices. Antiochus was defeated in Persia and did not attempt to take Jerusalem back. This is how the book of Daniel describes his end:

Daniel 8:24: "And his power shall be mighty, but not by his own power: and he shall destroy wonderfully, and shall prosper, and practise, and shall destroy the

mighty and the holy people.

25 And through his policy also he shall cause craft to prosper in his hand; and he shall magnify himself in his heart, and by peace shall destroy many: he shall also stand up against the Prince of princes; but he shall be broken without hand.”

Antiochus Epiphanes IV was indeed “broken without hand”. He did not die in battle and he was not assassinated. History tells us that he died of some sort of disease. After Antiochus died, his son invaded Judah and defeated Judas. Judas then retreated to Jerusalem, which was put under siege. Just as Jerusalem was on the verge of defeat, Lysias (the self-appointed regent of Syria) persuaded the invading army to make peace instead. So Jerusalem was spared.

But there was more trouble ahead. After Lysias, a man named Demetrius reigned over Syria. Under his rule Judas was killed. Judas' brother Simon then took over leadership of the army; he conquered the Syrian outposts in Judah and forced the Syrian garrison in Jerusalem to surrender.

In 49 BC a civil war broke out between Pompey and Julius Caesar. A man named Antipater sided with Caesar and gave him support. In return, Caesar appointed Antipater as procurator over Judah. Antipater then appointed his son Herod as governor over Galilee. This is the Herod who was reigning when Christ was born. Herod was later appointed the King of the Jews.

Herod wanted the Jews to accept him, so he went to great lengths to make the Temple in Jerusalem more magnificent. However, Herod wasn't a particularly moral person. After all, he was the man who did this:

Matthew 2:16: “Then Herod, when he saw that he was mocked of the wise men, was exceeding wrath, and sent forth, and slew all the children that were in Bethlehem, and in all the coasts thereof, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had diligently inquired of the wise men.”

This is only a few of the events that took place during the inter-testament period. (For example, we haven't even touched on the rise of the Sadducees and Pharisees.) The point I want to emphasize is that the time between the end of the Old Testament and the birth of Christ was full of wars, revolts, and peril. It was a difficult time in history. Empires waged war against other empires, and control of Jerusalem changed hands again and again. However, there was a brief period of peace – and that era coincided with the ministry of Christ.

The Pax Romana (the Roman Peace) lasted from the ascension of Augustus in 27 BC to the death of Marcus Aurelius in 180 AD. During that period there was peace throughout the Roman Empire. This is a critically important point. If the time of Christ's ministry had been full of wars, invasions, and peril, then His ministry would have been greatly hampered. No one would have been setting out on missionary journeys; instead they would have been fleeing for their lives. If armies had invaded Israel while Jesus was preaching then no great crowds would have come out to see Him. They would have been too busy hiding in caves or fortified cities.

But the Pax Romana was in effect during the lives of Christ and His disciples. This gave them great freedom to move from city to city and province to province. This meant that people were free to come out and hear Him. It was a period of safety and order – which is precisely what the Church needed in order to become established. It would have been impossible for Paul to go from city to city if the Empire was in a time of war and barbarians were burning cities to the ground. Jesus came at just the right time. Before Pax Romana there were wars and revolts in Judah, and after Pax Romana the Roman Empire decayed and fell into ruin. But there was one window of opportunity, and that was when Christ

came. The Lord used history itself to prepare the way for the Lord.

John the Baptist

We have already seen that God gave Israel many Messianic prophecies so that Israel would recognize the Messiah and understand what He came to do. However, God did not stop there. He also promised to send someone who would prepare the way for the Lord. This was prophesied by Isaiah:

Isaiah 40:3: “The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

4 Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together: for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it.”

Malachi also mentions this:

Malachi 3:1: “Behold, I will send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me: and the Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to his temple, even the messenger of the covenant, whom ye delight in: behold, he shall come, saith the Lord of hosts.”

The reason we know that these verses are talking about John the Baptist is because the Bible explicitly tells us this. We can find it in the book of John:

John 1:19: “And this is the record of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, Who art thou?

20 And he confessed, and denied not; but confessed, I am not the Christ.

21 And they asked him, What then? Art thou Elias? And he saith, I am not. Art thou that prophet? And he answered, No.

22 Then said they unto him, Who art thou? that we may give an answer to them that sent us. What sayest thou of thyself?

23 He said, I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord, as said the prophet Esaias.”

John the Baptist fulfilled these prophecies and told the world that the advent of the Messiah was at hand. Not only did John tell people that the Messiah was coming, but he also *actually pointed Him out!* When Jesus came to be baptized by John, he pointed Jesus out and said that He was the Lamb of God. John spent years telling people that the Messiah was coming, and then he *literally* pointed people to Jesus.

Keep in mind that John the Baptist was not some obscure person. Everyone had heard of him and knew what he was doing:

Matthew 3:5: “Then went out to him Jerusalem, and all Judaea, and all the region round about Jordan,”

This meant that *everyone* knew that the time of the Messiah was at hand. When John the Baptist pointed to Christ and said “Behold the Lamb of God!”, it would have been something that everyone was aware of. In other words, John accomplished his mission. The whole nation was told that the Messiah was coming, and *John even identified who the Messiah was*. God did not keep the identity of Jesus a secret.

John did more than just tell people that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah. He also laid the groundwork for Christ's ministry. John really did prepare the way for the Lord. He commanded people to repent, for the kingdom of Heaven was at hand:

Matthew 3:1: “In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judaea,

2 And saying, Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

The Messiah was coming! Now was the time for all men to repent of their sins, because judgment was at hand. All of Israel was going to have to make a choice: would they accept their Messiah, or would they reject Him and bring judgment upon themselves and their nation? It's true that the Messiah had to die, but Israel did *not* have to reject Him. They could have listened to Him and repented. In fact, that is precisely what John the Baptist was urging them to do. He was telling the people to repent of their sins and prepare their hearts for the Messiah. He warned them that terrible judgment was coming:

Matthew 3:10: “And now also the axe is laid unto the root of the trees: therefore every tree which bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire.”

There had been four hundred years of silence since the close of the book of Malachi, but those years of silence were now at an end. The Messiah was at hand! He would forgive all those who repented and believed, but He would destroy those who rejected Him. John warned that judgment was near and the ax had been made ready. Those who did not repent would be cast into the fires of Hell. The Messiah was not a person who could be treated lightly or rejected with impunity:

Matthew 3:11: “I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance. but he that cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear: he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost, and with fire:

12 Whose fan is in his hand, and he will thoroughly purge his floor, and gather his wheat into the garner; but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”

The message of John the Baptist was clear and riveting: the Messiah would gather His wheat and burn His tares. Those who repented and believed would be saved, and those who did not repent would be burned with “unquenchable fire”. Those were the options. The people would either be saved or be damned. The time of waiting was over; it was now the time of decision. Israel was about to be forced to make a choice.

The problem was that Israel believed they were saved by virtue of their birth. They thought that since they were children of Abraham they were automatically saved. After all, they were God's chosen people! They didn't need to do anything, and they certainly didn't need to have their sins forgiven. John warned them that this kind of thinking was deeply wrong:

Matthew 3:8: “Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance:
9 And think not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to our father: for I say unto you, that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham.”

John told them that God was not impressed by their genetic lineage. What God wanted was for Israel to *repent and believe*. Their ancestor Abraham could not save them; only belief in the Messiah could do that. John commanded the people to repent – and that is the very same message that Jesus preached as well.

Not only did John the Baptist actually point out Christ, but he also prepared the hearts of Israel. He told them that judgment was coming and that the kingdom of Heaven was at hand. He warned them that it wasn't good enough to just be a genetic descendent of Abraham; they needed to repent, or else they would be lost. John made it clear that the Messiah was at hand and He would take all those who rejected Him and burn them with unquenchable fire.

John the Baptist did prepare the way for the Lord – but as the Scriptures foretold, Israel refused to accept the Messiah. They rejected Him. Christ came unto His own and His own received Him not. Since Israel rejected Him, God sent His judgment upon the nation. The Lord destroyed both Jerusalem and the Temple and scattered the Jews among the nations. The Church Age then began, and God gathered a people for Himself among the Gentiles – but that is a lesson for another time.

The point is that God went to *great lengths* to prepare the way for the Lord. The coming of the Messiah was no secret, and what the Messiah was going to do was no secret either. Israel should have recognized Him, but they didn't. They should have accepted Him, but they didn't. However, they had no excuse for their utter failure. God did indeed prepare the way for the Messiah; Israel simply wasn't interested in what He had to offer.

KING UZZIAH

In this lesson we are going to continue our study of obscure Bible stories. This time we are going to talk about one of the least famous kings of Judah: the righteous King Uzziah.

After the reign of King Solomon, God divided the nation of Israel into two parts. The tribes of Judah and Benjamin were given to the line of David, and David's descendants reigned over them. Since Benjamin was a very small tribe, this kingdom eventually became known as simply Judah. The rest of the tribes were given to other men to reign, and became known as Israel. Sadly, Israel never had any righteous kings: every single one of their rulers was wicked. But Judah was a different story. Some of Judah's kings were wicked, and some of them were righteous. You never really knew what you were going to get from one generation to the next.

Uzziah's father, Amaziah, is a great example. 2 Chronicles 25 tells us that Amaziah started out his reign as a righteous, God-fearing king. However, one day God gave Amaziah victory over the Edomites. After this amazing victory, Amaziah took the idols of the Edomites back with him to Judah and began to worship them:

2 Chronicles 25:14: “Now it came to pass, after that Amaziah was come from the slaughter of the Edomites, that he brought the gods of the children of Seir, and set them up to be his gods, and bowed down himself before them, and burned incense unto them.”

Keep in mind that Amaziah had been a servant of the Lord – but as soon as he saw these idols he departed from God and became an idolater. He did this in spite of the fact that God just gave him an amazing victory over the Edomites! That victory alone should have taught him that the Lord was stronger than the false idols of the Edomites, and yet the king did not learn that lesson. Amaziah decided to abandon the God who had given him an incredible victory, and instead worship idols that were unable to save the people of Edom.

Needless to say, God was not happy about this. The Lord turned him over to his enemies:

2 Chronicles 25:20: “But Amaziah would not hear; for it came of God, that he might deliver them into the hand of their enemies, because they sought after the gods of Edom.”

Amaziah then launched a disastrous attack against Israel. He lost badly. In fact, he lost *really* badly:

2 Chronicles 25:22: “And Judah was put to the worse before Israel, and they fled every man to his tent.

23 And Joash the king of Israel took Amaziah king of Judah, the son of Joash, the son of Jehoahaz, at Bethshemesh, and brought him to Jerusalem, and brake down the wall of Jerusalem from the gate of Ephraim to the corner gate, four hundred cubits.

24 And he took all the gold and the silver, and all the vessels that were found in the house of God with Obbededom, and the treasures of the king's house, the hostages also, and returned to Samaria.”

This was a terrible defeat. A large portion of the wall protecting Jerusalem was broken down – which, in those days, meant that the city was now vulnerable to attack and easy prey for other nations. The treasures of the temple were stolen, the king's wealth was taken, and even hostages were taken as well. Amaziah's false gods – his worthless idols, which he had taken from the Edomites – were not able to save him from defeat at the hand of the king of Israel.

This loss did not go over very well among the people of Judah. A conspiracy arose against the king, and Amaziah was assassinated:

2 Chronicles 25:27: “Now after the time that Amaziah did turn away from following the Lord they made a conspiracy against him in Jerusalem; and he fled to Lachish: but they sent to Lachish after him, and slew him there.”

Amaziah's decision to turn from the Lord and worship idols did not turn out very well for him. This was the legacy that Uzziah was faced with: his father was an idolater who brought ruin upon the nation. Uzziah was given a city that was weak and vulnerable and a treasury that had been looted. On top of that, Uzziah became king when he was just 16 years old:

2 Chronicles 26:1: “Then all the people of Judah took Uzziah, who was sixteen years old, and made him king in the room of his father Amaziah.”

Imagine a sixteen-year-old teenager reigning over an entire nation. That is the situation Judah was faced with.

What kind of king did Uzziah become? Well, as we will see, Uzziah made some good decisions and some bad decisions. This man reigned over Judah for an astonishing 52 years:

2 Chronicles 26:3: “Sixteen years old was Uzziah when he began to reign, and he reigned fifty and two years in Jerusalem. His mother's name also was Jecoliah of Jerusalem.”

Unlike his father, Uzziah was not an idolater. He served the Lord:

2 Chronicles 26:4: “And he did that which was right in the sight of the Lord, according to all that his father Amaziah did.”

Uzziah did not serve the worthless idols of the Edomites. His reign started well – but as we will see, it ended poorly. Uzziah served the Lord during the ministry of the prophet Zechariah:

2 Chronicles 26:5: “And he sought God in the days of Zechariah, who had understanding in the visions of God: and as long as he sought the Lord, God made him to prosper.”

This is not the same person who wrote the book Zechariah. That book was written during the reign of King Darius (Zechariah 1:1), who was king over Babylon while the people of Judah were in exile there. Uzziah was king long before the time of the exile. Although this Zechariah had an understanding of visions, he is an altogether different Zechariah.

This verse tells us that while Zechariah was alive and carrying out his ministry, Uzziah served the Lord. It seems that Uzziah needed someone to lead him – he would only be good if someone was standing over him. Once Zechariah was gone, though, Uzziah got into a lot of trouble. Uzziah is not the only king who had this particular problem. After the time of Uzziah, a man named Jehoash reigned over Judah. He also did what was right – but only during the lifetime of Jehoiada the priest:

2 Kings 12:2: “And Jehoash did that which was right in the sight of the Lord all his days wherein Jehoiada the priest instructed him.”

Jehoiada lived for a long time, but eventually he died:

2 Chronicles 24:15: “But Jehoiada waxed old, and was full of days when he died; an hundred and thirty years old was he when he died.”

A hundred and thirty years old is a pretty long life! King Jehoash had plenty of time to learn how to be a good and righteous king, but as soon as Jehoiada died Jehoash went bad. The king abandoned the worship of God and began to serve idols:

2 Chronicles 24:17: “Now after the death of Jehoiada came the princes of Judah, and made obeisance to the king. Then the king hearkened unto them.
18 And they left the house of the Lord God of their fathers, and served groves and idols: and wrath came upon Judah and Jerusalem for this their trespass.”

The Lord used another Zechariah, the son of righteous Jehoiada, to tell the king that his idolatry was wrong. In response the king had him *killed*:

2 Chronicles 24:21: “And they conspired against him, and stoned him with stones at the commandment of the king in the court of the house of the Lord.”

Not only did the king put to death the son of his lifelong friend and mentor, but Zechariah was murdered *in the temple*. Jehoash was only willing to serve the Lord as long as his mentor was standing over his shoulder. As soon as that mentor was gone, Jehoash began worshipping idols and killing people. The king would only be good as long as there was someone around making him behave. Once that person was gone, his true nature emerged and became obvious to everyone.

There are some people who are like that. They will be good as long as someone is making them be good. They will do the right thing as long as certain people are watching. But if they are left to their own devices, they will do what they really wanted to do all along. Their religion is just a show that they put on for the benefit of other people. It isn't genuine and it isn't who they truly are. It's just an act.

Uzziah served the Lord during the days of Zechariah – and as long as Uzziah served the Lord, the Lord blessed him. When Uzziah began his reign Jerusalem was in tatters – but since he served God, the Lord blessed him. Uzziah was not only able to defeat the Philistines, but he actually built cities in their territory:

2 Chronicles 26:6: “And he went forth and warred against the Philistines, and brake down the wall of Gath, and the wall of Jabneh, and the wall of Ashdod, and built cities about Ashdod, and among the Philistines.”

The protective walls that surrounded key Philistine cities were destroyed. The Philistines were so humbled that Uzziah was able to build Jewish cities in their midst. God gave him victory over the Philistines, and over other nations as well:

2 Chronicles 26:7: “And God helped him against the Philistines, and against the Arabians that dwelt in Gurbaal, and the Mehunims.

8 And the Ammonites gave gifts to Uzziah: and his name spread abroad even to the entering in of Egypt; for he strengthened himself exceedingly.”

As long as Uzziah served the Lord, God watched over him. God gave him victory after victory. God strengthened his nation and protected him in battle. God even gave him a great name – verse 8 tells us that the king became famous. As long as Uzziah honored the Lord, the Lord honored him.

Uzziah repaired the breaches in the wall around Jerusalem. In fact, he went further and strengthened Jerusalem's defenses even more than they had been originally:

2 Chronicles 26:9: “Moreover Uzziah built towers in Jerusalem at the corner gate, and at the valley gate, and at the turning of the wall, and fortified them.”

Not only was Uzziah a strong king, but he was a rich king as well. As long as he served the Lord, God blessed him with great wealth:

2 Chronicles 26:10: “Also he built towers in the desert, and digged many wells: for he had much cattle, both in the low country, and in the plains: husbandmen also, and vine dressers in the mountains, and in Carmel: for he loved husbandry.”

The Lord blessed Uzziah *tremendously*. God blessed his military might, God blessed his wealth, and God blessed his reputation. As long as Uzziah sought the Lord and did what was right, God blessed him on every side.

Now, I am *not* saying that if you serve the Lord then God will bless you with wealth – that is not my point. The disciples were righteous men and yet they led lives of extreme poverty and were eventually executed for their faith. My point is that God blessed Uzziah in amazing ways.

Uzziah had an enormous military:

2 Chronicles 26:13: “And under their hand was an army, three hundred thousand and seven thousand and five hundred, that made war with mighty power, to help the king against the enemy.

The king was so strong that he was able to field an army of 300,000 men. He was so wealthy that he was able to equip this army with weapons and armor:

2 Chronicles 26:14: “And Uzziah prepared for them throughout all the host shields, and spears, and helmets, and habergeons, and bows, and slings to cast stones.”

The king was so clever that he was able to come up with innovative defenses for his city:

2 Chronicles 26:15: “And he made in Jerusalem engines, invented by cunning men, to be on the towers and upon the bulwarks, to shoot arrows and great stones withal. And his name spread far abroad; for he was marvellously helped, till he was strong.”

Why was Uzziah so successful? Because God blessed him on every side! God blessed his military might, his wealth, and his reputation. Uzziah had it all. As long as Uzziah sought the Lord, the Lord was with him. Uzziah truly lacked nothing.

But one day Zechariah died, and Uzziah was left to his own devices. Now, the king knew the difference between right from wrong. He knew what it meant to serve the Lord. God had blessed him on every side and given him incredible power, wealth, and prestige. Yet here, at the height of his glory, Uzziah made the decision that destroyed him.

We saw with Jehoshaphat that as soon as Jehoiada died, the king turned to idols and murder. Once that godly influence was no longer around, the king dove into idolatry and evil. Uzziah did something similar. Once Zechariah was no longer around to set him straight, Uzziah became proud. Uzziah believed that all the success that he experienced was his own doing. He was not humbled by it, nor did he see it as a rare blessing that God had given to him. Uzziah became so convinced of his own greatness that he did something terrible:

2 Chronicles 26:16: “But when he was strong, his heart was lifted up to his destruction: for he transgressed against the Lord his God, and went into the temple of the Lord to burn incense upon the altar of incense.”

At the height of Uzziah's power and glory, he decided to go into the temple and assume the role of a priest. Now, Uzziah was from the tribe of Judah. In order to be a priest you had to be from the tribe of Levi (and a direct descendent of Aaron). Uzziah was absolutely *not* allowed to do what he did – and he knew it. The commandment of God was very strict. If you weren't from the tribe of Levi then you couldn't even go into the holy place of the temple, much less burn incense there! God restricted that job to the priests of a single tribe, and no one else was allowed to do it. This was a very well-known commandment and had been in place since the days of Moses.

This was not a minor transgression. God actually *struck people dead* for this sort of sin. At the very beginning of the tabernacle's existence, two of the sons of Aaron (who actually were priests from the tribe of Levi) decided to commit a sin that was almost identical to Uzziah's. They offered something to God that the Lord had not commanded. The Lord's response was immediate:

Leviticus 10:1: “And Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, took either of them his censer, and put fire therein, and put incense thereon, and offered strange fire before the Lord, which he commanded them not.

2 And there went out fire from the Lord, and devoured them, and they died before the Lord.”

It was actually the *job* of these two priests to offer incense to the Lord – but they did it at a time when God said it should not be done. So God responded by sending fire from Heaven that killed both of those men where they stood. God *killed* them for doing this. What Uzziah was doing was actually worse: not only was he offering strange fire before the Lord, but he was doing it *in spite of the fact that he was not a priest*.

Uzziah knew that he was not supposed to be doing this, but he decided to do it anyway. Uzziah was so convinced of his greatness that he thought he could get away with anything. He coveted the role of a priest and decided that he was going to take it for himself. After all, he was the king. He had served God faithfully. Why, God needed him! He had done all sorts of great things for Judah. God surely owed him this, right?

There are some Christians who commit this same sin. When God blesses them and they become great, they start thinking that they are better than everyone else. They think that they can get away with things – that if they transgress the law of God, it's really not that big a deal. After all, look at all the good they've done! Look at all the ways they've served the Lord! They have a “right” to commit this sin – they've earned it. All the good they've done balances out this little bit of evil. God would never judge them for it because they're such pillars of the church. God *needs* them. Besides, God loves them and will forgive them for what they've done.

But God will not be mocked. The Lord is utterly impartial. He does not show favoritism – in fact, He does quite the opposite. God's judgments starts at the church, with the people of God. He disciplines those He loves precisely *because* He loves them. When a Christian decides he is so great and mighty that he has a right to sin, that Christian is about to have a very rude awakening. Pride goes before a fall.

God was merciful to Uzziah and gave the king a chance to rethink what he was doing. The brave priests of the temple resisted the king and told him that what he was doing was wrong:

2 Chronicles 26:17: “And Azariah the priest went in after him, and with him fourscore priests of the Lord, that were valiant men:

18 And they withstood Uzziah the king, and said unto him, It appertaineth not unto thee, Uzziah, to burn incense unto the Lord, but to the priests the sons of Aaron, that are consecrated to burn incense: go out of the sanctuary; for thou hast trespassed; neither shall it be for thine honour from the Lord God.”

The priests caught Uzziah in the holy place of the temple – a place he had no right to be. They immediately told him to put down the incense and leave, for he was sinning by just being inside the temple at all. They told him he had no right to offer incense, for only the consecrated sons of Aaron were allowed to do that.

These were very brave priests. It takes a lot of courage to stand up against the king himself – a man who could have had them put to death if he wished. These priests stood up to the king and rebuked him. Sadly, the king did not listen to the priests. Instead he became very angry with them – and that is when God punished Uzziah:

2 Chronicles 26:19: “Then Uzziah was wroth, and had a censer in his hand to burn incense: and while he was wroth with the priests, the leprosy even rose up in his forehead before the priests in the house of the Lord, from beside the incense altar.”

God did not kill Uzziah; instead God humiliated him. God struck him with leprosy right where he stood. This changed the king's life dramatically – and not in a good way.

You see, under the Mosaic Law lepers were considered to be unclean. That meant they could not touch anything that was holy. Lepers were not allowed anywhere near the temple. In fact, they weren't even allowed to live with other people! They had to live alone (or with other lepers), because anyone they came into contact with was made unclean. Lepers were shunned and avoided by everyone.

They were the outcasts of society.

The consequences of leprosy fell upon Uzziah immediately. As soon as he became a leper he was thrust out of the temple, because his very presence was defiling it:

2 Chronicles 26:20: “And Azariah the chief priest, and all the priests, looked upon him, and, behold, he was leprous in his forehead, and they thrust him out from thence; yea, himself hastened also to go out, because the Lord had smitten him.”

Uzziah was so proud that he thought he could get away with anything. He thought that he could do whatever he wanted, no matter how sinful or wicked it might be, and God would let him get away with it. He thought he was above the law – but he wasn't. He thought the commandments of God didn't apply to him – but they did. He thought that God would show him special consideration because he was such a great guy – but God didn't.

Uzziah was a leper for the rest of his life, and he lost everything. He lost his home, he was never able to go near the temple again, and he even lost his kingship:

2 Chronicles 26:21: “And Uzziah the king was a leper unto the day of his death, and dwelt in a several house, being a leper; for he was cut off from the house of the Lord: and Jotham his son was over the king's house, judging the people of the land.”

Uzziah had it all and he lost it all. His reputation was gone in an instant. His glory, his strength, his reign – all of it was gone. God humbled him mightily. In one moment Uzziah went from being one of the most respected men of his time, to being an outcast that was avoided by everyone. His pride and disobedience ruined him.

In fact, his leprosy even cost him burial in the tomb of the kings:

2 Chronicles 26:23: “So Uzziah slept with his fathers, and they buried him with his fathers in the field of the burial which belonged to the kings; for they said, He is a leper: and Jotham his son reigned in his stead.”

The kings of Jerusalem were usually buried in the special tomb reserved for the kings – but not Uzziah. Since he was a disgraced leper, he was buried in a field instead. He was not even given a royal burial.

Why did this happen? Because he was convinced that he could get away with anything. He was convinced that he was so great, and such a special child of God, that the rules simply didn't apply to him. He thought that the commandments were for other, less special people. He decided that he could get away with it – but he couldn't.

As Moses once told the children of Israel, be sure your sin will find you out. God is not a respecter of persons. He is not going to give you a free pass to sin as you please. Your service to the Lord does not give you the right to be immoral. Uzziah is not the only person who found out, too late, that God is serious and does not tolerate sin from anyone.

The point is simple: do not follow Uzziah down the road to destruction. Things did not turn out well with him – and if we follow his example, they will not turn out well for us either.

PHILEMON

In this lesson we are going to study one of the shortest books in the Bible – the book of Philemon. This New Testament epistle has just one chapter and 25 verses, and can easily be read in a single sitting. It doesn't get a lot of attention but it tells a fascinating story.

Before we get into this letter we need a little bit of background. The book of Philemon was written during Paul's first imprisonment in Rome, which occurred in 62 AD. While Paul was in prison he wrote Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians. He also took the time to write this letter, which he sent to a friend. The reason he wrote it is because he happened to meet a runaway slave named Onesimus.

Most of Paul's letters were written to churches in order to discuss various problems or challenges that they were facing. This particular letter is different: it was written to a family in order to address the issue of their runaway slave. Paul wrote this letter with one clear goal in mind: setting Onesimus free. What is fascinating is the way Paul went about accomplishing that goal.

Slavery in the Roman Empire was a very serious matter. It is estimated that around one third of Italy's entire population was slaves. Slaves were considered to be property, and masters had the right to put them to death for very small offenses. Rome was in constant fear of slave revolts and experienced three significant rebellions in its history. This fear led them to treat runaway slaves very harshly. The laws regarding runaway slaves were very strict: if you found one you were required to turn him in so he could be returned to his master – where he stood a good chance of being crucified and killed.

When Paul met Onesimus he was under a legal obligation to turn him into the authorities. However, Paul did not do that. Instead he took a different approach – and that is what we are going to investigate. It seems that when Paul met Onesimus, the first thing he did was share the gospel with him. Under Paul's care and teaching Onesimus came to know the Lord. Once Onesimus was a Christian, Paul then wrote a very interesting letter to his master Philemon.

Now, there were a lot of different ways Paul could have handled this situation. Paul was an apostle, after all; he had a lot of influence in the churches, he was well-known, and he was highly respected. Paul could have addressed Philemon with great force – but he didn't. Instead he took a much more subtle approach. Paul once told Timothy to be very careful when dealing with other believers:

1 Timothy 5:1: “Rebuke not an elder, but intreat him as a father; and the younger men as brethren;”

Paul said that Christians ought to treat older men with respect and younger men as brothers. Instead of going into the situation and using force to deal with it, Paul urged Timothy to be gentle and courteous. In this letter to Philemon we will see this principle in action. There are a lot of things Paul could have said, but he chose to be gentle – and yet Paul still put an incredible amount of pressure on Philemon.

Look at how Paul opened the letter:

Philemon 1:1: “Paul, a prisoner of Jesus Christ, and Timothy our brother, unto Philemon our dearly beloved, and fellowlabourer,”

In most of Paul's letters he always started by identifying himself as an apostle. He used his

apostolic position to establish his authority and make it clear that the recipient of the letter should listen to him. In his letter to Philemon, however, Paul doesn't do that. He *could* have said “Hey Philemon! It's me, Paul the apostle. You have to do whatever I tell you because *I'm an apostle.*” But Paul doesn't do that. Paul didn't use his authority to force Philemon to do anything. Instead he worked on Philemon's *emotions*. He didn't call himself Paul the apostle; instead he called himself Paul the *prisoner*. He painted a picture of himself as a prisoner who was locked away in Rome and suffering on behalf of the gospel. (That was the truth, after all.)

Once Paul established himself as a suffering prisoner, he praised Philemon highly. He described him as someone who was “dearly beloved”. Philemon was a “fellowlaborer”. That is high praise! How would you feel if Paul called *you* a fellow-laborer in Christ?

Paul did not stop at greeting Philemon. He also greeted the rest of his family:

Philemon 1:2: “And to our beloved Apphia, and Archippus our fellowsoldier, and to the church in thy house:”

Apphia was probably Philemon's wife. This is significant, because in Roman times the wife was the one who had authority over the slaves. Since Paul was writing about an escaped slave, this was something that directly affected her. Archippus was probably Philemon's son.

Verse 2 tells us that there was a church in Philemon's house, which is not too surprising. In those days Christians did not meet in church buildings, the way we do today; instead they met in the homes of believers. Philemon had a church that met in his house, but although Paul mentions it he is not address this letter to it. This is because Paul was addressing a private family matter – the issue of the escaped slave Onesimus.

Paul was still not done with the introduction of his letter. He went on to say that he was praying for Philemon, even though Paul was in prison (and therefore Philemon really should have been praying for him):

Philemon 1:4: “I thank my God, making mention of thee always in my prayers,”

He also praised Philemon's faith and love:

Philemon 1:5: “Hearing of thy love and faith, which thou hast toward the Lord Jesus, and toward all saints;”

Notice that at the end of this verse Paul said that Philemon had a lot of love and faith for *all* saints. This is important! Philemon doesn't know it yet but his slave Onesimus is now a Christian, which means he is part of “all saints”. Paul is going to make the case that since Philemon has great love for the saints of God, he should also have a great love for Onesimus.

Paul then praised Philemon's hospitality:

Philemon 1:7: “For we have great joy and consolation in thy love, because the bowels of the saints are refreshed by thee, brother.”

The apostle has spent almost a third of this letter just greeting Philemon – but there is a strategic purpose behind this. Paul thanked Philemon for several very specific things: for being loving and kind, for being good to the saints, and for being hospitable. Paul is going to take advantage of those traits and

tell Philemon that he should apply them to his runaway slave Onesimus. Paul wants Philemon to show Onesimus that same love, kindness, and hospitality. After this gracious introduction it's going to be hard for Philemon to refuse Paul.

Once the introduction has been concluded, the apostle gets to the heart of the letter. He first makes it clear that Paul does indeed have apostolic authority. Paul could have come down hard on Philemon, but he instead chose to entreat him as a brother:

Philemon 1:8: “Wherefore, though I might be much bold in Christ to enjoin thee that which is convenient,
9 Yet for love's sake I rather beseech thee, being such an one as Paul the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ.”

Paul reminded Philemon *again* that he was a prisoner in Rome – and on top of that he was an old man. Philemon wouldn't refuse the request of a suffering prisoner, would he? Surely Philemon wouldn't say no to an old man who was suffering for the cause of Christ. After all, Philemon was a loving and hospitable person, and no loving person would dare do something that heartless to an apostle!

Do you see what's going on? When Philemon read this he couldn't possibly have missed the point. Paul was making it very hard for Philemon to refuse what he was about to ask – and he's barely gotten started. Paul went on to describe Onesimus as his own son:

Philemon 1:10: “I beseech thee for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my bonds:”

Philemon would probably have had some rather bad memories of Onesimus, the slave who ran away from him. But now Philemon would find it difficult to be hard on Onesimus. After all, Paul the apostle – the man who wrote a large portion of the New Testament, and whom God used to do mighty miracles – just called Onesimus *his son*. Paul was clearly very attached to him! Onesimus wasn't a simple runaway slave anymore. Now he is a favorite of one of the most prominent leaders of the early church. That creates a whole different situation. If Philemon does anything to harm him then Paul is going to find out about it – and I'm sure Philemon didn't want Paul coming after him. (Would you?)

Paul then referred to Onesimus' past – but he does so in a rather interesting way:

Philemon 1:11: “Which in time past was to thee unprofitable, but now profitable to thee and to me:”

What we miss in the English translation is the fact that the name Onesimus actually means *profitable*. Paul was making a play on Onesimus' name. In the past he was *unprofitable*, but now things have changed. Onesimus wasn't a runaway slave anymore. He was now a fellow saint who was profitable to Philemon *and* to Paul. Therefore, Paul wanted Philemon to treat Onesimus with great kindness:

Philemon 1:12: “Whom I have sent again: thou therefore receive him, that is, mine own bowels:”

The King James Version has a very literal way of translating this verse. In ancient times the

bowels were believed to be the seat of human emotions. Today we would use the word “heart” instead. Paul was telling Philemon that he loved Onesimus like a son and Philemon should treat him with great care. Paul didn't want Philemon to crucify Onesimus or have him torn apart by lions.

Yes, Paul does send Onesimus back to Philemon, but he didn't turn Onesimus over to the authorities. He also didn't send Onesimus back alone. The journey back to Philemon would have been a long and hazardous one, and Onesimus could have easily ended up arrested. Therefore Paul sent him back in the company of someone else. Although the letter to Philemon doesn't discuss the travel arrangements, we can find them in Paul's letter to Colossians:

Colossians 4:7: “All my state shall Tychicus declare unto you, who is a beloved brother, and a faithful minister and fellowservant in the Lord: ...

9 With Onesimus, a faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you. They shall make known unto you all things which are done here.”

Onesimus was indeed going back – but Tychicus was going to be there to see what happened. Interestingly, Paul made it clear to Philemon that he actually wanted Onesimus to stay with him:

Philemon 1:13: “Whom I would have retained with me, that in thy stead he might have ministered unto me in the bonds of the gospel:

14 But without thy mind would I do nothing; that thy benefit should not be as it were of necessity, but willingly.”

Once again we see Paul mentioning the fact that he was a prisoner for the sake of Christ. The apostle told Philemon that he was suffering in prison and *really* needed some help so he could continue to spread the gospel. In fact, what he actually needed was the help of Onesimus – but Paul didn't want to use his authority to just take Onesimus by force. He wanted Philemon to willingly let Onesimus go.

That was going to be a difficult request for Philemon to refuse, wasn't it? Paul just praised Philemon for being a great guy who was devoted to the cause of Christ. The apostle Paul happened to have a need that was directly tied to the gospel, and it was a need that Philemon could meet. How could Philemon refuse him? Only a monster would say “Yes, Paul, I know you're in prison and I know you need my help, but I just don't care.” Remember, Philemon actually had a church *in his house*. If he turned Paul down, his congregation was definitely going to hear about it. How could Philemon explain to his church that he refused to help a suffering apostle who was in prison?

Paul wanted Philemon to set Onesimus free, and he wanted Philemon to do it willingly. The apostle was putting a *lot* of pressure on Philemon to let Onesimus go. But Paul wasn't done yet. He next tried to change Philemon's attitude toward Onesimus:

Philemon 1:15: “For perhaps he therefore departed for a season, that thou shouldest receive him for ever;

16 Not now as a servant, but above a servant, a brother beloved, specially to me, but how much more unto thee, both in the flesh, and in the Lord?”

Paul told Philemon that perhaps it was God's will for Onesimus to run away so that he could be converted and become a Christian. Yes, he did indeed run away, but in the end it was a blessing. God used the situation to save his soul from Hell and transform his life. Paul wanted Philemon to actually *rejoice* that Onesimus left him! The apostle was working to change Philemon's attitude about the entire

situation. Onesimus was no longer a mere slave; instead Philemon should see him as a *beloved brother*. Since Philemon loved the saints he ought to love Onesimus as well. In fact, Philemon should rejoice over this because it brought someone to Christ.

As you can see, Paul is working hard on Onesimus' behalf and was seeking to change Philemon's attitude. Runaway slaves were typically greeted with torture and death. Paul, however, wanted Philemon to treat Onesimus as if he was Paul himself:

Philemon 1:17: “If thou count me therefore a partner, receive him as myself.”

“Do you consider me to be a partner in the gospel, Philemon?” What a question to ask! Paul was *much* more than just a partner; why, Paul had done more to spread the gospel than Philemon could ever hope to match. Philemon was not worthy to be compared with Paul – and yet Paul was making that comparison. Paul was saying that if Philemon considered him, Paul the apostle, to be a fellow laborer in the gospel, then Philemon should treat Onesimus the same way he would treat Paul himself. Philemon should not beat Onesimus and kill him; instead he should welcome him back with love and grace.

But Paul was still not done. It seems that Onesimus did more than just run away from his master; he apparently wronged Philemon in other ways as well. Whatever he did, Paul said to put it on his account:

Philemon 1:18: “If he hath wronged thee, or oweth thee ought, put that on mine account;

19 I Paul have written it with mine own hand, I will repay it: albeit I do not say to thee how thou owest unto me even thine own self besides.”

Philemon couldn't prosecute Onesimus for anything because Paul said he would repay it personally. Did Onesimus steal anything? Did he wrong anyone? Then send the bill to Paul. The apostle (who was suffering in prison) would cover Onesimus' debt.

After reading this, there was no way for Philemon to prosecute his runaway slave without looking like a complete jerk. Philemon couldn't just ignore the apostle – but at the same time, imagine how awkward it would have been for Philemon to try to send Paul a bill! There Paul was, in prison, suffering for the gospel. Only a callous monster would say “Yes, Paul, I know you're in jail and everything, but here's the bill that you owe. Please take the donations that the churches are giving you to keep you alive and send them to me. Thanks.” Although Philemon *could* do that, and I have no doubt that Paul was serious about paying Onesimus' debt, you would have to have a heart of stone to write that sort of bill.

Just in case Philemon was unhappy about this turn of events, Paul reminded him (in a rather clever way) that Philemon owed *him* a great debt. It seemed that Philemon himself came to know Christ through the ministry of Paul. Paul was saying “Yes, it's true that Onesimus owes you a debt. But don't forget that you owe *me* a debt as well, and I have never tried to collect on it.”

The parallels here between what Paul did for Onesimus and what Christ did for us are very clear, and I'm sure Philemon could not have missed it. Paul was taking upon himself the wrong that Onesimus did and was offering to pay for it. Christ took upon Himself the wrongs that we did, and paid for them on the cross. Paul was reminding Philemon that just as he was forgiven, he should also forgive those who wronged him.

Paul *still* wasn't done. He goes on:

Philemon 1:20: “Yea, brother, let me have joy of thee in the Lord: refresh my bowels in the Lord.”

Paul, the aged apostle, was suffering in prison for the cause of Christ. He needed Philemon's help. Surely Philemon was going to help, right? Surely Philemon was going to give Paul a bit of joy in the dark prison where he was languishing. Surely Philemon wasn't going to make things worse and bring him pain.

That is what Paul was saying here. It's true that he wasn't giving Philemon orders, but there was no way Philemon could have missed what Paul wanted. The apostle was asking Philemon to welcome Onesimus back, forgive him, treat him as a brother in Christ, and then send him back to Paul. In fact, Paul tells Philemon that he was confident that Philemon would do more than he asked:

Philemon 1:21: “Having confidence in thy obedience I wrote unto thee, knowing that thou wilt also do more than I say.”

It would have been *enormously* difficult for Philemon to refuse Paul's request. After everything Paul wrote it would have been very awkward for Philemon to write back and say “Paul, I know you have confidence in me. I know you said you would pay his debt and I know I owe you my life, but your confidence in me is misplaced. I'm not going to listen to you.” Paul has been very gentle about it, but he has maneuvered Philemon into a corner.

I don't know what sort of person Philemon was; the Bible doesn't mention him anywhere else, nor does it record how this story turned out. But if Paul was confident that Philemon would do more than Paul asked, he was probably right. Even so, Paul still added some extra insurance to his letter:

Philemon 1:22: “But withal prepare me also a lodging: for I trust that through your prayers I shall be given unto you.”

Paul was telling Philemon that one day he would get out of prison (which did happen), and when that occurred he was going to go visit Philemon. When Paul visited Philemon he was going to find out how he treated Onesimus. This could be interpreted as a subtle warning: one way or another Paul would find out what happened and would hold Philemon accountable.

Interestingly, Ignatius wrote in 110 AD that the bishop of Ephesus was a person named Onesimus. Now, no one knows if it was the same Onesimus that is mentioned in this letter, but it is possible. If he was just a teenager when he was Philemon's slave then he could have lived long enough to be that same person. It would be nice to think that Philemon did everything Paul asked, and Onesimus later became one of the leaders of the church.

This letter is primarily focused on Paul's dealings with Philemon, but I think there is another factor to consider. As we know, this letter was included in the canon of the New Testament. This means that this letter must have been passed around to the other churches back in the time when it was written. Philemon was not the only person who read it; other slaveholders probably did as well.

When they read this letter, what would they have learned from it? Well, first of all, it was obvious that Paul wanted the gospel to be preached to everyone – even to slaves. Paul wanted converts to Christ to come from every walk in life. But there's more to it than that: Paul showed tremendous love and kindness to Onesimus. He ignored Roman law and treated him as a brother, and not as property. He

wanted Onesimus to be loved as a fellow saint, and he wanted Onesimus to be set free so he could serve the Lord and advance the gospel.

Yes, slaveholders could just ignore this letter and do as they pleased – just as people ignore the Bible all the time and do what is right in their own eyes. But no honest man could miss the plain desire of the apostles. Paul was being very gentle here, but he was absolutely crystal clear about what he wanted to see done. He did not treat Onesimus as a slave; instead he treated him as his own son – and he wanted to see him set free.

THE UNRIGHTEOUS STEWARD

In this lesson we are going to take a look at one of the most obscure parables in the New Testament: the parable of the unrighteous steward. This particular parable doesn't get taught very often, but it has a powerful meaning that is very applicable to our lives. Although this chapter is a little more difficult to understand than some of the others, it is well worth our time.

This parable is about a steward who worked for a rich man. One day someone accused the steward of having wasted the property of his employer:

Luke 16:1: “And he said also unto his disciples, There was a certain rich man, which had a steward; and the same was accused unto him that he had wasted his goods.”

Since it was the steward's job to faithfully care for the property of his master, this was a very serious accusation. No master wanted to hear that his goods were being wasted! If the steward could not faithfully carry out his job then he was in danger of being fired.

However, there is one additional detail that we must not overlook. This verse says that the steward was *accused* of wasting his employer's goods. It didn't say that he had actually wasted them. It's worth noting that the word translated “accused” is an interesting one. It could also be translated as *slander*. The word carries with it the idea that the accusation is false. In other words, the steward hadn't actually been wasteful! Instead he had been a faithful employee. Yet, in spite of his good service, he was falsely accused of wasting his master's property.

Unfortunately for him, his master believed the accusation:

Luke 16:2: “And he called him, and said unto him, How is it that I hear this of thee? give an account of thy stewardship; for thou mayest be no longer steward.”

It seems that the master didn't bother to conduct an investigation, and instead decided to fire his employee on mere hearsay. That one false accusation cost the steward his job. Before the steward left, however, he had to face an audit. The master wanted the steward to give an account of the property he had been managing.

This unexpected turn of events caused a big problem for the steward. Once he lost his job he would have no way to support himself:

Luke 16:3: “Then the steward said within himself, What shall I do? for my lord taketh away from me the stewardship: I cannot dig; to beg I am ashamed.”

In those days there weren't a lot of available career options. Most people were farmers, which was hard, backbreaking work. It seems that this steward couldn't handle the rigors of farm life. It's possible that he was an old man who wasn't physically capable of it; we don't really know. All the text says is that farming was not an option. Since he was not rich enough to live without a job, that meant the only other option was begging – and he didn't want to become a beggar. This steward had a problem.

However, the steward was clever. He came up with an idea:

Luke 16:4: “I am resolved what to do, that, when I am put out of the stewardship, they may receive me into their houses.”

Technically he hadn't been fired yet, which meant he still had power. He decided to use his position in order to win friends for himself. He was going to do people favors so that when he lost his job, those people would owe him and give him a place to live. He would help them, and in return they would help him.

The steward put his plan into action immediately. Since his master wanted an account of his property, the steward called all the people who owed his master money:

Luke 16:5: “So he called every one of his lord's debtors unto him, and said unto the first, How much owest thou unto my lord?”

It turned out that a number of his master's debtors were in trouble, which gave the steward a chance to act. One person owed a hundred measures of oil:

Luke 16:6a: “And he said, An hundred measures of oil. . .”

So what is this verse talking about? Well, a “measure of oil” was between eight and nine gallons. This meant that this person owed around 800 gallons of oil (probably olive oil, not petroleum). Now, I couldn't find any information on how much olive oil cost back in Roman times. Today a gallon of olive oil will set you back around \$40. Eight hundred gallons, at today's prices, would cost \$32,000. That is a pretty serious debt!

Owing a debt in the ancient world is very different from owing one today. In Biblical times you couldn't simply declare bankruptcy and then move on with life. You didn't walk away from the situation with a bad credit score. No, the consequences were vastly more serious. During the days of the prophet Elisha a woman came to him and told him that she was in debt. Look at what was going to happen to her if she could not pay:

2 Kings 4:4: “Now there cried a certain woman of the wives of the sons of the prophets unto Elisha, saying, Thy servant my husband is dead; and thou knowest that thy servant did fear the Lord: and the creditor is come to take unto him my two sons to be bondmen.”

If you couldn't pay your debt then the creditor would come and take away your family *as slaves*. That is what debt meant: slavery. As you can see, these debtors had a serious problem. They had a debt that they owed to the steward's master, and they could not pay it. Since they could not pay it, they were in danger of having the master come to collect on their debt – and he would collect it by taking their children away from them. These people desperately needed help.

So what did the steward do? He helped them by reducing their debt:

Luke 16:6b: “. . . And he said unto him, Take thy bill, and sit down quickly, and write fifty.”

The steward reduced the debt from something they *couldn't* pay to something they *could* pay. They could now pay down the debt and avoid having their children taken from them. Thanks to the

steward, they would no longer lose everything. This placed them in the steward's debt – they owed him a great deal because he had saved them from a terrible disaster. After what he did for them they would *definitely* give the steward a place to stay.

But this also helped the master as well. Since the debt had been reduced to something the people could pay, he would now receive some measure of repayment. It's true that he wouldn't receive the entire amount he was owed, but some payment was better than no payment at all. Everyone benefited from what the steward did.

The steward didn't stop at helping just one person. He helped as many people as he could find:

Luke 16:7: “Then said he to another, And how much owest thou? And he said, An hundred measures of wheat. And he said unto him, Take thy bill, and write fourscore.”

The steward wanted to have as many people owing him a favor as possible. Note, however, that the steward was still being careful about his master's property. To some people he gave a large discount, and to others he gave a small discount. The first person had their debt cut in half, while the second one received a smaller reduction. But the effect was the same: both people were helped, both people were grateful, and both people would help the steward in the future.

This was a clever move on the steward's part. We don't know how old he was; he might have been young or he could have been an old man. What he wanted was a means of support that would last him for the rest of his life. He knew it would be difficult for one family to support him indefinitely, so he tried to build up favors from as many people as possible. He wanted to have a large network of grateful friends.

Interestingly, when the steward's master found out what was going on, the master was not upset. In fact, he actually praised the steward:

Luke 16:8a: “And the lord commended the unjust steward, because he had done wisely: . . .”

Why did the master praise him? Because the steward had “done wisely” for everyone involved. The steward had done wisely for himself, for now he had friends who would help him in his time of need. He had done wisely for these debtors, for they would now be able to repay the debt and would not face financial ruin. And he had done wisely for his master, for now he would actually get something paid on the debt he was owed. Everyone came out ahead.

After telling this parable Jesus did something very unusual. In nearly all other parables Jesus proclaimed the story publicly and then privately explained to His disciples what He actually meant. This time, though, Jesus didn't do that. Instead He explained the parable's meaning *immediately*, so the Pharisees would know exactly what He was telling them:

Luke 16:8b: “. . .for the children of this world are in their generation wiser than the children of light.

9 And I say unto you, Make to yourselves friends of the mammon of unrighteousness; that, when ye fail, they may receive you into everlasting habitations.”

Jesus said that the ungodly are actually more clever than the righteous, because they know how

to use their resources, position, and influence to win friends. They work hard to get other people in their debt so that they would be owed favors. That way when they needed something they would have a network of people they could fall back on. This is very common behavior in the world. In fact, Jesus Himself commented on it:

Matthew 5:46: “For if ye love them which love you, what reward have ye? do not even the publicans the same?”

That is how the world works: people help their friends, and those friends help them in return. People buy friends with favors and then expect those favors to be returned.

Jesus is telling us that we need to start thinking from a heavenly perspective. Christians are going to live forever; we have been given everlasting life. Therefore, *because* we are going to live forever, we should be going out of our way to help as many people as possible. Why? Because when the next life begins and we are in Heaven, the people we helped will remember what we did for them! They will remember that we were supportive in their great hour of need. Not only will they remember, but they will be grateful – and *they will reward us*.

Verse 9 is very clear about this. Jesus says that we are to make friends. What are we supposed to use to do this? The “mammon of unrighteousness” – in other words, money and our worldly possessions. Why are we supposed to do this? So that the people we help will receive us into “everlasting habitations”. Now, where do we find these everlasting habitations? They're clearly not in *this* life; after all, no homes in this world last forever. Jesus can only be talking about the *next* life. He wants us to use our position, our wealth, and whatever else we have to help those who are in need and to rescue those who are in dire circumstances. If we do this, when we reach Heaven we will have friends who will receive us into their homes.

The steward needed people to receive him into their homes because he was about to be homeless. We are not going to be in that situation. What Jesus is talking about here is a *reward* for our service – not from God, but from those we helped. When we think about Heaven (if we think about it at all), we tend to think about the things that God will do for us. We don't often think about the things that *other people* will do for us. That is what this parable is telling us to consider.

So let's break this down. How can we be sure that this is what Jesus meant? First of all, the Bible is clear that we will have a home in Heaven. Jesus tells us in this passage that people will receive us into “everlasting habitations”, so we *must* have an “everlasting habitation” that we can receive people into. This is not the only time Jesus mentioned this idea. We also find it here:

John 14:2: “In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you.”

I realize that some modern translations use the word “rooms” instead of “mansions”, but the idea is the same: God has prepared a dwelling place for us in Heaven. This really should not come as a surprise, since the Bible tells us that in the next life we will be living in a great city. Revelation 21 and 22 tells us a great deal about this heavenly city that will one day be our home. We don't have the time to quote those chapters in their entirety, so this will have to suffice:

Revelation 21:23: “And the city had no need of the sun, neither of the moon, to shine in it: for the glory of God did lighten it, and the Lamb is the light thereof.
24 And the nations of them which are saved shall walk in the light of it: and the

kings of the earth do bring their glory and honour into it.”

Where will we be living? Not “on a cloud”, as our culture likes to portray, but *in a city*. Do you know what cities have? *Places to live!* We are not going to be wandering around this great city of gold as a bunch of homeless people, looking for some kind of a park bench to sleep on. We are the children of God. The Lord has promised us a home – a place where we can live and receive friends. That is exactly what He is going to do.

We can see that we *will* have a place to live. But will we remember our life back on Earth? This is an important question. After all, Jesus seems to be saying that the reason people will invite us into their “everlasting habitations” is because they remember what we did for them. This strongly implies that when people die they do not forget the life that they lived.

If this seems surprising, keep in mind that this is not the only passage in Scripture that teaches this. In fact, later on in this very same chapter Jesus tells the story of the rich man and Lazarus. During their lives the rich man lived a fabulous life of ease and plenty, while Lazarus the beggar lived on whatever scraps he could find. When they both died, the rich man went to Hell – but Lazarus did not. The rich man was tormented in the fires of Hell and begged for a single drop of water to ease his pain. This is what Abraham told him:

Luke 16:25: “But Abraham said, Son, remember that thou in thy lifetime receivedst thy good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things: but now he is comforted, and thou art tormented.”

The rich man had not forgotten his life, even though he was in Hell; he could still remember the life of plenty that he had before. The beggar Lazarus had not forgotten his life either. Amazingly, even *Abraham* knew the lives that these two men had lived! All three of these men were dead, and yet they all remembered their old lives. Their deaths had not erased the past.

Will we have a place to live in Heaven? Absolutely. Will we remember the past? Certainly. That is what Jesus told us – not once, but twice *in the same chapter*. Jesus wants us to help others who are in need, and told us that in Heaven they will remember what we have done and repay us.

I realize that it may seem selfish to help others so that we will get repaid later. But note that *Jesus* is the one telling us to do this! In fact, the Lord is actually calling us fools for *not* doing this. We know that we're going to live forever, and yet we don't take advantage of that fact. We have a tremendous opportunity to do good to those who are around us, but we're so caught up in this life that we don't think very much about the life to come.

The Lord wants to change the way that we think. He wants us to think long-term – *very* long-term:

Matthew 6:19: “Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal:
20 But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal:
21 For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.”

God commands Christians to be *heavenly* focused. We need to remember that this world, and everything it contains, is going to be destroyed. This world is not eternal. It is not going to last – but *we* will live forever. Therefore, it doesn't make any sense to lay up treasures here because we are

guaranteed to lose them. It is a foolish investment – it's like taking money and setting it on fire. It is a complete waste of time.

Instead God wants us to be focused on the next world. He wants our hearts to be fixed on Heaven. The problem is that many Christians don't really believe in Heaven. They may claim to believe it, but their actions indicate otherwise. Their lives don't reflect the fact that they are going to have homes there, or will remember their lives and recognize their friends. They *certainly* don't reflect the fact that they can amass treasure there! Many people simply don't take very seriously the things that Jesus told us about the life to come. What Jesus said to Nicodemus has come to pass:

John 3:12: “If I have told you earthly things, and ye believe not, how shall ye believe, if I tell you of heavenly things?”

Jesus told us a great deal about the life to come, but too many people live as if this life is all that there is and the next life is meaningless. That is why Jesus said the children of this world are wiser than the children of light. The children of light are not living strategically! They are not living in light of the life to come.

The Lord is not impressed with the way the righteous are living their lives. After praising the steward for being wise He warns us against being wasteful:

Luke 16:10: “He that is faithful in that which is least is faithful also in much: and he that is unjust in the least is unjust also in much.”

11 If therefore ye have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will commit to your trust the true riches?”

Jesus tells us that those who are faithful in small things will be faithful in great matters, and those who are wicked in small matters will be wicked in great matters. God is telling us *ahead of time* that He is paying close attention to the way we are living our lives. Verse 11 is a warning: are we wisely handling the temporary goods of this life? If we're not, God has no intention of giving us something vastly more important to manage in the world to come.

It's true that all Christians are saved by the sacrifice of Christ and will go to heaven. However, *our life does not end there*. During our time in this world God tests us. He gives us trials to see if we are faithful or faithless – if we are wise or foolish. If we are wise and faithfully serve the Lord during this life, then in the next life God will trust us with much greater matters. However, if we are fools then God is going to trust us with nothing. Yes, we'll be in Heaven, but we will lose out on something that really matters. There is a high price to be paid.

Just in case we missed verse 11, Jesus repeated Himself in the very next verse:

Luke 16:12: “And if ye have not been faithful in that which is another man's, who shall give you that which is your own?”

Jesus is reminding us that *we are stewards*. God has given us many blessings in this life and He expects us to use them for His glory. We need to have a completely different attitude and focus. Christians should realize just how worthless and temporary the things of this world truly are. We know that this world is going to be destroyed. We know that we cannot take our prized possessions to Heaven with us. So why do we put so much focus on things we know we are going to lose? The things of this world *shouldn't matter to us*.

What we ought to be doing is living with a Heavenly focus. We should be doing everything possible to advance the kingdom of God. We should spread the gospel far and wide and help those who are in need. We should give aid and comfort to missionaries and to the saints. We should see ourselves as stewards and realize that everything that we have *actually belongs to God*. The question is simple: how does God want us to invest *His* possessions?

Look at verse 12 again. *Nothing that we have belongs to us*. We belong to God, and everything that we have belongs to God as well. Our job is to advance His kingdom as much as possible. Is that how we are living our life? Is that our focus? Do we even care? Or are we too caught up amassing worldly goods *that we already know we are going to lose one day*?

The whole point of this parable is that Jesus wants us to use our goods *in a way that actually matters*. Since we can't keep them, we need to invest them wisely. It's true that we can't bring them with us to Heaven, but we *can* convert them into Heavenly treasure. We can do things in this life that will impact the life that is to come.

Look at what Jesus says next:

Luke 16:13: “No servant can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon.”

What did the steward do in the parable? He used his position to help other people. He made a difference in the lives of others and he was rewarded for that. The world understands that principle very well.

The question is, do *Christians* understand it? Jesus has told us that we are going to live forever. He has told us that there is a life to come, and we can do things in this life that will have an eternal impact. Jesus told us that we are stewards, not owners, and we should view our life from that perspective. He told us repeatedly to use our possessions to serve God instead of ourselves.

In fact, verse 13 is very blunt: you *cannot* serve both God and money. You can either serve God or you can serve yourself. You can either sacrifice your possessions to serve the Lord and advance His kingdom, or you can spend your life building castles for yourself. But remember: if you spend your life seeking your own wealth then you will die and lose *everything*. You cannot take one penny with you. But if you sacrifice your own desires and spend your life serving God, the Lord will reward you – and in Heaven the people that you helped will reward you as well. The only way to keep your wealth is to use it for the kingdom of God.

When the Pharisees heard these things, they mocked Jesus:

Luke 16:14: “And the Pharisees also, who were covetous, heard all these things: and they derided him.”

What is *our* response going to be? Jesus told the Pharisees of Heavenly things and they refused to believe him. They rejected Him outright and went right back to living a life of selfishness and pride. But what about you? Are you going to reject Him as well, or will you take heed to what He had to say?

Do you know what Jesus did next? He told them the story of the rich man and Lazarus:

Luke 16:19: “There was a certain rich man, which was clothed in purple and fine linen, and fared sumptuously every day:

20 And there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, which was laid at his gate, full of

sores,

21 And desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man's table: moreover the dogs came and licked his sores.”

We have already discussed this passage, so I'm not going to repeat it here. We know how it turned out. The rich man lived a very easy life, but when he died and went to Hell he could not take any of his wealth with him. He lost everything he had and was tormented for the rest of eternity. However, the beggar Lazarus – who had nothing and who lived a painful life – was saved and found comfort and peace.

The rich man's wealth was utterly useless in the next life. It could not save his soul and it could not save him from torment. Now that we understand the context of this passage, the story is even more powerful, isn't it? The Pharisees derided Christ for telling them not to pursue wealth, and then He graphically illustrated just how useless wealth really is. Yes, it may help you in this life – but you are going to be in the next life *for all of eternity*, and it will not help you there.

That is why we need to be wise. That is why we need to use our temporary and fleeting possessions to serve the Lord with all of our heart. Do not be like the foolish rich man, who lost everything; instead be wise, like the steward. Serve the Lord while you can – because when you reach the next life it will make a *great deal* of difference.

It's true that your works do not save you. Our salvation comes from Christ's sacrifice on the cross, not the good deeds that we do. But our actions do have consequences.

THE GOD OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

There are a number of people who claim that the God of the Old Testament is a cruel and vengeful God who punishes people for the smallest offenses and destroys nations left and right. These people say that the God of the New Testament, however, is full of mercy and love and peace. They believe that God changed at some point and became far more merciful than He once was.

The great problem with this theory is that the Bible tells us that God never changes:

Malachi 3:6: “For I am the LORD, I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed.”

If God never changes, but yet we believe that God was more vengeful in the Old Testament than He was in the New Testament, then something is wrong with the way we perceive the Scriptures. I'd like to take this opportunity to study the God of the Old Testament and see what is really going on. We may find a great deal more mercy than is commonly known.

Since we don't have the time to examine every book in the Old Testament, I'd like to focus on the book of Jeremiah. This particular book is considered one of the major prophets – it is a long book that's filled with passages of wrath and anger. If there's any book in the Bible that people tend to think of when they picture a God of wrath, it's this one. Take a look for yourself:

Jeremiah 7:32: “Therefore, behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that it shall no more be called Tophet, nor the valley of the son of Hinnom, but the valley of slaughter: for they shall bury in Tophet, till there be no place.

33 And the carcasses of this people shall be meat for the fowls of the heaven, and for the beasts of the earth; and none shall fray them away.

34 Then will I cause to cease from the cities of Judah, and from the streets of Jerusalem, the voice of mirth, and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom, and the voice of the bride: for the land shall be desolate.”

There's a lot of wrath in those verses, isn't there? God told them that His judgment upon Judah would be so terrible that they would literally *run out of places to bury the dead*. He said that there would be so many dead bodies that they would lie on the ground, unburied, and become food for wild animals. God would destroy Jerusalem so thoroughly that He would *utterly wipe out every last trace of joy and gladness*. That is some pretty severe wrath!

But let's back up a little bit. Jeremiah 7 tells us *what* God was going to do to Judah. It truly is gut-wrenching – but what had Judah done to deserve such awful judgment? If we go back just two verses earlier in that same chapter we will find our answer. Judah was guilty of some staggeringly terrible things:

Jeremiah 7:30: “For the children of Judah have done evil in my sight, saith the LORD: they have set their abominations in the house which is called by my name, to pollute it.

7:31 And they have built the high places of Tophet, which is in the valley of the son

of Hinnom, to burn their sons and their daughters in the fire; which I commanded them not, neither came it into my heart.”

You may remember that the very first commandment – the greatest commandment of all, according to Jesus Christ – was to love the Lord you God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. The Israelites were commanded to worship God alone and serve no other gods – but they had broken that commandment. Not only did they worship idols, but they actually set up idols in *the temple itself* – a place that was supposed to be holy and set apart for the worship of God! Not only did they worship idols, but they actually *sacrificed their children* to those idols. Not only did they sacrifice their children to idols, but they actually *burned their children alive as human sacrifices!* These were not small sins; they were staggering sins, and they had been going on for a long time.

In the New Testament book of Acts there was a time when Ananias and Sapphira lied about the money they had given to the church, and God struck them dead on the spot for those lies. When the nation of Judah began burning their children alive as human sacrifices, did God strike them dead on the spot? Amazingly, no, He did not. Instead He did something else: He called Jeremiah to be a prophet and gave him a message to the people – a message to stop their sins and repent. If the nation repented of their sins then God would forgive them and bless them:

Jeremiah 3:12: “Go and proclaim these words toward the north, and say, Return, thou backsliding Israel, saith the LORD; and I will not cause mine anger to fall upon you: for I am merciful, saith the LORD, and I will not keep anger for ever.

13 Only acknowledge thine iniquity, that thou hast transgressed against the LORD thy God, and hast scattered thy ways to the strangers under every green tree, and ye have not obeyed my voice, saith the LORD.

14 Turn, O backsliding children, saith the LORD; for I am married unto you: and I will take you one of a city, and two of a family, and I will bring you to Zion:

15 And I will give you pastors according to mine heart, which shall feed you with knowledge and understanding.”

God's message to Israel was *not* “You have been very wicked, and I am going to kill all of you because you richly deserve it”. Instead God told them that judgment was coming, but if they repented God would not destroy them. In fact, if they repented then God would gather them and bless them! All they had to do was acknowledge their sin and repent. In other words, God was using Jeremiah to offer the people *mercy*.

In fact, the Lord told them that if they repented He would *not* remove them from the land, in spite of all the wicked things they had done:

Jeremiah 4:1: “If thou wilt return, O Israel, saith the LORD, return unto me: and if thou wilt put away thine abominations out of my sight, then shalt thou not remove.”

God did indeed tell them that judgment was coming – but He also told them how to *stop* the judgment from coming. All they had to do was repent. If they stopped being evil – if they stopped worshipping idols and burning their children alive – then God would forgive them and bless them. They had a simple and straightforward way to avoid the terrible future that God warned them about.

But the people would not repent. They would not listen to God. In fact, they were so wicked that God made Jeremiah a challenge: if he could find just *one* righteous person in the entire city of

Jerusalem then God would pardon their sins and not bring judgment. However, the city was so bad that not one person could be found:

Jeremiah 5:1: “Run ye to and fro through the streets of Jerusalem, and see now, and know, and seek in the broad places thereof, if ye can find a man, if there be any that executeth judgment, that seeketh the truth; and I will pardon it.”

Abraham once asked God to spare Sodom if there were just ten righteous people in it. God offered to spare Jerusalem over *one* righteous man! Amazingly, the entire city was so corrupt that not even a single righteous man could be found. That's how bad things actually were.

God offered to pardon the city if they repented, but they did not repent. So what did God do next? He made them the offer *again*:

Jeremiah 7:1: “The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD, saying,
7:2 Stand in the gate of the LORD's house, and proclaim there this word, and say, Hear the word of the LORD, all ye of Judah, that enter in at these gates to worship the LORD.
7:3 Thus saith the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, Amend your ways and your doings, and I will cause you to dwell in this place.”

You might recognize this as Jeremiah 7 – the very chapter we saw earlier where God said He was going to kill so many people that they would run out of room to bury them. What you might not have realized is the *context* of those verses. God told Jeremiah to proclaim that message *in the temple* – which is where you would expect to find people dedicated to the worship and service of God. These were *temple worshipers* God was addressing! Yes, God did say that He would kill many people – but notice what verse 3 says. The Lord made it clear that if the people repented then God would *not* kill them. If the people stopped their abominations then God would *not* judge them. Instead He would forgive their sins and spare their lives, and they would continue to dwell in the land.

What we need to realize is that God sent Judah a message of death and judgment in order to warn them that *that was their future if they did not repent*. If they repented, however, they would be saved. They would not be killed and the survivors exiled; instead they would be blessed. God warned them of the judgment that was coming *so that they could avoid that judgment altogether*. God was not saying “I'm going to kill you all because you richly deserve it, and there's nothing you can do about it”. Instead God was *offering the people mercy*. He was telling them how to *avoid* the wrath that was coming. All they had to do was repent and stop being evil. Stop lying. Stop murdering. Stop burning children alive as sacrifices to idols. If they stopped then God would forgive them.

How did the temple worshipers respond to God's call for repentance? Well, Jeremiah tells us that instead of repenting they tried to kill him:

Jeremiah 11:19: “But I was like a lamb or an ox that is brought to the slaughter; and I knew not that they had devised devices against me, saying, Let us destroy the tree with the fruit thereof, and let us cut him off from the land of the living, that his name may be no more remembered.”

These people – who supposedly were worshipers of the Lord – really, *really* hated Jeremiah. They hated him so much that Jeremiah bitterly cursed the day he born:

Jeremiah 20:14: "Cursed be the day wherein I was born: let not the day wherein my mother bare me be blessed.

15 Cursed be the man who brought tidings to my father, saying, A man child is born unto thee; making him very glad."

But even though Jeremiah was persecuted, God did not stop offering mercy. God told Jeremiah that He did not want to destroy Judah. What He actually wanted was for the nation to be a source of praise and glory that the whole world could see:

Jeremiah 13:11: "For as the girdle cleaveth to the loins of a man, so have I caused to cleave unto me the whole house of Israel and the whole house of Judah, saith the LORD; that they might be unto me for a people, and for a name, and for a praise, and for a glory: but they would not hear."

The book of Ezekiel tells us that God takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked; what God would much rather see is for the wicked to repent of their sins and do what is right. So God urged Judah to repent *over and over and over again*. God warned the nation that if they didn't repent, terrible judgments would befall them.

Jeremiah took no joy in delivering these messages. He did not delight in telling his neighbors that if they didn't repent they would be brutally killed. The coming judgment was so awful that, even though it was falling upon incredibly wicked people, it moved Jeremiah to tears:

Jeremiah 13:15: "Hear ye, and give ear; be not proud: for the LORD hath spoken.
16 Give glory to the LORD your God, before he cause darkness, and before your feet stumble upon the dark mountains, and, while ye look for light, he turn it into the shadow of death, and make it gross darkness.
17 But if ye will not hear it, my soul shall weep in secret places for your pride; and mine eye shall weep sore, and run down with tears, because the LORD's flock is carried away captive."

This is not a message that is full of hate; instead it's full of love and compassion! Jeremiah wasn't telling people "Just wait until you get what's coming to you! Boy, I am sure going to enjoy watching all of you get slaughtered. That will be a great day." Jeremiah was *genuinely heartbroken* over the coming judgment. He wasn't excited about it or longing for it. He urged the people to humble themselves and pray and repent so that *they could avoid the judgment*. The fact that they refused to listen literally made him break down into tears. Jeremiah was trying to *save people*, not kill them. God used him to extend mercy to people who *definitely* didn't deserve it.

God kept making the offer, even though the people kept refusing it. Before Nebuchadnezzar's army surrounded Jerusalem and besieged it, Jeremiah preached the gospel of repentance for *40 years*. He preached through the reigns of three different kings: Josiah, Jehoiakim, and Zedekiah. He preached year after year after year, all while people burned their children alive to idols and refused to listen to him.

The day finally came when the Babylonian army did surround Jerusalem and lay siege to it. Do you know what God did next? *He offered the people mercy yet again:*

Jeremiah 38:17: “Then said Jeremiah unto Zedekiah, Thus saith the LORD, the God of hosts, the God of Israel; If thou wilt assuredly go forth unto the king of Babylon's princes, then thy soul shall live, and this city shall not be burned with fire; and thou shalt live, and thine house:

38:18 But if thou wilt not go forth to the king of Babylon's princes, then shall this city be given into the hand of the Chaldeans, and they shall burn it with fire, and thou shalt not escape out of their hand.”

At this point the people had spent *decades* persecuting Jeremiah. In fact, Jeremiah had spent the last few years in prison, and he was still in prison when he gave King Zedekiah this message. Judgment was literally just a few hours away, but even at this late hour *God was still offering them a way out*. If the people surrendered to the Babylonians then everything would be fine. If they did this *one thing* and obeyed God then God would spare the city, the life of Zedekiah, and the life of Zedekiah's family. All they had to do was *obey God this one time* and everything would be fine. At this point the city had nothing left to lose – they were entirely out of food and were facing imminent starvation and death.

So did the people repent and obey God? Sadly, no. Zedekiah refused to listen to the Lord, *even when he had nothing left to lose* and everything to gain. God offered him mercy at literally the last possible minute, and Zedekiah turned it down. Since Zedekiah refused God's mercy, he experienced God's wrath:

Jeremiah 52:6: “And in the fourth month, in the ninth day of the month, the famine was sore in the city, so that there was no bread for the people of the land.

7 Then the city was broken up, and all the men of war fled, and went forth out of the city by night by the way of the gate between the two walls, which was by the king's garden; (now the Chaldeans were by the city round about:) and they went by the way of the plain.

8 But the army of the Chaldeans pursued after the king, and overtook Zedekiah in the plains of Jericho; and all his army was scattered from him.

9 Then they took the king, and carried him up unto the king of Babylon to Riblah in the land of Hamath; where he gave judgment upon him.

10 And the king of Babylon slew the sons of Zedekiah before his eyes: he slew also all the princes of Judah in Riblah.

11 Then he put out the eyes of Zedekiah; and the king of Babylon bound him in chains, and carried him to Babylon, and put him in prison till the day of his death.”

This is truly a horrific judgment – but remember, all of this was *completely avoidable*. God told Zedekiah exactly what to do to avoid all the things that happened to him. But Zedekiah would not listen.

When the judgment fell, most of the survivors (which weren't very many) were carried away to Babylon. However, the Babylonians left a few Jews behind in order to work the ground. God promised this surviving remnant that if they obeyed Him and remained in the land, God would watch over them, protect them, and bless them. All they had to do was listen to Him and obey, and *not leave the country*:

Jeremiah 42:9: “And said unto them, Thus saith the LORD, the God of Israel, unto whom ye sent me to present your supplication before him;

42:10 If ye will still abide in this land, then will I build you, and not pull you down,

and I will plant you, and not pluck you up: for I repent me of the evil that I have done unto you.

42:11 Be not afraid of the king of Babylon, of whom ye are afraid; be not afraid of him, saith the LORD: for I am with you to save you, and to deliver you from his hand.

42:12 And I will shew mercies unto you, that he may have mercy upon you, and cause you to return to your own land.”

Notice how merciful God is being! The Lord told them that the time of His wrath was over. If they just stayed in the land then God would bless them and protect them and give them the peace they were looking for. All they had to do to receive these blessings was literally *stay right where they were* in the land of Judah. If they fled then terrible things would befall them:

Jeremiah 42:13: “But if ye say, We will not dwell in this land, neither obey the voice of the LORD your God,

14 Saying, No; but we will go into the land of Egypt, where we shall see no war, nor hear the sound of the trumpet, nor have hunger of bread; and there will we dwell:

15 And now therefore hear the word of the LORD, ye remnant of Judah; Thus saith the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel; If ye wholly set your faces to enter into Egypt, and go to sojourn there;

16 Then it shall come to pass, that the sword, which ye feared, shall overtake you there in the land of Egypt, and the famine, whereof ye were afraid, shall follow close after you there in Egypt; and there ye shall die.

17 So shall it be with all the men that set their faces to go into Egypt to sojourn there; they shall die by the sword, by the famine, and by the pestilence: and none of them shall remain or escape from the evil that I will bring upon them.”

You see, God was testing their faith. At that time Egypt looked very safe and Judah looked very dangerous. God told the people that if they trusted Him – if they believed Him and demonstrated their faith by being obedient and remaining in the land – then God would bless them and protect them and give them a great future. However, if they refused to trust in Him and fled to Egypt – which *seemed* much safer – then they would die.

Do you know what the people did? They fled to Egypt. Do you know what the people did once they got to Egypt? They doubled-down on their idolatry – *the very thing that brought God's judgment upon them to begin with*. They refused to repent, even *after* seeing the terrible things God had done to Jerusalem:

Jeremiah 44:16: “As for the word that thou hast spoken unto us in the name of the LORD, we will not hearken unto thee.

17 But we will certainly do whatsoever thing goeth forth out of our own mouth, to burn incense unto the queen of heaven, and to pour out drink offerings unto her, as we have done, we, and our fathers, our kings, and our princes, in the cities of Judah, and in the streets of Jerusalem: for then had we plenty of victuals, and were well, and saw no evil.”

Jeremiah had spent *forty years* telling the people that God's judgment was going to come upon them because of their wicked idolatry. These people then *experienced* that judgment. They saw all the

prophecies come true. They saw the power of God – but instead of repenting they *continued to serve idols* and insisted that their prosperity came from idol worship, not the Lord. They were going to worship the idols of Egypt no matter what, and even God Himself could not stop them.

So God told them that He was going to send Nebuchadnezzar to Egypt and have him conquer it, and would burn the idols that they were trusting:

Jeremiah 43:10: “And say unto them, Thus saith the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel; Behold, I will send and take Nebuchadrezzar the king of Babylon, my servant, and will set his throne upon these stones that I have hid; and he shall spread his royal pavilion over them.

43:11 And when he cometh, he shall smite the land of Egypt, and deliver such as are for death to death; and such as are for captivity to captivity; and such as are for the sword to the sword.

43:12 And I will kindle a fire in the houses of the gods of Egypt; and he shall burn them, and carry them away captives: and he shall array himself with the land of Egypt, as a shepherd putteth on his garment; and he shall go forth from thence in peace.

43:13 He shall break also the images of Bethshemesh, that is in the land of Egypt; and the houses of the gods of the Egyptians shall he burn with fire.”

God told them *in advance* that death and judgment were coming upon Egypt. The Lord told them that Nebuchadnezzar was going to conquer the land and kill many people and burn their worthless idols. Do you know what God was doing? *He was offering them mercy!* If the people had believed God then they would have repented of their sins and ran out of Egypt like their lives depended upon it – *because they literally did*. Even at this late hour, and even after all their repeated refusals to repent, and even after they rejected God's mercy time and time again, *God was still offering them even more mercy*.

Do you see how astoundingly generous and merciful God was? The people God was showing love and compassion to were absolutely guilty. They were not basically good people; they were desperately wicked and depraved. These weren't people who didn't know any better; they were people who had been warned *repeatedly* for *forty years* and had literally seen God's wrath in-person (along with fulfilled prophecies), and had *still* not repented. Yet, *even after all that*, God still offered them a chance to repent. He still extended His hand out to them.

This is how God Himself put it:

Jeremiah 7:25: “Since the day that your fathers came forth out of the land of Egypt unto this day I have even sent unto you all my servants the prophets, daily rising up early and sending them:

7:26 Yet they hearkened not unto me, nor inclined their ear, but hardened their neck: they did worse than their fathers.

Judah's rebellion wasn't something that started in the days of Jeremiah, nor was Jeremiah the first prophet that God sent to tell them that judgment was coming and they needed to repent. God had actually been warning them for *hundreds of years*. This had been going on since the time of Moses. God could have simply struck them all dead the first time they stepped out of line; that seems to be how people think the God of the Old Testament acted. But that is not at all what the Lord did. God, as it

said, “rose up early” and sent prophet after prophet, which Judah rejected and persecuted and imprisoned and killed. After hundreds of years of wickedness (and human sacrifice), God finally had enough:

Jeremiah 44:22: “So that the LORD could no longer bear, because of the evil of your doings, and because of the abominations which ye have committed; therefore is your land a desolation, and an astonishment, and a curse, without an inhabitant, as at this day.”

God is very longsuffering, but His patience has a limit. He will wait a very long time and offer mercy again and again, but there does come a day when His mercy finally stops and judgment comes. Yet, as we have seen, God is willing to save people even up to the very last minute *if only they would repent*. When 2 Peter 3:9 says that God was not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to the knowledge of repentance, it is very serious. Look at how many times (and at such great personal cost to Jeremiah!) God offered mercy to the most wicked and depraved people.

Do you see how God's evangelistic efforts are so much more passionate than our own? Would *you* have put so much time and effort – and gone to such great personal expense – to repeatedly offer mercy to such wicked and hard-hearted people? *Yet God did exactly that*. The Lord kept going and kept persisting long after everyone else would have quit and gone home, and He kept proclaiming His message to people who He knew hated it and would not listen to it.

There is another side to this as well. Yes, God often preached a hellfire-and-brimstone message. Jesus Himself did this time and time again; He had far more to say about Hell and its horrors than about Heaven. But the book of Jeremiah should help put this into context. The reason God does this is so that *people will repent and not experience all those terrible things*. God warned people of the coming judgment *in order to save them from it*. He told them of the danger and then offered them mercy and forgiveness. God didn't lie about what was coming or hide it. The wrath of God is vast – but He offers *tremendous* mercy, even at the last possible minute and even to the most wicked of people. God wants everyone to know of the great danger they are in *so that they might be saved*.

Think of it this way. It is one thing to go to the doctor and hear that you should take a certain medicine because it will make you happier and give you a better and more comfortable life. It is quite another thing to be told that if you do not take that medicine then you will die, and will die very quickly and painfully. That puts the situation in a completely different perspective! The first message is not terribly important, especially if you are more or less happy with your life. The second message, though, is one that only a fool would ignore. If you are in tremendous danger then you need to know about it immediately, lest you meet a terrible fate. How heartbreaking it would be to meet that fate and then find out it was entirely avoidable!

In the New Testament Jesus offered forgiveness and grace to all who repented – and in the Old Testament God made *exactly the same offer*. In the New Testament the Bible tells us that God loved us and died for us while we were still sinners; in the Old Testament we see God reaching out in love and mercy to desperately wicked people. In both testaments we see God warning of terrible judgments that are coming – and in both testaments we find God offering forgiveness and a way to avoid those judgments and receive peace, joy, and everlasting life. The message of the two testaments are not different; they are actually the same, if only we will take the time to read them a little bit closer.

FINISHING THE COURSE

In this lesson I want to take a look at two different characters in the Bible. These two men made very different decisions and led very different lives. Both of these men have an important lesson to teach us – if we will only take the time to listen.

In the New Testament there is a person whose name is Demas. This man is one of the most obscure characters in the Bible. He only appears in three verses – but those verses have quite a story to tell.

The first time Demas is mentioned is in the book of Colossians. The apostle Paul mentions him in passing:

Colossians 4:14: "Luke, the beloved physician, and Demas, greet you."

This letter was written while Paul was being held in prison in Rome. Despite the dire circumstances, though, Paul was not alone; Luke and Demas were both with him. Demas was willing to work alongside Paul even though he was in jail. That is really something! It shows the kind of person that Demas was. The fact that Paul mentioned Demas by name is no small matter either. (How would you like for *your* name to be mentioned in one of Paul's letters?) We don't know much about Demas, but we do know that people thought he was a good man. After all, he was standing there at Paul's side, in spite of his imprisonment.

Demas is mentioned again in Paul's letter to Philemon:

Philemon 1:24: "Marcus, Aristarchus, Demas, Lucas, my fellowlabourers."

Like Colossians, this letter was also written while Paul was still imprisoned in Rome. Once again, despite the terrible circumstances, Demas is there at Paul's side. The apostle even calls him a fellow laborer – which is high praise! Demas was working alongside Paul while the apostle is in prison. He was helping the apostle Paul in his time of need.

There is one more mention of Demas in the Bible, and it can be found in 2 Timothy. When that letter was written the apostle was once again in prison. This time, though, things were different. The first time he was imprisoned by Rome he was set free, but now Paul knew he was going to be executed. This letter was probably the last one that Paul wrote, and it was written shortly before his death in 67 AD.

This is the last thing Paul had to say about Demas:

2 Timothy 4:10: "For Demas hath forsaken me, having loved this present world, and is departed unto Thessalonica; Crescens to Galatia, Titus unto Dalmatia."

Demas – the very man who had stood by Paul during the apostle's first imprisonment – had now abandoned him, just when Paul's need was greatest. Paul was about to be executed, but Demas was nowhere to be found. Paul even explains why Demas did this: the reason he abandoned Paul was because he loved the world. When death approached and Demas had to make a choice, he chose the world over God. He did exactly what the apostle John said not to do:

1 John 2:15: “Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him.”

We each have a choice: to love this world, or to love God. The apostle Paul chose to love God, and it cost him his life – but it saved his soul. Demas, though, made a different choice: he chose to love this world. He abandoned God and turned instead to the delights that this world had to offer.

Demas seemed like a man of God, but he really wasn't. The reason we know this is because when things truly became dangerous he abandoned God in order to save himself. The Bible is clear that people who do this never knew God at all:

1 John 2:19: “They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would no doubt have continued with us: but they went out, that they might be made manifest that they were not all of us.”

What John is saying is that true Christians go the distance. They do not fall away when hard times come, and they don't leave when things become dangerous. Those who fall away and abandon God are just showing that they never knew God at all. Their religion was phony. They were just pretenders. Real Christians – genuine ones – pass the test; false ones fall away.

Demas started out with great promise, but when things became risky he left. He started the race but he failed to finish it. When it counted most he abandoned his post and walked away, leaving the apostle Paul to die. He chose the riches of this world over the sufferings of Christ. It may have saved his life, but it cost him his soul.

Now that you've heard the story of Demas, let's take a look at Manasseh. This man was King Hezekiah's son, and he ruled over the land of Judah. Although Hezekiah faithfully served the Lord, Manasseh decided to live a life of total wickedness. The crimes that he committed were truly horrifying. He worshiped Baal:

2 Kings 21:1: “Manasseh was twelve years old when he began to reign, and reigned fifty and five years in Jerusalem. And his mother's name was Hephzibah.
2 And he did that which was evil in the sight of the Lord, after the abominations of the heathen, whom the Lord cast out before the children of Israel.
3 For he built up again the high places which Hezekiah his father had destroyed; and he reared up altars for Baal, and made a grove, as did Ahab king of Israel; and worshipped all the host of heaven, and served them.”

He polluted the Temple with idols:

2 Kings 21:4: “And he built altars in the house of the Lord, of which the Lord said, In Jerusalem will I put my name.
5 And he built altars for all the host of heaven in the two courts of the house of the Lord.”

He burned his sons alive as an offering to false gods:

2 Kings 21:6: “And he made his son pass through the fire, and observed times, and

used enchantments, and dealt with familiar spirits and wizards: he wrought much wickedness in the sight of the Lord, to provoke him to anger.

7 And he set a graven image of the grove that he had made in the house, of which the Lord said to David, and to Solomon his son, In this house, and in Jerusalem, which I have chosen out of all tribes of Israel, will I put my name for ever:

8 Neither will I make the feet of Israel move any more out of the land which I gave their fathers; only if they will observe to do according to all that I have commanded them, and according to all the law that my servant Moses commanded them.”

He was so bad that he persuaded Israel to be even more evil than the ancient Canaanites:

2 Kings 21:9: “But they hearkened not: and Manasseh seduced them to do more evil than did the nations whom the Lord destroyed before the children of Israel.”

Manasseh was desperately wicked. Because of the tremendous evil of this man, God said that He was going to judge the land of Judah. In fact, God promised to destroy the entire nation and hand them over to their enemies:

2 Kings 21:10: “And the Lord spake by his servants the prophets, saying,
11 Because Manasseh king of Judah hath done these abominations, and hath done wickedly above all that the Amorites did, which were before him, and hath made Judah also to sin with his idols:

12 Therefore thus saith the Lord God of Israel, Behold, I am bringing such evil upon Jerusalem and Judah, that whosoever heareth of it, both his ears shall tingle.

13 And I will stretch over Jerusalem the line of Samaria, and the plummet of the house of Ahab: and I will wipe Jerusalem as a man wipeth a dish, wiping it, and turning it upside down.

14 And I will forsake the remnant of mine inheritance, and deliver them into the hand of their enemies; and they shall become a prey and a spoil to all their enemies;

15 Because they have done that which was evil in my sight, and have provoked me to anger, since the day their fathers came forth out of Egypt, even unto this day.”

God said that He was going to wipe away Jerusalem the way one would wipe a dish. He was going to devastate the country and forsake them.

Manasseh, though, did not care. Instead he continued to murder the innocent:

2 Kings 21:16: “Moreover Manasseh shed innocent blood very much, till he had filled Jerusalem from one end to another; beside his sin wherewith he made Judah to sin, in doing that which was evil in the sight of the Lord.”

Here we see that Manasseh filled the land with innocent blood. He was a murderer, an idolator, and he practiced human sacrifice. His life was an abomination to God.

God did exactly what He said He would do. Decades after Manasseh died, the Lord sent the king of Babylon to destroy Jerusalem:

2 Kings 24:1: “In his days Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came up, and Jehoiakim

became his servant three years: then he turned and rebelled against him.

2 And the Lord sent against him bands of the Chaldees, and bands of the Syrians, and bands of the Moabites, and bands of the children of Ammon, and sent them against Judah to destroy it, according to the word of the Lord, which he spake by his servants the prophets.

3 Surely at the commandment of the Lord came this upon Judah, to remove them out of his sight, for the sins of Manasseh, according to all that he did;

4 And also for the innocent blood that he shed: for he filled Jerusalem with innocent blood; which the Lord would not pardon.”

King Nebuchadnezzar demolished Jerusalem: he burned the city, tore down its walls, destroyed the Temple, looted everything, and carried away its people. Verses 3 and 4 tell us that this was done because of the terrible sins of Manasseh. God was so angry at the king's wickedness that He pulverized the entire nation.

But that is not the end of the story. You see, when Manasseh would not repent the Lord sent the Assyrians against him. The Assyrians carried him away and put him in prison:

2 Chronicles 33:10: “And the Lord spake to Manasseh, and to his people: but they would not hearken.”

11 Wherefore the Lord brought upon them the captains of the host of the king of Assyria, which took Manasseh among the thorns, and bound him with fetters, and carried him to Babylon.”

At this point something very interesting happened. When Manasseh had lost everything and was at the lowest point in his life, he sincerely repented of what he had done – and the Lord heard him:

2 Chronicles 33:12: “And when he was in affliction, he besought the Lord his God, and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers,

13 And prayed unto him: and he was intreated of him, and heard his supplication, and brought him again to Jerusalem into his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the Lord he was God.”

When God set Manasseh free from prison and returned him to Judah, the king continued to serve the Lord. He removed the idols from the land and commanded the nation to serve God:

2 Chronicles 33:14: “Now after this he built a wall without the city of David, on the west side of Gihon, in the valley, even to the entering in at the fish gate, and compassed about Ophel, and raised it up a very great height, and put captains of war in all the fenced cities of Judah.

15 And he took away the strange gods, and the idol out of the house of the Lord, and all the altars that he had built in the mount of the house of the Lord, and in Jerusalem, and cast them out of the city.

16 And he repaired the altar of the Lord, and sacrificed thereon peace offerings and thank offerings, and commanded Judah to serve the Lord God of Israel.”

Manasseh changed. He truly repented. He abandoned his wickedness and sought after God, and

he found forgiveness. He spent the rest of his life serving the Lord and urging the nation to do the same.

Now, there were still consequences for what he had done. Decades after he died God sent the Babylonians against Jerusalem, and they utterly destroyed the city – just as the Lord had promised. God forgave Manasseh, but He kept His word.

The story of these two men illustrates an important truth. Demas turned from doing what was right and chose to abandon God. Therefore, as Ezekiel had warned centuries earlier, Demas lost his soul:

Ezekiel 18:26: “When a righteous man turneth away from his righteousness, and committeth iniquity, and dieth in them; for his iniquity that he hath done shall he die.”

Demas turned away from righteousness and chose the world over God. That may have saved his life, but it cost him his eternity.

Manasseh, though, made a very different choice. He abandoned his wickedness and cried out to God. Despite all the things he had done, he found forgiveness and died a righteous man:

Ezekiel 18:27: “Again, when the wicked man turneth away from his wickedness that he hath committed, and doeth that which is lawful and right, he shall save his soul alive.”

28 Because he considereth, and turneth away from all his transgressions that he hath committed, he shall surely live, he shall not die.”

The reason I say all of this is because it is critically important to *finish well*. It is not enough to serve God in your youth; you have to finish the course! You have to keep the faith. You cannot just abandon God and walk away; you have to stick with it until the very end. The way that you finish your life is incredibly important.

As long as you are alive there is still time to change your course. There is still time to abandon your sins and seek after God. You can still repent, as Manasseh did, and end your life differently from the way you started it. Do not follow the example of Demas and join him on his road to Hell. Repent and change, while there is still time.

If you are marching onward toward Heaven, *don't stop*. Instead continue to follow the example of the apostle Paul:

2 Timothy 4:5: “But watch thou in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, make full proof of thy ministry.

6 For I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand.

7 I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith:

8 Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing.”

Are you going to fight the good fight and finish the course? Are you going to keep the faith, or will you abandon it? What choice will you make? Your decision will matter – in fact, it will matter for

all of eternity. As Jesus said, those who forsake Him and try to hold onto their lives will lose them, but those who give up their live for His sake will find everlasting life.

ABORTION

I never intended to write a paper on the topic of abortion. Usually I only write about things when something needs to be said. When it comes to this topic, though, I thought that *surely* all Christians understand that murdering children and selling their organs is a terrible, *terrible* sin against God. There's simply no way that any Christian could ever support that – right?

But it turns out that's not the case. There are many Christians who have no problem with abortion. In fact, the goalposts have been moved. It used to be that abortion only involved murdering children *before* they were born. Now we are being told that it's perfectly fine to murder them *after* they're born as well. After all, they say, an infant isn't really that different from an unborn baby. Even a toddler isn't self-aware or fully developed. Young children aren't really “human” after all. Some people claim that they are entirely disposable when they are young, and if you want to kill your infants and sell their organs then you go right ahead. God, we are told, has no problem with it.

It really says a lot about our time when we have to tell *other Christians* that children really *are* human beings, that it is wrong to murder them, and that it is evil to harvest their organs and sell them. There was a time when Christians understood that murdering people (*especially* innocent children) was a terrible sin. These days, though, it's becoming hard to find a sin that the modern church *don't* support.

So, let's get started. Is it a sin to murder innocent people? Yes, actually, it is. Despite what you may have been told, murder really *is* a sin. Now, I'm sure you think I'm going to go to the Ten Commandments to defend this claim, but I'm not. Let's take a look at a far more graphic example:

2 Kings 24:1: “In his days Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came up, and Jehoiakim became his servant three years: then he turned and rebelled against him.

2 And the Lord sent against him bands of the Chaldees, and bands of the Syrians, and bands of the Moabites, and bands of the children of Ammon, and sent them against Judah to destroy it, according to the word of the Lord, which he spake by his servants the prophets.

3 Surely at the commandment of the Lord came this upon Judah, to remove them out of his sight, for the sins of Manasseh, according to all that he did;

4 And also for the innocent blood that he shed: for he filled Jerusalem with innocent blood; which the Lord would not pardon.”

Manasseh was king over Jerusalem, and during his reign he did terrible things. He shed a great deal of innocent blood – which means that he murdered many innocent people. This angered the Lord tremendously, and He refused to pardon what Manasseh did. The innocent blood of Manasseh's countless victims cried out to God for vengeance, and the cry was so great that God sent armies against Jerusalem. The reason He sent those armies was *to destroy the city* and slaughter its inhabitants. Since the nation killed innocent people, God decided to kill the nation in return.

As you can see, God is not “perfectly fine” with the idea of killing innocent people. He *hates* it. He hates it so much that it actually brings God's judgment down upon the *entire nation*. Killing innocent people is one of the few things that will cause God to destroy entire countries. He hates it *that much*.

But, some claim, the unborn aren't actually “people”. Even infants and toddlers aren't really people. They're just clumps of undeveloped cells; they're not fully sentient yet or anything. Killing

them and harvesting their organs is perfectly fine – right? Actually, *no*, it's not fine. I am here to tell you that it is most certainly *not fine*. The Bible repeatedly refers to pregnant women as being “with child”. Take a look:

Genesis 16:11: “And the angel of the Lord said unto her, Behold, thou art with child and shalt bear a son, and shalt call his name Ishmael; because the Lord hath heard thy affliction.”

Genesis 19:36: “Thus were both the daughters of Lot with child by their father.”

Genesis 25:21: “And Isaac intreated the Lord for his wife, because she was barren: and the Lord was intreated of him, and Rebekah his wife conceived.
22 And the children struggled together within her; and she said, If it be so, why am I thus? And she went to enquire of the Lord.”

I could go on and give many more examples – the Bible is very consistent about this – but I think I've made my point. Pregnant women are *with child*. (Yes, I realize that modern translations use the word “pregnant” instead of “with child”. Given how many Christians support abortion and even get abortions themselves, I'm not at all surprised that modern translations try to appease people by hiding the reality of what “being pregnant” really means. But facts are facts; changing the language does not change the reality of what is really going on.)

You still don't believe that the unborn are children? Take a look at Genesis 25:21-22. The Bible says that Rebekah conceived, and at that point she had two *children* inside her. The unborn “things” inside her were *children*. They were not just a clump of undeveloped cells. They were *human beings*. People today say “Oh, it's not really a child; it's just a fetus” – apparently ignorant of the fact that “fetus” is just a Latin word that means “unborn baby”. Using a Latin term instead of the English word *doesn't change what it is*.

The truth is that people already know that the unborn are human beings. This isn't some great secret. If that unborn human being is *wanted* then its parents rejoice over it, give it names, take ultrasound pictures of it, and start preparing their home for it. If they have a miscarriage then they mourn over the loss of their child. If someone were to somehow kidnap their unborn child, kill it, and harvest its organs, the parents would never dream of saying “Oh well, it doesn't really matter; it was just a clump of cells. No biggie.” It's only when the child *isn't* wanted that we suddenly start coming up with excuses as to why it's ok to crush the skull of the baby and tear it limb from limb. But you can't have it both ways. If it is a child *when you want it to be*, then it is also a child when it's a big inconvenience to you. Its innate humanity does *not* depend on whether or not you want to keep it alive.

Life begins at conception, not at implantation or when it becomes a teenager. The Bible is very clear about this:

Genesis 4:1: “And Adam knew Eve his wife; and she conceived, and bare Cain, and said, I have gotten a man from the Lord.”

Genesis 4:17: “And Cain knew his wife; and she conceived, and bare Enoch: and he builded a city, and called the name of the city, after the name of his son, Enoch.”

Genesis 16:4: “And he went in unto Hagar, and she conceived: and when she saw

that she had conceived, her mistress was despised in her eyes.”

Genesis 21:2: “For Sarah conceived, and bare Abraham a son in his old age, at the set time of which God had spoken to him.”

Genesis 25:21: “And Isaac intreated the Lord for his wife, because she was barren: and the Lord was intreated of him, and Rebekah his wife conceived.”

This really should be obvious. Conception is the point when the egg is fertilized; it is when the entire process begins. People may argue that there's not much chance of survival until implantation happens, but that is completely irrelevant. You see, the person's chance of survival has *no impact* on whether that creature is a human being and whether his life has actually begun. For that matter, people have little chance of survival on their own until they're at least in the first grade; toddlers just don't do very well if left alone in the wild. The real question is not “When is the person old enough to take care of himself and live on his own?” No, what really matters is *when does his life begin* – and it obviously begins at conception. Let's be serious: if you suddenly enter a life-threatening situation and your chance of survival is low, *you don't stop being a human being*. Whether or not you have a chance of living another 24 hours is *completely unrelated* to whether or not you are a human.

Interestingly, the Bible tells us that conception is when the child acquires its sin nature:

Psalm 51:5: “Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me.”

This verse is not saying that David was the product of an adulterous affair; instead it is talking about the doctrine of original sin. All of us inherit the sin nature of Adam. We are not merely *born* sinners; we are actually *conceived* as sinners. We have a sin nature from the moment of conception. Now, it should be obvious that in order to have a sin nature *we have to be people*. Clumps of cells cannot have a sin nature. Animals cannot have a sin nature. Only *people with souls* can have sin natures.

Take a look at this:

Luke 1:13: “But the angel said unto him, Fear not, Zacharias: for thy prayer is heard; and thy wife Elisabeth shall bear thee a son, and thou shalt call his name John.

14 And thou shalt have joy and gladness; and many shall rejoice at his birth.

15 For he shall be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink; and he shall be filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother's womb.”

John the Baptist was filled with the Holy Spirit *before* he was born. This obviously means that the unborn are able to be filled with the Spirit! Now, animals can't be filled with the Spirit, and clumps of cells can't be filled with the Spirit either. Only *people* can be filled with the Holy Spirit. Therefore, John the Baptist was obviously a person *before* he was born.

The “thing” that starts growing when a woman becomes pregnant is a *human being*. It is a *child* that has a sin nature and that is able to be filled with the Holy Spirit. The Bible tells us that harming this unborn child carries serious consequences:

Exodus 21:22: “If men strive, and hurt a woman with child, so that her fruit depart from her, and yet no mischief follow: he shall be surely punished, according as the woman's husband will lay upon him; and he shall pay as the judges determine.

23 And if any mischief follow, then thou shalt give life for life,

24 Eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot,

25 Burning for burning, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.”

This passage examines the situation where a man hurts a pregnant woman *accidentally* and causes her to give birth prematurely. If there is no harm to the child then he is forced to pay a fine. However, if there *is* harm to the child then he will be punished, *even though it was an accident*. If what he did causes the child to die then *he is to be executed*. The passage is very clear about this! If his actions caused “mischief” to the child – if he harmed the baby in any way – then he is guilty, even though it was purely unintentional. If his actions lead to the death of the child, then in the eyes of God he is guilty of murder and was to be executed for his crime. (If that was the punishment for *accidentally* harming the unborn baby then imagine how much worse it would be to harm the child on purpose!) In other words, abortion carried the *death penalty*. In the sight of God it is murder, plain and simple.

One of the things that fascinates me about this topic is that people who support abortion are almost always against capital punishment. This means that while they are 100% against the execution of rapists, murderers, and child abusers, they *support* the murder of innocent children – children who have committed no crimes. In other words, they are *against* putting to death dangerous felons, but they *support* the violent dismembering of little children. Rapists should have their lives spared, but children should be killed and have their organs harvested and sold. It's really hard to think of a more demonic position to take than that. There is nothing the least bit Christian about murdering an innocent person and selling their liver – and the fact that this is even a matter of debate among Christians is a sign of how evil and depraved the modern church has become.

There are all kinds of arguments that people use to try to justify abortion, but I'm not going to try to cover them all here. It all comes down to this: the unborn are *human beings*, and it is wrong to kill innocent human beings. It is a *very serious* and evil thing to do. Yes, I realize that there may be human beings in your life who are causing you a lot of trouble. It may be that if those people were dead, you would be a lot happier. Maybe they are causing you pain, and if they would just die everything would be great. Maybe you didn't ask for that person to come into your life, and the whole situation is unfair. But here is the problem: *that does not give you the right to kill them*. You do not have the right to murder other people in order to make your own life more bearable. No matter how much happier you might be if that other person was dead, *you do not have the right to kill them*.

If you *do* have the right to kill anyone who gets in your way, then that obviously means that other people have the right to murder *you* when they decide that you are getting in their way. If the lives of other people are not sacred then your own life isn't sacred either. You cannot claim a right to life and then turn around and deny that right to others. You cannot say “Well, my life counts and theirs doesn't.” After all, it doesn't take very much imagination to imagine someone else saying “Well, *my* life is the one that counts, and you are the one who is a bother.”

If you have some sort of medical problem that makes it impossible to save both the mother and the child, then that is one thing. In that case it makes sense to save the mother. Most abortions, however, are *not* done because of dangerous pregnancies that are putting lives at risk, or because of cases of rape or incest. The majority of abortions are done purely for reason of convenience.

The bottom line is this: the unborn are *people*. Children are *people*. The Bible is crystal clear about this. It is wrong to murder innocent people, and it is wrong to harvest their organs. It is wrong to kill other people, even if it will make your own life more convenient. God *hates* it when the innocent are killed. In fact, He hates it so much that it brings down His judgment upon the wicked nations that dares to do such a thing. It is not something that Christians should support.

ALL THINGS WORK TOGETHER FOR GOOD

Today I want to take a look at one of the most well-known verses in the Bible. The reason I want to do this is because I believe this verse has been completely misinterpreted in this age of me-centric Christianity. Our culture has taught us to think that “it's all about me”, and that has had a severe impact on our ability to understand the Bible.

The verse that I want to discuss is this one:

Romans 8:28: “And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.”

When the modern generation reads this verse they often interpret it like this: “All of the trials in life are just the road I have to take in order to get to a better life. I am going through a rough spot now, but on the other side of this trial my life is going to be a lot better.” As far as today's generation goes, the verse might as well read like this: “And we know that all things work together for my personal benefit, so that my life might be made better.”

But is that really true? Is that actually what that verse means? I think the answer is a resounding *no*. In our fervent desire to make everything about ourselves, the true meaning of this verse has become lost. The truth of the matter is quite different.

When people think of this verse they tend to think of two examples: Joseph and Job. Joseph, as you may recall, was sold into slavery by his brothers. Eventually that led to a series of circumstances that put him in charge of Egypt. Joseph went from being sold as a slave (and later being put in prison) to being second in command over the entire country; he went from being impoverished in prison to being royalty.

Job's case is a little different, but the story ends in a similar way. Job went through some terrible trials: he lost his health, his family, and his wealth. However, after the trial was over Job got everything back, and he became an even greater man than he was before. The trials of both Job and Joseph led to personal enrichment and wealth – which enforces the common interpretation of Romans 8:28.

But does that really happen every single time? Do all trials end in fame, fortune, and personal enrichment? Do all trials result in a better life? Well, let's stop and think about that for a moment, and look at a few other famous Biblical characters.

In the Old Testament there was a prophet by the name of Ezekiel. He was a righteous and faithful man, and he served the Lord all his life. When the Lord gave him a message he delivered it, and when the Lord gave him a command he obeyed it. There came a time when Ezekiel was faced with a great trial. God told him that He was going to kill Ezekiel's wife (whom he loved very much), and He commanded Ezekiel not to mourn over her death:

Ezekiel 24:15: “Also the word of the Lord came unto me, saying,
16 Son of man, behold, I take away from thee the desire of thine eyes with a stroke:
yet neither shalt thou mourn nor weep, neither shall thy tears run down.
17 Forbear to cry, make no mourning for the dead, bind the tire of thine head upon thee, and put on thy shoes upon thy feet, and cover not thy lips, and eat not the bread of men.
18 So I spake unto the people in the morning: and at even my wife died; and I did in

the morning as I was commanded.”

The reason the Lord did this was to warn the people of Israel that terrible judgment was coming. Ezekiel's actions were a very graphic and potent sign of what was to come. The trial was very difficult and painful for Ezekiel, but that was the entire point:

Ezekiel 24:21: “Speak unto the house of Israel, Thus saith the Lord God; Behold, I will profane my sanctuary, the excellency of your strength, the desire of your eyes, and that which your soul pitieth; and your sons and your daughters whom ye have left shall fall by the sword.

22 And ye shall do as I have done: ye shall not cover your lips, nor eat the bread of men.

23 And your tires shall be upon your heads, and your shoes upon your feet: ye shall not mourn nor weep; but ye shall pine away for your iniquities, and mourn one toward another.

24 Thus Ezekiel is unto you a sign: according to all that he hath done shall ye do: and when this cometh, ye shall know that I am the Lord God.”

After this trial was over, did Ezekiel get his wife back? No. Did God give him another wife? No. Did Ezekiel's life improve now that his wife was gone? No. The reason God did this was not to improve Ezekiel's life, but to warn the entire nation that if they did not repent God would send a terrible judgment upon them. God did this for the benefit of *the nation*, not for the benefit of Ezekiel.

Another example of someone who suffered greatly is the apostle Paul. During the course of his ministry he experienced countless trials and hardships:

2 Corinthians 11:24: “Of the Jews five times received I forty stripes save one.

25 Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day I have been in the deep;

26 In journeyings often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils by mine own countrymen, in perils by the heathen, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren;

27 In weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness.”

That is some pretty severe torment! Did these sufferings enrich Paul's life? Did they lead to fame and fortune? Was his life improved by the beatings and imprisonments that he received? Not exactly. The apostle tells us that all of these things actually happened for a very different reason – to further the spreading of the gospel:

Philippians 1:12: “But I would ye should understand, brethren, that the things which happened unto me have fallen out rather unto the furtherance of the gospel;

13 So that my bonds in Christ are manifest in all the palace, and in all other places;

14 And many of the brethren in the Lord, waxing confident by my bonds, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.”

According to Paul himself, the many trials that he faced were not for *his* benefit, but were to

further the gospel itself. Likewise, Ezekiel's trials were not for his benefit, but were to warn the nation of Israel to repent.

Which brings us back to Joseph. According to Joseph himself, the reason all those terrible things befell him was *not* so that he could one day be royalty and live a fabulous life. They instead happened so that God could save the lives of many people:

Genesis 50:19: “And Joseph said unto them, Fear not: for am I in the place of God?
20 But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive.”

Why did God afflict Joseph? In order to save the lives of his family – the very people who hated him, persecuted him, and sold him into slavery! God put Joseph through a terrible ordeal in order to save Joseph's *enemies*. It wasn't about Joseph at all.

We can find something similar in the story of Job. One of the things that people tend to overlook is that Job is not the only person in the story who suffered. A lot of people lost their lives:

Job 1:14: “And there came a messenger unto Job, and said, The oxen were plowing, and the asses feeding beside them:
15 And the Sabeans fell upon them, and took them away; yea, they have slain the servants with the edge of the sword; and I only am escaped alone to tell thee.
16 While he was yet speaking, there came also another, and said, The fire of God is fallen from heaven, and hath burned up the sheep, and the servants, and consumed them; and I only am escaped alone to tell thee.
17 While he was yet speaking, there came also another, and said, The Chaldeans made out three bands, and fell upon the camels, and have carried them away, yea, and slain the servants with the edge of the sword; and I only am escaped alone to tell thee.
18 While he was yet speaking, there came also another, and said, Thy sons and thy daughters were eating and drinking wine in their eldest brother's house:
19 And, behold, there came a great wind from the wilderness, and smote the four corners of the house, and it fell upon the young men, and they are dead; and I only am escaped alone to tell thee.”

When God tried Job's faith, He allowed Satan to kill Job's servants and children. In other words, the reason Job's children had to die was not to benefit *them*, but was to benefit Job. All of those people died *in order to benefit someone else*.

That is the point we miss. It is absolutely true that all things work together for good, for those who love God. However, what we forget is that sometimes the good is for *someone else* and not ourselves. Ezekiel suffered in order to warn the Israelites. Paul suffered so that the gospel might be spread. Joseph suffered to save the lives of his family. Job's children died so that Job's faith could be tested.

I am not saying that our trials *never* result in personal blessings. There are indeed times when the trials in our life are followed by periods of blessing – and there are examples of that throughout the Bible. It is also true that when we suffer for the sake of Christ, we will receive Heavenly rewards.

My point is that we tend to think that everything that happens to us is somehow about us. We think that when God sends us a trial, the next thing He will send is a great blessing that makes

everything better. We overlook the many godly people who suffered and saw no reward for it:

Hebrews 11:36: “And others had trial of cruel mockings and scourgings, yea, moreover of bonds and imprisonment:

37 They were stoned, they were sawn asunder, were tempted, were slain with the sword: they wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins; being destitute, afflicted, tormented;

38 (Of whom the world was not worthy:) they wandered in deserts, and in mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.”

Many saints have suffered terrible things throughout history, and many of them only saw their circumstances get worse. Prophets boldly proclaimed the word of the Lord and were thrown into prison for it. Apostles preached the gospel and were executed for their faith. These people assuredly received Heavenly rewards, but let's be honest: when people think about Romans 8:28 that's *not* what they have in mind. We have this idea that our Earthly sufferings will be followed by Earthly blessings – and we forget the many, many people who suffered greatly and saw no such physical blessings.

In closing, let me say that we need to remember that it isn't always about us. Sometimes God works through us to bless those who are around us. Sometimes God puts us through great trials so that others can be enriched. Sometimes we must suffer so that others can be saved. God does not always repay Earthly trials with Earthly riches! I think it is most unwise to believe that everything that happens to you happens for *your* temporal, Earthly benefit. As we have seen, sometimes God has a very different plan in mind.

ARE ALTAR CALLS BIBLICAL?

I realize this might seem like a strange question to ask. After all, altar calls have become a staple of the modern American church, to the point where it's hard to imagine a church service that *doesn't* have an altar call. Who could possibly object to ending a sermon with an invitation to come and be saved? Isn't that just the natural thing to do?

Altar calls have become a tradition – in fact, they have very nearly become a sacrament in our churches. Because of this we don't stop to think about what we're doing. We simply accept them and assume that altar calls must be a good idea. When we run across a group that *doesn't* do altar calls we immediately think that they must be some kind of weird, unchurched pagans. What is their problem?

I think it's high time for us to step back and take a Biblical look at what we're actually doing. We should always be willing to compare every aspect of our lives – and our churches – to what is revealed in the Word of God. There should be nothing that is “too important” to examine from a Biblical perspective. After all, if altar calls are a wonderful thing to do then it should be a simple matter to show that from the Bible, right? But if the Bible *doesn't* support this practice, then that should tell us something.

The first point I'd like to make is that there are no altar calls anywhere in the Bible. Altar calls are completely unknown in the Old Testament. In the New Testament no church is ever said to have one, and they are never mentioned in any of the letters to the churches. The disciples never used an altar call in any of their sermons. Even Jesus Himself never used altar calls.

There are some people who try very hard to find an altar call in the Bible, but it can't be done because *there aren't any*. Some people are so desperate to find an example of this practice that they claim that Melchizedek's meeting with Abraham was an altar call:

Genesis 14:18: “And Melchizedek king of Salem brought forth bread and wine: and he was the priest of the most high God.

19 And he blessed him, and said, Blessed be Abram of the most high God, possessor of heaven and earth:

20 And blessed be the most high God, which hath delivered thine enemies into thy hand. And he gave him tithes of all.”

Just take a look at that passage for yourself! Does Melchizedek ask his audience to come to the front and pray the sinner's prayer so that they can be saved from their sins? Absolutely not. This isn't even *remotely* like an altar call. No one is urging sinners to repent of their sins and put their faith and trust in Christ – and yet people still claim that this is Biblical proof that altar calls are Scriptural. If this is truly the only Biblical support you have, then your case is really, really poor.

I'll repeat this one more time: there are no altar calls anywhere in the Bible. It is not a Biblical practice and there is no Scriptural support for that idea. Now, that doesn't mean that no one in the Bible preached the gospel, because they most certainly did. Many people preached repentance and urged sinners to turn from their sins:

Matthew 3:1: “In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judaea,

2 And saying, Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

Matthew 4:17: "From that time Jesus began to preach, and to say, Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

Acts 2:38: "Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost."

There are many more examples that I could give, but I think you get the point. There is no shortage of preaching in the Bible! What we *don't* find are altar calls. Even when Jesus preached and ministered to thousands of people for several days in a row, He never wrapped up by urging people to come to the front of the group to be saved. That simply never happened.

In our days that would be unthinkable, wouldn't it? After all, if a modern church had a group of thousands of people, what would they do? Why, they're going to conclude by playing some sort of emotional hymn. They will then ask everyone to close their eyes, and urge the people to pray a certain prayer. The pastor will tell them that if they prayed that prayer then they're saved. Or, instead of praying that prayer in their seats while no one is looking, they may instead invite people to come to the front of the church and pray the prayer there. If they come and pray then they will be saved. This practice is so common that it never occurs to us that no one in the Bible ever did anything remotely like this.

But the truth is the altar call is a modern phenomenon. It is entirely absent from the Bible, and the early church did not practice it. In fact, the altar call was popularized by Charles Finney, who lived from 1792 to 1875. There were a few isolated cases where altar calls were used before then in some special circumstances, but Finney is the evangelist who popularized it. In other words, *altar calls were unknown to the church before the 19th century*. They are something new. I'd also like to point out that while Finney was a well-known evangelist, he was far from orthodox. Finney rejected the doctrine of original sin. He did not believe in the imputed righteousness of Christ (the idea that when we are saved God gives us the perfect righteousness of Christ, and that is why we are justified in His sight). He also rejected the idea of biblical regeneration – that people are made new creatures in Christ after they are saved.

Finney believed that in order to save people, all you had to do was put the right kind of emotional pressure on them and use the right kind of tricks, and you could drive them to the altar and get them to say that magical prayer. He also believed in the "prayer of faith", which meant that God was required to give you whatever you prayed for. If you prayed that 100 souls would be saved by your preaching then God was required to save 100 souls no matter what. (Needless to say, there are very serious theological problems with that idea.)

This was the mindset that created the altar call, and this was the theology behind it. People today have accepted Finney's ideas on what it takes to get people to be saved – and that is unfortunate, because what the Bible teaches about salvation is radically different. The modern approach to salvation is extremely shallow and produces a great many false converts. It does not do a very good job of explaining to people what salvation actually requires.

For example, take this account:

I recall a conversation in America in which a pastor's wife narrated to me her experience as a counselor. In counseling someone who came forward [to the altar]

she discovered that this enquirer had no concept of repentance or faith. She endeavored therefore to explain the gospel in a simple manner. The leader of the meeting in the meantime began to be impatient and after about ten minutes could stand it no longer. Sweeping the woman counselor aside, he took over as follows:

“You don't want to go to hell, do you?”

“No!”

“You want to go to heaven, don't you?”

“Yes, I do!”

“You believe that Christ died for sinners, don't you?”

“Yes, I do!”

“Then let's give thanks that he died for you and has given you salvation.”

Then the leader prayed as follows: “Lord, I thank you for giving this soul eternal life. Thank you, Lord, Amen.”

Then, turning to the person in question, he said, “Now you have eternal life and you can praise the Lord! Go and tell your friends that you have been saved!”

(*The Great Invitation*, Hulse, p109)

Was that person actually saved? I very seriously doubt it. He had no idea what faith was and he had no concept of repentance. On top of that, the prayer itself was prayed by *the leader*, not by the individual. The person never repented of his sins or gave his life to Jesus. I'd like to point out that even *demons* believe that Christ died for sinners, and demons would much rather go to Heaven than be cast into Hell! Demons, though, *are not saved*.

You see, being saved is not just a matter of believing that Christ died for sinners. You also have to *repent*. You have to go to Jesus and ask Him to forgive your sins. You have to submit yourself to Christ, turning from your own sinful ways and obeying God instead. Salvation is far more than just a mental assertion of “Yes, Jesus died for sins”. In order to be saved you must *surrender*. You must halt your rebellion against God and give Him complete control over your life, your will, your thoughts, your possessions, and your actions. (That does not mean that you will be perfect from that moment on, or that your works is what saves you or keeps you saved. What it means is that if you are unwilling to turn from your wicked ways, God is not going to forgive you for them.)

You also need to understand who Christ is and what He did. For example:

Romans 10:9: “That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved.”

Belief in the resurrection is part of the requirements for salvation! Also notice how Paul talks about confessing the Lord Jesus. I cannot emphasize this enough: you *must* make Jesus your Lord. You cannot be saved by saying “Yes, Lord, I believe that you died for sinners and I want to go to Heaven, but I'm not going to obey you and I don't want you to tell me what to do. Just mind your own business and do whatever I tell you, and we'll get along fine.” That is *not* salvation.

During altar calls we tell people that if they come forward and pray a prayer, they will be saved – but that is not a true statement. *It is not the prayer that saves you*. The prayer of salvation is not some sort of magical spell that saves people by the mere act of repeating the words. Does the sinner who is praying it actually understand the gospel? Are they repenting of their sins? Do they believe in the person and work of Christ? Are they abandoning their rebellion against God and submitting themselves to His authority? The answers to these questions are *extremely important*. The only thing that can save

people is *faith in Christ*. If that is absent then the prayer will not do any good whatsoever. We are saved by *faith*:

Ephesians 2:8: “For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God:
9 Not of works, lest any man should boast.”

Notice that this passage *doesn't* say “You are saved by saying a certain sequence of words, regardless of what you actually believe and regardless of whether you have repented!” *But that is precisely how people often treat the sinner's prayer.*

The great danger of altar calls is that they are extremely shallow. They don't get into any of these issues; for one thing, they don't have the time. Instead they teach people that if they just say certain magical words they can escape Hell. So what do people do? They come to the front of the church, they say that prayer, and they go away believing that they are saved. Doesn't that seem like a dangerous thing to be doing?

In fact, the church makes this worse by pronouncing that person saved right then and there. That, too, is an awful thing to do. How can you possibly know in that split second if that person was actually saved? Nowhere does the Bible say “If you go to the front of the church, pray, and feel good afterward, you are saved” - but that is how *countless* people verify their salvation. The Biblical way of making sure that you are saved is to examine your life for the fruits of the Holy Spirit. The book of 1 John has a whole list of tests that examine your life for evidence that you have changed and become a new person. Do you love other Christians? Do you obey God? Have you confessed your sins? Are you growing in holiness? Have you abandoned your old wicked ways? Are you staying in the faith?

The only way a person can tell if they are actually saved or not is to wait and see, and evaluate their lives against the objective criteria that the Bible lays out. The proof of their salvation is in the life that they lead. As Jesus said, a good tree bears good fruit and a bad tree bears bad fruit. Genuine conversions always result in a changed life, because we are transformed into a new creature in Christ:

2 Corinthians 5:17: “Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.”

If there is no change in that person's life – if they continue living a sinful, wicked, selfish life – then they aren't a Christian. The prayer that they prayed was a waste of time, and responding to the altar call did nothing. Their conversion was phony. But you know something? *That's not something you can determine during the altar call.* Churches have absolutely no business pronouncing anyone saved on the spot – especially when so many people who respond to altar calls never show up in church again.

If the prayer “didn't work”, the problem isn't with Christ. Jesus is clear that He will reject no one:

John 6:37: “All that the Father giveth me shall come to me; and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out.”

The problem is with what churches have been doing. Sure, if you put a lot of emotional pressure on people and use the right manipulative tactics, you might be able to get people to come to the front of the church and pray a prayer that you tell them to pray. *But that is a very far cry from being saved.* That

doesn't mean that person understood or believed the gospel. That doesn't mean they have any idea what Christ actually did for them. That also doesn't mean they are sorry for their sins or are willing to turn from them. That *especially* doesn't mean that person is laying down their life and pledging to be slaves of Christ.

It's that last point that is especially relevant in our modern age. Churches are filled with people who believe that Christ died for sinners but who have no intention of obeying God. These people love their sins and don't have the slightest intention of turning from them. They believe they can continue to live a life of sin and doing whatever they please, and that God will just have to take whatever He can get. The idea that you have to repent of your sins and live a holy life is completely foreign to them. They would never agree to such a thing because they love their sins and their selves too much.

These people are not saved. The apostle John makes this point very clear:

1 John 2:3: “And hereby we do know that we know him, if we keep his commandments.

4 He that saith, I know him, and keepeth not his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him.

5 But whoso keepeth his word, in him verily is the love of God perfected: hereby know we that we are in him.”

The modern church may call them “carnal Christians” and say that they're just not very spiritual, but the Bible calls them what they are: *lost people*. In order to be saved Jesus must be your Savior *and* your Lord. If you reject Him as Lord and insist that *you* control your life, not God, then you are not saved at all.

But altar calls skirt over all these issues. They don't give people a deep understanding of the gospel; instead they say “Pray this prayer and you'll go to Heaven”. They don't test the person to see if he understands what he's doing or believes in the gospel; instead they use high-pressure tactics to get people to say a set of magical words. On top of all that, altar calls assure the person that they are saved right then and there – instead of applying the Biblical tests that separate true conversions from false ones.

As a result, churches are filled with incredibly shallow “believers” who may or may not understand the gospel and who may or may not have actually repented, but who are nonetheless convinced that they're saved, because they once went to the front of the church and prayed a prayer.

Here's something to think about: out of all those people who come to the altar to “get saved”, how many of them show any fruits of repentance?

Matthew 3:7: “But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees come to his baptism, he said unto them, O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come?

8 Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance:”

When ten thousand people respond in one of the great evangelistic crusades, do we see the lives of those people transformed? How many of those people join churches, lead holy lives, and display the fruits of the Spirit? You know the answer as well as I do: many of those people are never seen again.

In fact, what I *have* seen are people who come to the altar to get saved over, and over, and over again. The reason they do this is because they don't understand the gospel and they have no idea how to tell if they're actually saved or not. All they know is that being saved is a warm feeling, and since they

don't have that feeling anymore they must not be saved. So they go to the front of the church to try to get that feeling again, and then announce to the world that this time they've *really* been saved.

None of that is Biblical, but that's the sort of mindset that altar calls are encouraging. The modern church has exchanged the Biblical understanding of the gospel with a shallow one that's designed to drive as many people as possible to the front of the church.

It may seem completely harmless to urge people to come to the front of the church to be saved – but is it? I believe it has taught generations of people that coming to the front of the church and praying a prayer is the same thing as getting saved. I am gravely concerned that by doing this we are actually inoculating people from the gospel. After all, once a person has gone to the front of the church and prayed, they believe they are saved *because that is what pastors tell them*. Even if they are leading an incredibly wicked life that is utterly devoid of faith or godliness, it is impossible to tell that person “You need to repent and believe”. Since they believe that they are already saved, they won't listen to what you have to say. They have been taught a false standard of faith, and that blocks the Biblical standard from ever reaching them.

Now, if a person is feeling conviction and wants to talk to the pastor about it, I think that is a good thing. A thorough conversation could do that person a world of good and lead them to Christ – but that's not what altar calls are. I fear that our approach to salvation has *not* been saving as many people as we think, but instead has been immunizing them against the gospel and setting them on the road to Hell. Are there people who are genuinely saved through altar calls? Of course – but the number of people who respond and are never seen again is far greater. Should we really be using a method that rarely works, that produces many false converts, and that has no Biblical support whatsoever?

You might wonder: if altar calls are not Biblical then what should people be doing? It's an easy question to answer. We should preach the gospel:

I Corinthians 1:18: “For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God.

19 For it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and will bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent.

20 Where is the wise? where is the scribe? where is the disputer of this world? hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world?

21 For after that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe.

22 For the Jews require a sign, and the Greeks seek after wisdom:

23 But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock, and unto the Greeks foolishness;

24 But unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God.”

Notice that Paul did not say “If you want to get people saved, play a soft hymn and urge them to come to the front of the church to pray the following prayer. If people don't want to come then plant a few people in the audience and have them come to the front, to make it look like people are moving and put more pressure on the reluctant ones. Make it sound like people just have to say a certain phrase in order to avoid Hell. Don't emphasize the cost of following Christ, and make no mention of repentance or a changed life. Keep it simple: come to the front, pray the prayer, and you're done.” Even though churches follow those instructions as if they were a sacrament from God, you will not find them *anywhere* in the Bible. Instead Paul was simple and to the point: *preach the cross*. Preach the full

gospel of God, because *that* is the mechanism God will use to save people.

I find it fascinating that Christ routinely offended those who came to Him. For example, after attracting a very large crowd by miraculously feeding thousands of people with a very small meal, Jesus said this:

John 6:51: “I am the living bread which came down from heaven: if any man eat of this bread, he shall live for ever: and the bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.

52 The Jews therefore strove among themselves, saying, How can this man give us his flesh to eat?

53 Then Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you.”

After Jesus preached this message, many of those who had been following Him left:

John 6:64: “But there are some of you that believe not. For Jesus knew from the beginning who they were that believed not, and who should betray him.

65 And he said, Therefore said I unto you, that no man can come unto me, except it were given unto him of my Father.

66: From that time many of his disciples went back, and walked no more with him.”

If the modern church had been in that situation they would have handled it completely differently. First of all, the church would have had an altar call to bring as many people to the front as possible. They would have emphasized praying a simple prayer to avoid Hell, and would have avoided discussing any doctrines that might offend people. Once they had prayed the prayer and joined the church, they would then preach messages that the new converts would accept. After all, if you preach the hard truths there's a good chance that people will leave, and who wants that? The modern church is all about numbers: the more people you can pack in the better – and the easiest way to do that is to water down the truth and make it acceptable to everyone.

But that's not what Christ did. He knew that many of those who were following Him didn't really believe, and so He deliberately preached something hard so that those who didn't believe would leave. He only wanted *genuine* converts, not phonies. He used hard doctrine to separate the wheat from the chaff. We would never dream of doing that today – and that alone says a lot about us.

Altar calls are a great tool to use if you want to maximize the number of people in your pews. However, if you are looking for genuine Christians who will stand the test of time then they are a terrible thing to use – *especially* when used in the careless way that so many modern churches use them. As we can see, Christ took a radically different approach.

Do you want to save people? Then preach the gospel. Make sure that people understand it – *all* of it. Preach the hard truths. Tell them that genuine conversions result in a changed life that bears the fruits of the Spirit. Those who believe will come to Christ and truly be saved – and those who don't will be offended and driven away. Offending people may seem like a bad thing to do, but it is *far* better than making them think they're saved when they really aren't. After all, it is *much* easier for someone who knows that they're lost to come to Jesus, than someone who is convinced they were saved at the altar when they weren't.

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN'S RELIGION

Here's something to think about: what religion did Benjamin Franklin practice? When it comes to the Founding Fathers of our nation, people tend to think that they fell into one of two categories. Some say that they were Deists – people who believed in a God that created the world but who stepped away from it and stopped caring about it. There might be a God, but He is very far away and doesn't involve Himself with our lives. Others claim that they were devout Christians who believed in the God of the Bible.

Benjamin Franklin did not fall into either one of those categories. He instead invented a new religion for himself, which he outlined in 1728 in a document called *Articles of Belief and Acts of Religion*. What he said in that document is both fascinating and disturbing.

First, in this document Franklin tells us that he *does* believe there is a God out there:

“I believe that there is one supreme, most perfect Being...”

However, Franklin believes that this God does not care about mankind. He is too great and infinite to care about the race of men:

“...I imagine it great vanity in me to suppose, that the Supremely Perfect does in the least regard such an inconsiderable nothing as man;”

Not only does God not care about mankind, but He is also completely uninterested in receiving worship or praise from men:

“...He, the Infinite Father, expects or requires no worship or praise from us, but that He is even infinitely above it.”

We can already see that Franklin has moved very far from Christianity. Yes, it's true that the Bible teaches that there is a God. However, it also tells us that God has a great love for mankind:

John 3:16: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”

God has not walked away from His creation; instead He sent His Son Jesus to come into this world and *die* in order to save people from their sins and give them everlasting life. God is not distant; He is near. God does not despise our worship; instead He desires us to love Him with all of our being:

Matthew 22:36: “Master, which is the great commandment in the law?
37 Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind.
38 This is the first and great commandment.”

What Franklin is teaching is most definitely *not* Christianity. But Franklin is not yet done. Although he believes that this infinite God cares nothing for mankind, he also believes that God created

a whole race of lesser gods:

“I conceive, then, that the *infinite* has created many beings or gods, vastly superior to man... and very powerful: and that each has made for himself one glorious sun, attended with beautiful and admirable system of planets.”

Franklin believes that these lesser gods are the ones who created the stars, the planets, and the men who live in the world. These lesser gods are the ones we should worship:

“He is not above caring for us, being pleased with our praise, and offended when we slight Him, or neglect His glory.”

So what do these lesser gods want from mankind? Franklin believes they primarily want people to be happy:

“...I believe He is pleased and delights in the happiness of those He has created... And since He has created many things, which seem purely designed for the delight of man, I believe He is not offended when He sees His children solace themselves in any manner of pleasant exercises and innocent delights...”

These lesser gods are not beings of judgment and rulemaking, nor do they concern themselves about wickedness and sin. They primarily just want people to be happy, and as long as people are happy they are happy.

A brief study of Benjamin Franklin's life will reveal how he lived out these beliefs. In 1745 he wrote an appalling document entitled *Advice to a Young Man on the Choice of a Mistress*. This document is exactly what you think it is. (At one point he recommends having affairs with older women, “Because there is no hazard of Children, which irregularly produced may be attended with much Inconvenience.”) Franklin not only sought after fornication, but he also had a child out of wedlock. Throughout his life he tried to do things that made him happy. That was his creed. To him fornication was just an “innocent delight” – but the God of the Bible has a very different view of the matter.

Was Benjamin Franklin a Christian? Absolutely not. It would even be difficult to call him a true Deist, for he did believe in lesser gods that cared about mankind and wanted men to be happy. It is true that he believed that “God governs in the affairs of men”, but his God was *not* the God of the Bible. If anything, his beliefs almost seem to be a precursor to Mormonism, which also teaches that there is a race of lesser gods that rule over planets. But it is most definitely *not* Christianity.

CASTING LOTS

In the book of Joshua there came a time when the promised land had been subdued by Israel, and it was time for the tribes to settle down. Some of the tribes had already taken their portion of the land, but about half of the tribes had not yet received inheritance:

Joshua 18:1-2: “And the whole congregation of the children of Israel assembled together at Shiloh, and set up the tabernacle of the congregation there. And the land was subdued before them. And there remained among the children of Israel seven tribes, which had not yet received their inheritance.”

When Joshua heard this news he was not pleased. He commanded the Israelites to go out, look over the land, and bring a description of it to him. Once he had their information it would be time to allot it to the remaining tribes:

Joshua 18:3-4: “And Joshua said unto the children of Israel, How long are ye slack to go to possess the land, which the LORD God of your fathers hath given you? Give out from among you three men for each tribe: and I will send them, and they shall rise, and go through the land, and describe it according to the inheritance of them; and they shall come again to me.”

This task was easy enough to do, but it raised a problem. Once Joshua had the information regarding the land they had just conquered, how would the land be divided up among the seven remaining tribes? This was *not* a trivial task! Remember, once the land was given to a tribe it was theirs forever. The Mosaic Law did not allow tribes to swap land or sell it to others. When Joshua allocated the land he was setting its destiny in stone. That is where that tribe would be for the rest of the nation's existence.

As if that was not hard enough, there is the additional matter that land is not uniform. One piece of land is not the same as another piece of land. There are differences in terrain, in resources, in its relative location to important places, and so forth. Deciding who got what piece of land was a *really big decision*. How could anyone possibly make a decision like that?

If we were faced with this problem today there are several things we might do. We might form a committee and have them divide the land, but people would claim the results were unfair and the best land was given to others. We might put it to a vote, but people would try to vote the best places for themselves at the expense of others. No matter what you did, someone would make the case that you messed up their future by giving the better land to the wrong tribe. Someone was going to be very unhappy.

The choice Joshua had to make would impact millions of people for more than a thousand years. It was going to change the destiny of the nation and how history unfolded. So what did Joshua do? He *cast lots*:

Joshua 18:8: “And the men arose, and went away: and Joshua charged them that went to describe the land, saying, Go and walk through the land, and describe it, and come again to me, that I may here cast lots for you before the LORD in Shiloh.”

In modern terms, he flipped a coin. At the time it was actually possible to inquire of the Lord directly using something known as the Urim and the Thummim, but that is not what Joshua did. Instead he used the equivalent of random throws of a pair of dice to decide what tribe got what piece of land.

Why would Joshua use a coin toss to make such an important decision? The Bible gives us two reasons. The first is that casting lots keeps people from fighting over the result:

Proverbs 18:18: “The lot causeth contentions to cease, and parteth between the mighty.”

If you make a decision that favors one person over another then that could easily lead to a fight. However, if the decision is left up to a coin-toss then that changes everything. That is why issues like who goes first in a sporting competition are often decided by a coin toss – it is seen by everyone as a fair way to make that sort of decision. By “casting lots”, Joshua could divide up the land in a way that didn't show favoritism to anyone, and that no one could really argue about.

There is another reason why lots were used. Did you notice that Joshua said he was going to cast lots before the Lord? That is because the Bible teaches that the outcome of casting lots is *not* random:

Proverbs 16:33: “The lot is cast into the lap; but the whole disposing thereof is of the Lord.”

The reason Joshua “cast lots” before the Lord was because he knew the Lord would use the outcome in order to make sure that each tribe got the land they were supposed to have. Joshua understood that the outcome was *not* random chance. God was in control of everything, including the casting of lots. There was no such thing as chance.

I realize this attitude seems a little strange, but that is because we don't usually think about it in that level of detail. Now, we understand that God has an overall plan for history. God has given us prophecies about things that are going to happen in the future, and we know that God will bring those things to pass. We have seen God do that time and time again – the Bible is filled with fulfilled prophecy. We know that God is not *predicting* what is going to happen in the future; instead God is telling us that certain things are going to come to pass *because it is His will* for them to come to pass.

If God controls the future then God must also control the events that lead up to the future. If He didn't have that sort of power then the future He desires might never come to pass, because some event could come along that would push nations in a totally different direction. A small event in the past could cause a tremendous difference a few hundred years later. Sometimes world wars are started by small and seemingly insignificant events.

What we need to realize is that if God can control the future and the fate of nations, then He must also control things on a much smaller scale as well – such as the outcome of casting lots. If God was unable to do a small thing as that then how could He possibly make promises about events far into the future? Therefore, it is not surprising that the Bible tells us the outcome of “casting lots” is of the Lord. It's not that there is something special about the lots themselves; they are not magical devices with supernatural powers. The reason “casting lots” works is because the lot is being cast in a universe that is under God's control. Since God has decided that history is going to turn out in a certain way, He will make sure that nothing happens that could thwart His plan.

This is far from the only time that we see lots used in the Bible. In 1 Chronicles 24 and 25, King

David set up a system of priests and workers to serve in the temple. There were a great many people involved in those days, and they couldn't possibly all serve at once. A system had to be devised in order to keep the temple running and make sure that everyone was in the right place and served at the right time.

There was a lot to think about here – this was a big decision that would impact the temple for hundreds of years. So how was this problem solved? By the casting of lots:

1 Chronicles 25:8: “And they cast lots, ward against ward, as well the small as the great, the teacher as the scholar.”

How was the land of Israel divided among the remaining tribes? By casting lots, and trusting that God would work through the lots in order to accomplish His will. How was the temple service divided among all the qualified families? By casting lots.

Those are not the only decisions that lots were used for in the Bible. There came a time much later in Israel's history when Nehemiah was working to rebuild Jerusalem and make it habitable again. In those days it was dangerous to live in an unprotected and vulnerable city – especially in a land that was surrounded by hostile forces who might attack at any moment. Even so, *someone* had to live in the city or else the work would never be done and Jerusalem would never be livable again. But how could anyone make the decision about who should take that risk?

Nehemiah knew just what to do. He cast lots:

Nehemiah 11:1: “And the rulers of the people dwelt at Jerusalem: the rest of the people also cast lots, to bring one of ten to dwell in Jerusalem the holy city, and nine parts to dwell in other cities.”

The people did not form a committee to study the matter and decide who should move. Nor did Nehemiah make the determination himself, based on how well he knew people or who he thought made the most sense to move. No, instead they cast lots and left the decision up to the Lord.

We find this same approach to decision making in the New Testament as well. When Judas betrayed Jesus and then committed suicide, the ranks of the disciples dropped to 11 and a vacancy was opened. That vacancy needed to be filled, so the remaining disciples found two men who were both qualified candidates. However, who was the right person for the job? There was no obvious reason to choose one over the other. This was a momentous decision that would have a big impact on the church for the rest of its history – after all, God used the disciples to build the foundation of the church itself.

So what did the disciples do? They cast lots:

Acts 1:24-26: “And they prayed, and said, Thou, Lord, which knowest the hearts of all men, shew whether of these two thou hast chosen, That he may take part of this ministry and apostleship, from which Judas by transgression fell, that he might go to his own place. And they gave forth their lots; and the lot fell upon Matthias; and he was numbered with the eleven apostles.”

Joshua cast lots before the Lord, and divided up the land of Canaan based on the outcome of those lots. The disciples prayed to the Lord and cast their lots, and upon that basis Matthias became numbered with the apostles. Notice that they did not treat the lots as if they were some kind of magical items; instead they prayed to the Lord, cast the lots, and accepted the decision that resulted.

It's true that there are many decisions in the Bible that were *not* made by lots. However, we can see why these particular decisions were good candidates for that model. When it came to dividing the land, that was an enormous task that was a very poor fit for a decision by committee. Casting lots to divide the land was much more fair, was far less prone to corruption, and removed a burden that was otherwise unbearable. No one could possibly be “fair” in a decision like that, but by casting lots it could be handled quite nicely.

The same thing was true for the division of workers in the temple. Everyone was qualified, but who could possibly decide who should serve first in the year and who should serve last? If a committee tried to decide that it would just lead to hurt feelings and cries of favoritism. By casting lots the whole thing became much more fair and equitable.

When it came to deciding who had to take the risk of living in Jerusalem, that would also be a terrible decision for any leader to make. Which of your people do you put in danger? How could you fairly make a decision like that? By casting lots, the decision was removed from the hands of men and there was no question of bribes or corruption. Everyone understood the basis for the decision and why people got what they did.

It may seem strange that a *disciple* was chosen by casting lots, but there were two excellent candidates and only one vacancy. By casting lots there were no hard feelings. No one had to worry about being the one who voted for the losing candidate, and there was no question about secret deals or favoritism. A lot of potential strife was removed – and there was no way for the decision to go wrong because both candidates were qualified.

So what does this have to do with us today? I find it fascinating that so much of what we find in the Bible is completely foreign to the way we run our churches. I have never seen a church make a decision by casting lots, even though that practice is quite common in the Bible. However, I have seen churches make many decisions by voting, even though voting is nowhere to be found in the pages of Scripture! Voting definitely existed in Bible times, because the chief priests voted to put Jesus to death. People knew about voting back then (after all, ancient Greece was a democracy) but yet no apostle ever suggested that it be used as a part of church government.

Getting rid of voting is pretty unthinkable today, but that is because we have gotten *very* far from the model of church that is found in the Bible. Today when we talk about “going to church” what we mean is going on a Sunday morning to a large, expensive building, where we will sit in a pew (or row of chairs) alongside a lot of other people that we may or may not know. Over the next 60 to 90 minutes we will sing a few songs together, collect an offering, and then listen to a sermon. After the pastor has finished delivering the sermon (which we listen to without saying anything) we will go home. The church building has a paid staff which do most of the work, and a small group of deacons or elders who do the rest; the role of most members is to show up, give money, and then go home without having done much of anything or interacted with anyone. Nearly all of the money that is collected is spent on maintaining the church building and paying its full-time staff, because it takes hundreds of thousands of dollars to run a church building, even if only a hundred or so people attend. These churches are incorporated as nonprofit corporations (for tax exemption purposes), and have regular business meetings to review the church finances and vote on whatever needs to be decided.

Do we find this model anywhere in the New Testament? *No, we do not.* When the New Testament speaks of the Corinthian Church it is actually talking about the group of Christians who live in Corinth. It was *not* speaking about a building, because no New Testament church had a dedicated building where they met to have worship services! In fact, there are *no verses* in the New Testament that command Christians to go around building dedicated church buildings. That simply wasn't how things were done in the days of the apostles. Instead of making the trip to an enormous and expensive

church campus, Christians met in small groups in people's homes. While they were there they would sing songs, talk to one another, confess their sins to one another, and pray for one another. Everyone who had something to say spoke up and said it. If a preacher had a message to give he gave it. His message was discussed on the spot, and people asked (and answered) questions. It wasn't a 60-minute service with a long monologue at the end; instead it was a highly interactive event that lasted until people were done. On top of that, these same people met regularly throughout the week to eat meals together. This was actually a vital church activity, because when you regularly eat a meal with other people you can really get to know them. (Compare eating one or two meals a week with someone, to just sitting behind a person in church. After a year, which do you think will result in a stronger relationship?)

The early church model had a lot of things going for it. If you are meeting in small groups in people's homes then you don't have to worry about paying for an expensive building (or maintaining it, or paying taxes on it). If each of the small groups have qualified leaders then you don't have to force a single pastor to somehow try to meet the needs of hundreds or thousands of people. Each small group will get to know one another and will work together *as a body* (as opposed to the current model, where most of the body has nothing to do). It also means you don't need full-time staff, which *drastically* cuts down on overhead! That, in turn, means that you can dedicate a much larger portion of the offerings (which were *not* collected every week) to things like missions and helping the poor.

The modern church is designed to put most of the work on the paid staff, and minimize interaction by everyone else. You can faithfully attend a church all year and not learn anything substantial about the people who are sitting on the row behind you. However, if you attend a small house church faithfully for a year and have a meal every week with that group, you would get to know them really well. If you are in a small and highly interactive setting, it suddenly becomes possible for you to help people – and for them to help you.

The same goes for the sermon. When a pastor gets in front of 200 people, gives a monologue for an hour, and then sits down without taking any questions, he has no way of knowing how much of his message got across (if any of it did). No one can interrupt him and ask for clarification, and no one can correct him if he makes a mistake. You can try to catch the pastor after the sermon to talk to him, but no pastor is very receptive to answering a whole bunch of questions. (Besides, if everyone did that he would have a real problem on his hands.) However, in a small group setting people could easily ask questions, or bring up their own points, or discuss how to apply the message to their lives. The whole situation changes and discipleship actually becomes possible.

The problem is we are used to doing things in a certain way, and we think the way that things have always been done is the best way – even though, if we are honest, our way hasn't produced very good results. Church attendance numbers are dropping rapidly, people are not engaged, and very little spiritual growth is happening. If we take a look at what we are doing and try to find it in the Bible, we might be surprised to learn that there isn't much resemblance between our way of doing things and the pattern we see in the Word of God. It's possible that if we take a step back and try things a little bit differently, we might get different results.

In the Bible people cast lots to make some very important decisions. Once we reach a point where we can't imagine doing things the way we see them done in the Bible, then it becomes clear that we have lost our way and are mired in our traditions.

COLONIAL AMERICA'S DARK SIDE

The modern Church holds the early American colonists in high regard, and there are some good reasons for that. Groups such as the Puritans were a key part of the founding of the United States – they were a brave group of Christians who fled from terrible persecution to come here and start a new life in a new land. Many of them died in the process. They were a serious and devout people who were willing to risk their lives in order to found a new society where they might be free.

However, there is more to our history than most people realize. The Puritans were an amazing group, but they were not without fault – and some of the more disturbing parts of their history are not widely known. The story of the Salem Witch Trials is famous, but that is far from the only troubling incident in their history. There are some facets of their past that should not be forgotten. It's easy to look back through time and think that the modern Church should be more like them, but do we *really* remember what colonial America was actually like?

I think it would be a good idea to take a look back at the 17th century and review a few of the lesser-known stories from our past. There is a lot that we can learn.

The Commune

When the colony at Plymouth was founded in 1620, the Puritans decided to form an ideal society. In this society there would be no private property. No one would own their own land; instead all of the land would be communal. Everything would be shared equally: the food, the clothing, and so forth. Everyone would work for the good of everyone else. Whatever you produced would not go to your family; instead it would be shared among the entire community.

How did this work out? Not very well at all. William Bradford was a historian who lived during that era (he was born in 1590 and died in 1657). In his record of those days Bradford reported that the people *hated* it:

“For this community (so far as it was) was found to breed much confusion and discontent and retard much employment that would have been to their benefit and comfort.” (*Of Plymouth Plantation*, as recorded in *The Annals of America*, p72)

Bradford reported that the men were upset that they were working to support the families of other people, and that the fruits of their labor was going to others instead of to their own wives and children:

“For the young men that were most able and fit for labor and service did repine that they should spend their time and strength to work for other men's wives and children without any recompense.” (*Of Plymouth Plantation*, as recorded in *The Annals of America*, p72)

The men who were young and strong and who could produce the most goods were upset that their labors were given to others, and that they did not receive anything more than those who produced

very little or nothing at all:

“The strong, or man of parts, had no more in division of victuals and clothes than he that was weak and not able to do a quarter the other could; this was thought injustice.” (*Of Plymouth Plantation*, as record in *The Annals of America*, p72)

The wives did not like the fact that they were having to do laundry for men that they weren't even married to:

“And for men's wives to be commanded to do service for other men, as dressing their meat, washing their clothes, etc., they deemed it a kind of slavery; neither could many husbands well brook it.” (*Of Plymouth Plantation*, as recorded in *The Annals of America*, p73)

In the end this arrangement caused so many serious problems that people lost respect for one another:

“if it did not cut off those relations that God has set among men, yet it did at least much diminish and take off the mutual respects that should be preserved among them.” (*Of Plymouth Plantation*, as recorded in *The Annals of America*, p73)

But that's not all. Since people were unwilling to work, food did not get planted – and because food did not get planted, the harvests were very meager and many people died. The Puritan's communistic society was on the verge of utter collapse, so they reluctantly decided to reinstate private property. They didn't want to do it, but they were all starving to death and didn't have much choice:

“So they began to think how they might raise as much corn as they could and obtain a better crop than they had done, that they might not still thus languish in misery. At length, after much debate of things, the governor (with the advice of the chief among them) gave way that they should set corn, every man for his own particular, and in that regard trust to themselves; in all other things to go on in the general way as before. And so [was] assigned to every family a parcel of land, according to the proportion of their number...” (*Of Plymouth Plantation*, as recorded in *The Annals of America*, p72)

This had amazing results. As soon as people had their own property and were working for their own families, the situation changed. People started going out and working:

“This had very good success, for it made all hands very industrious, so as much more corn was planted than otherwise would have been by any means the governor or any other could use, and saved him a great deal of trouble and gave far better content. The women now went willingly into the field, and took their little ones with them to set corn, which before would allege weakness and inability, whom to have compelled would have been thought great tyranny and oppression.” (*Of Plymouth Plantation*, as recorded in *The Annals of America*, p72)

Now, the Puritans weren't very happy that this new arrangement worked. They were convinced that the original way (which was essentially a form of communism) was better, even though it was killing people in large numbers. However, since they were starving to death they were forced to change to a more capitalistic society. Even though this worked, it didn't please the Puritans. They believed they were just giving in to men's innate corruption:

“Let none object this is men's corruption, and nothing to the course itself. I answer, seeing all men have this corruption in them, God in His wisdom saw another course fitter for them.” (*Of Plymouth Plantation*, as recorded in *The Annals of America*, p73)

I have no idea how the Puritans were able to read their Bibles and come away with the idea that God (who gave each tribe and family in Israel their own land) forbade the ownership of private property and wanted everyone to live together in a commune. All throughout the Bible families had their own pieces of land where they grew their own food. People had their own possessions, and when those possessions were taken away from them God became unhappy and called it *stealing*. People in the Bible worked to provide for their *own* families. Yet the Puritans were convinced that this was a bad system and tried to change it.

Nowhere in the Old or New Testament did God command all Christians to live together in one society and share all things equally! Yes, there were times in the Bible when Christians came together and gave to those who were in need (Acts 4:34-37), but acts of charity to address a temporary crisis is an *entirely* different thing from banning ownership of property, and taking away a person's harvest to give it to someone else. The Puritan's experiment with communism did *not* go well for them.

Religious Intolerantion

One of the key reasons why the Puritans came to the new world was to flee from persecution. They did not like being forced to worship in ways that violated their conscience, and they wanted to live in a place where they might be free. It therefore may come as a surprise to learn that one of the first things the colonists did was create a society that was every bit as intolerant as the one they had left. It turns out that they didn't actually object to persecution; they just wanted to be the ones who were doing the persecuting.

For example, the Maryland Toleration Act of 1649 (which was typical of the Colonial era) stated that you had to be a Christian *on pain of death*:

“...whatsoever person or persons within this province and the islands thereunto belonging shall henceforth blaspheme God, that is, curse Him, or deny our Savior Jesus Christ to be the Son of God, or shall deny the Holy Trinity - the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost - or the Godhead or any of the said three Persons of the Trinity or the unity of the Godhead, or shall use or utter any reproachful speeches, words, or language concerning the said Holy Trinity, or any of the said three Persons thereof, shall be punished with death and confiscation or forfeiture of all his or her lands and goods to the Lord Proprietary and his heirs.” (*Maryland Toleration Act of 1649*, as recorded in *The Annals of America*, p88)

If you blasphemed the name of the Lord you would be put to death. If you did not believe in Jesus or the Trinity you would be put to death. If you said anything bad about God you would be put to death. This is called enforcing Christianity at the point of the sword: you had to convert and become a Christian or else you would be executed. There was no room for unbelievers in that society.

If you worked on the Sabbath you would be heavily fined:

"...that every person and persons within this province that shall at any time hereafter profane the Sabbath or Lord's Day called Sunday, by frequent swearing, drunkenness, or by any uncivil or disorderly recreation, or by working on that day when absolute necessity does not require it, shall for every such first offense forfeit 2s. 6d..." (*Maryland Toleration Act of 1649*, as recorded in *The Annals of America*, p89)

Maryland was not the only place that had these kind of laws. They were pretty typical of the day. Here are some examples that were taken from the Code of the Connecticut General Court (1650):

"If any man after legal conviction shall have or worship any other God but the Lord God, he shall be put to death." (*Code of the Connecticut General Court*, as recorded in *The Annals of America*, p200)

"If any person shall blaspheme the name of God the Father, Son, or Holy Ghost with direct, express, presumptuous, or high-handed blasphemy, or shall curse in the like manner, he shall be put to death." (*Code of the Connecticut General Court*, as recorded in *The Annals of America*, p200)

"If any child or children above sixteen years old and of sufficient understanding shall curse or smite their natural father or mother, he or they shall be put to death..." (*Code of the Connecticut General Court*, as recorded in *The Annals of America*, p200)

But that's not all. In colonial America you were required to always agree with everything the preacher said. If you dared to disagree with the preacher and you claimed that he was in error, the Connecticut Code said you would be *criminally prosecuted*:

"...if any Christian... shall contemptuously bear himself toward the Word preached... either by interrupting him in his preaching, or by charging him falsely with an error, ... that every such person or persons, whatsoever censure the church may pass, shall, for the first scandal, be convented and reprov'd openly by the magistrates... And if a second time they break forth into the like contemptuous carriages, they shall either pay 5 pounds to the public treasure, or stand two hours, openly, upon a block or stool four foot high, upon a lecture day, with a paper fixed on his breast written with capital letters, AN OPEN AND OBSTINATE CONTEMNER OF GOD'S HOLY ORDINANCES, that others may fear and be ashamed of breaking out into the like wickedness." (*Code of the Connecticut General Court*, as recorded in *The Annals of America*, p201)

In other words, disagreeing with your pastor was something that could cause you to get hauled up before a court judge! If the judge decided that he agreed with your pastor's interpretation of the Bible, you would be hit with a *huge* fine. You had no right of conscience; you had to believe whatever the pastor told you to believe, whether you liked it or not.

The Code also required you attend Church every Sunday *without exception*. If you failed to do that then you would be prosecuted and heavily fined:

"It is ordered and decreed by this Court, and authority thereof, that wheresoever the ministry of the Word is established, according to the order of the Gospel, throughout this jurisdiction, every person shall duly resort and attend thereunto respectively upon the Lord's Day, and upon such public fast days and days of thanksgiving as are to be generally kept by the appointment of authority. And if any person within this jurisdiction shall, without just and necessary cause, withdraw himself from hearing the public ministry of the Word, after due means of conviction used, he shall forfeit for his absence, from every such public meeting, 5s, all such offenses to be heard and determined by any one magistrate, or more, from time to time." (*Code of the Connecticut General Court*, as recorded in *The Annals of America*, p202)

As you can see, the law required you to be a Christian. It required you to go to church and agree with your pastor. If you didn't then you would find yourself in court facing ruinous fines. In colonial America you had to attend the state-mandated church, listen to the state-mandated pastor, agree with the state-mandated beliefs, and pay the state-appointed pastor your tithes. It was not optional; it was *required*. There was no hint of religious freedom to be found.

The Puritans hated living in a society where they were forced into a state church that they did not agree with – so they came to this country and *established their own state church*, and threatened to kill anyone who did not belong to it. They established *exactly* the same sort of oppressive system that they had fled from in the first place! The only difference was that *they* were the ones who were in charge of this oppressive state church.

This brings up a question. When God established His Church in the New Testament, did Jesus tell His disciples to go into all the world and kill those who refused to convert? Actually, no, He most certainly did not:

Mark 16:15: "And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature."

Notice that there is no word in the Great Commission about finding unbelievers and forcing them to either convert or die. In Paul's letters to the churches he never said anything about killing unbelievers, nor did he say that Christians should try to take over the government so they could force Christianity upon the entire society.

Yes, it's true that in the Old Testament the Lord gave Israel the Mosaic Law, and under that law things like blasphemy and serving other gods were crimes that were punishable by death. However, there is an enormous difference between what God commanded Israel in the Old Testament and what God commanded His Church in the New Testament. We can see this difference illustrated in 1 Corinthians. When a church member was caught having sex with his stepmother, Paul only commanded that he be evicted from the church:

1 Corinthians 5:1: "It is reported commonly that there is fornication among you, and such fornication as is not so much as named among the Gentiles, that one should have his father's wife.

2 And ye are puffed up, and have not rather mourned, that he that hath done this deed might be taken away from among you...

13 But them that are without God judgeth. Therefore put away from among yourselves that wicked person."

Under the Old Testament Mosaic Law this person would have been put to death. However, Paul only said that he should be removed from the church until he repented, at which time he could rejoin. (Incidentally, 2 Corinthians 2:6-7 tells us that the person actually did repent, so Paul commanded that he be brought back into the church.) Nowhere did Paul even *suggest* that this person should be executed! God has not given the Church the power of the sword.

Do you know what happens when you tell people that if they do not become a Christian they will be executed? You get a whole lot of false converts. If you force people to go to church then they might attend, but they're not attending out of a sincere desire to worship God. No, they're going because *you are forcing them to be there.*

Colonial America forced Christianity on everyone on pain of death. This was a very, *very* bad thing to do. We rightfully get upset at religions who force people to convert or die. Christianity should *not* be one of those religions. That is not how Christ commanded His church to behave!

Interestingly, there were actually some people in Colonial times who understood this concept. In 1652 a man named Roger Williams wrote a sermon entitled *The Hireling Ministry*. He heartily condemned the religious persecution of the colonies:

"The civil state of the nations, being merely and essentially civil, cannot (Christianly) be called "Christian states", after the pattern of that holy and typical land of Canaan... The civil sword (therefore) cannot (rightfully) act either in restraining the souls of the people from worship, etc., or in constraining them to worship, considering that there is not a tittle in the New Testament of Christ Jesus that commits the forming or reforming of His spouse and church to the civil and worldly powers..." (*The Hireling Ministry*, as recorded in *The Annals of America*, p213)

Williams was absolutely right. The founding colonists had no right to enforce Christianity by the power of the government – but that is exactly what they did.

Licensed Churches

Not only did the colonies force people to be Christians, but they also required churches to be properly registered and licensed. If you did not have state approval then you could not preach or teach the Word of God. This passage is from the New Netherlands Restrictions on Religious Meetings (1624):

"The director general and council have been credibly informed that not only conventicles and meetings have been held here and here in this province but also that unqualified persons presume in such meetings to act as teachers, in interpreting and expounding God's Holy Word, without ecclesiastical or secular authority... Therefore, to prevent this, the director general and council strictly forbid all such public or private conventicles and meetings except the usual and authorized ones, where God's Word, according to the Reformed and established custom, is preached and taught in meetings held for the religious service of the Reformed Church, conformably to the Synod of Dort... under a fine of 100 pounds Flemish, to be paid by all who, in such public or private meetings, except at the usual authorized gatherings on Sundays or other days, presume to exercise, without due qualification, the duties of a preacher, reader, or chorister; and each man or woman, married or unmarried, who is found at such a meeting, shall pay a fine of 25 pounds Flemish." (*New Netherlands Restrictions on Religious Meetings*, as recorded in *The Annals of America*, p90-91)

It's great to talk about how the early settlers fled from religious persecution in order to found a new society where they could be free, but it's worth noting that they only believed in freedom for *themselves*. Under these sort of laws you were not allowed to preach or teach without state approval. Even *attending* an "unapproved" church made you a criminal! You were only allowed to attend *state* churches that had *state* preachers who preached the *state*-mandated message. If you attended anything else then the power of the state would be wielded against you.

Is it really a good idea for the state to have total control over churches? Absolutely not! Is it wise for the *state* to decide who can and cannot preach the gospel? Certainly not. Yet that is exactly the sort of system we find in colonial America.

Wage Controls

One of the problems with life in the new world was that everything was scarce – including labor. There was far more work to do than people to get it done. Since the demand for labor exceeded its supply, people began asking for a raise. This should not come as a surprise: after all, this is how supply and demand works. Whenever there is a shortage, prices go up.

The Puritans, however, were not happy about this aspect of economics. John Winthrop, who was appointed governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1629, tells us that in 1633 the Puritans decided to combat this by enacting wage controls:

"The scarcity of workmen had caused them to raise their wages to an excessive rate, so as a carpenter would have 3s the day, a laborer 2s 6d etc, and accordingly those who had commodities to sell advanced their prices sometime double to that they cost in England, so as it grew to a general complaint, which the court, taking knowledge of, as also of some further evils which were springing out of the excessive rates of wages, they made an order that carpenters, masons, etc. should take but 2s the day, and laborers but 18d, and that no commodity should be sold at above 4d in the shilling more than it cost for ready money in England; oil, wine,

etc..." (*John Winthrop's Journal*, as recorded in *The Annals of America*, p132)

Apparently the Puritans believed that the increased prices for services was a form of price gouging. They seemed to believe that everything should be more or less the same price as it was back in England – even though England was home to a centuries-old civilization, and the new world was an unsettled (and hostile) wilderness. Despite the fact that labor was plentiful in England and scarce in the new world, the Puritans believed that wages shouldn't be impacted by things like supply and demand. Charging more for labor was a great evil that had to be stopped.

This policy was not free from consequences. Instituting price controls has a number of important side-effects:

- **Shortages:** When there is more demand than supply, the supply runs out. There is just not enough to go around.
- **Waste:** When the price is allowed to rise, only the people who need labor the most will buy it. The others will have to find an alternative solution. When the price is frozen, though, the market cannot prioritize the labor. This means that people who don't really need it will buy it because it's cheap, and people who need it the most are not allowed to pay extra for it and will have to go without.
- **Reduced production:** When prices rise, this encourages other people to get into the market and start supplying that good. If prices are frozen below the market rate then people aren't as motivated to enter the market. That means the shortage will be made even worse because new producers aren't appearing.

The Puritans never seem to have understood that increased wages are actually an important market function. The increased price encourages people to conserve that form of labor, and it also encourages people to enter that market. Over time this eliminates the shortage by increasing production and decreasing demand. Creating price ceilings only makes matters worse and prolongs the suffering.

There's another side to this. If a person says "I will work for \$20 an hour" and the state comes along and says "\$20 an hour is forbidden; you will either work for \$10 an hour or you will not work at all", then what you have is a form of slavery. You are requiring a person to work at a wage other than what they have set for themselves. A person should be allowed to set his own rate at which he will work. After all, *no one is required to pay that rate*. Now, if no one wants to pay that rate then the person will have to make some decisions. He may have to lower his rate, or find a different career, or perhaps move to a different location that values his services more. But that is altogether different from saying "You are asking too much money for your services, so I am going to force you to work for less whether you want to or not." That is tyranny and oppression.

State-Mandated Preaching

In colonial America you had to preach what the state told you to preach. If you attacked the official state-sponsored doctrine or preached the wrong sermon on the wrong occasion, you would find yourself in a lot of trouble. John Winthrop reports this event from 1636:

"Mr. Wheelwright, one of the members of Boston, preaching at the last fast,

inveighed against all that walked in a covenant of works, as he described it to be, viz., such as maintain sanctification as an evidence of justification, etc., and called them antichrists, and stirred up the people against them with much bitterness and vehemency. For this he was called into the Court, and his sermon being produced, he justified it, and confessed he did mean all that walk in such a way. Whereupon the elders of the rest of the churches were called and asked whether they, in their ministry, did walk in such a way. They all acknowledged that they did. So, after much debate, the Court adjudged him guilty of sedition, and also of contempt, for that the Court had appointed the fast as a means of reconciliation of the differences, etc., and he purposely set himself to kindle and increase them..." (*John Winthrop's Journal*, as recorded in *The Annals of America*, p135)

It seems that a preacher by the name of Mr. Wheelright had preached a sermon that upset the government. He taught that if you believed genuine salvation produced a life of good works, you were preaching salvation by works and you were an antichrist. Now, from a theological perspective I believe that Mr. Wheelright was in error. The Bible really *does* teach that all genuine Christians will show the fruits of the Spirit in their life (see 1 John 2:1-5). However, what concerns me is that the government actually *prosecuted* Mr. Wheelright for his preaching. In fact, not only did they prosecute him but they found him guilty of "sedition" – which is another word for *treason*!

This raises a few questions. Is it really a good idea for the state to mandate what churches can or cannot preach? The Puritans thought it was. Is it a good idea for the government to prosecute a pastor for *treason* if he preaches something that the state does not like? That's exactly what happened here. The Puritans were convinced that the state should control what was preached and should be the final arbiter of true doctrine and false doctrine – *even though that was one of the key reasons why they left the old world in the first place*. The Puritans wanted religious freedom for themselves, but they were completely unwilling to extend it to others. If *they* disagreed with the churches in the old world then that was just and right, but if someone else came to their colony and disagreed with them then that was treason.

Illegal Profit Margins

In Puritan society you were required to keep your profit margin low. If the markup on your goods was too high, the Puritans would take you to court and prosecute you – as one unfortunate shopkeeper found out. This is what John Winthrop reported in 1639:

"At a General Court held at Boston, great complaint was made of the oppression used in the country in sale of foreign commodities; and Mr. Robert Keaine, who kept a shop in Boston, was notoriously above others observed and complained of; and, being convented, he was charged with many particulars; in some, for taking above 6d in the shilling profit; in some above 8d; and, in some small things, above two for one; And being hereof convict (as appears by the records), he was fined 200 pounds... For the cry of the country was so great against oppression, and some of the elders and magistrates had declared such detestation of the corrupt practice of this man..." (*John Winthrop's Journal*, as recorded in *The Annals of America*, p136-7)

Let's break this down. "6d" is 1 sixpence, or half a shilling. In the new world, where goods were scarce, this man was charging more for his merchandise than people would have paid if they had still lived in London. His markup ranged from 50% to 100%. Since his profit margin was too high, he was taken to court and prosecuted. He simply wasn't allowed to charge that much for his goods – so the government hit him with an unbelievably high fine. Having a high profit margin was, according to the Puritans, detestable corruption.

So let's talk about that for a minute. Suppose that you sailed to England, bought 100 turnips for \$1 each, and then took them to the new world and sold them for \$2 each. That would represent a 100% markup. That surely means that you made a lot of money, right? Well, not necessarily! First of all, how much money did it cost you to travel to England, and how much did it cost to carry the turnips back to America? If your expenses were more than \$100 then you actually *lost* money. Your high markup didn't even cover your transportation costs.

There's also the matter of spoilage. If it only cost you \$50 to make the round trip then you could make \$50 – unless half of your turnips went bad during the voyage. In that case the best you could do is break even, in spite of your high margin. Or what if none of them went bad and you reached the new world with your whole crop, but only half of them sold? In that case you once again just broken even. Even if you had a staggering \$10 markup, that would do you no good if you only sold one turnip.

A high markup does *not* mean you are making a lot of money. It is entirely possible to have a high markup and still go bankrupt due to overhead, low sales, and other costs. In fact, in some industries high margins are critically important – without them the industry couldn't function. They are *not* a sign of oppression.

What was really going on here was that the Puritans were oppressing this shopkeeper. Mr. Keaine was selling them goods at a certain rate, and the Puritans didn't want to pay that rate. They wanted to pay more or less the same rate that they would have paid back in England, where goods were plentiful and where there was a huge civilization to supply them. They hated the idea that prices went up when supply was low, and they firmly believed that things like supply and demand should not impact price at all. Now, the Puritans could have started another shop of their own and sold merchandise more cheaply. That would have either forced Mr. Keaine to lower his prices or it would have put him out of business. But the Puritans weren't interested in competing with him; they just wanted lower prices without any effort, so they brought him to court and prosecuted him. They did this in spite of the fact that *there was no law against what he was doing*:

"Yet most of the magistrates... would have been more moderate in their censure: (1) Because there was no law in force to limit or direct men in point of profit in their trade..." (*John Winthrop's Journal*, as recorded in *The Annals of America*, p137)

The Puritans fined this man a year's wages *in spite of the fact he had broken no laws*. They just decided on the spot that they didn't like what he was doing, and so they found him guilty. In Puritan society you could be found guilty *even if you had broken no laws!* The Puritans did not need laws to find you guilty.

Now, the Puritans *could* have let this man go on the grounds that he wasn't doing anything illegal, and then passed their misguided law that forbade high markups. But they didn't do that. They instead found a man guilty of breaking a non-existing law, which is appalling. Is it really a good idea for the state to find people guilty in the *absence* of laws? This should horrify us – but that is how the Puritans did things.

Mr. Keaine was fined a huge sum of money – but his punishment didn't stop there. The Puritans

also forced him to appear before his church and repent *with tears*:

"After the Court had censured him, the church of Boston called him also in question, where... he did, with tears, acknowledge and bewail his covetous and corrupt heart..." (*John Winthrop's Journal*, as recorded in *The Annals of America*, p138)

Was this man guilty of sin? Absolutely not! By no stretch of the imagination did he violate any of the Ten Commandments. He was not guilty of stealing, for he had not taken anything by force from anyone. Mr. Keaine was not forcing people to buy from him, nor was he preventing other shopkeepers from competing with him. All he did was tell people that if they gave him a certain sum of money then he would give them his goods in exchange. No one forced anyone to buy from him. But because the *Puritans* wanted to pay less than what he was charging, they brought him to court, prosecuted him, found him guilty even though he had broken no laws, and made him cry in front of his church. That was how the Puritans treated business owners. Oh – and they also seriously considered *excommunicating* him for this:

"The cause being debated by the church, some were earnest to have him excommunicated..." (*John Winthrop's Journal*, as recorded in *The Annals of America*, p138)

That's right: having a high profit margin was so serious a sin that it warranted being *kicked out of church*. The Puritans apparently believed it put you on the fast track to Hell.

Are there any Bible verses that say that certain profit margins are a sin? Absolutely not! A person is free to ask what they want in exchange for their property. After all, *it is their property*. When Abraham purchased a cave to bury his wife Sarah (Genesis 23), the children of Heth asked Abraham to pay *twenty times* what the cave was worth. Abraham did not complain about it or accuse them of price-gouging; instead he simply paid it.

The Puritans were not at all like Abraham. In fact, after prosecuting Mr. Keaine and forcing him to repent with tears, Cotton Mather preached an entire sermon on the evils of this wicked business owner who dared to provide them with merchandise in the wilderness. Mather wanted everyone to understand that profitable businesses were of the devil:

"These things gave occasion to Mr. Cotton in his public exercise the next lecture day, to lay open the error of such false principles, and to give some rules of direction in the case. Some false principles were these:" (*John Winthrop's Journal*, as recorded in *The Annals of America*, p138)

So what were the "false principles" that the Puritans condemned? The first one, at the very top of the list, was a condemnation of the whole concept of buying low and selling high:

"1. That a man might sell as dear as he can, and buy as cheap as he can." (*John Winthrop's Journal*, as recorded in *The Annals of America*, p138)

That's right. According to the Puritans, if you purchased a good when it was cheap and sold it when the price went up, you are a wicked sinner on the road to Hell. This shows an astounding amount of ignorance regarding how economies function. "Buying low" means you are purchasing goods at a

time when there is a surplus, and “selling high” means you are selling goods during a time of shortage. Do you know what the market needs when there are shortages? *More goods!* Selling when there is a shortage is *precisely* the right thing to do to relieve the shortage and start to drive the price back down. When people buy low and sell high they are actually transferring the goods to areas where there are shortages. This is something you *want* to happen. If you forbid this activity then you will get even worse shortages.

But Mather was just getting started. You were also of the devil if you raised your prices to cover your losses:

“2. If a man lose by casualty of sea, etc., in some of his commodities, he may raise the price of the rest.” (*John Winthrop's Journal*, as recorded in *The Annals of America*, p138)

So if your boat encountered problems on the way to the new world, you weren't allowed to raise your prices in order to cover your losses. This could easily mean the trip would ruin you financially. Do you know what merchants do when they can't make money? *They close up shop*. Once the merchants go out of business, the supply drops to *zero*. The Puritans believed that merchants had to assume all of the risk. They could not pass on the rising costs to their customers:

“3. That he may sell as he bought, though he paid too dear, etc., and though the commodity be fallen, etc...” (*John Winthrop's Journal*, as recorded in *The Annals of America*, p138)

As you can see, Mather taught that if the price of your goods went up then *you were not allowed to raise your prices* in response to your higher costs. No, you had to keep selling at the old price because that is the price people wanted to pay. Do you know what happens when this rule is enforced? Businesses go bankrupt and stop operating, and the supply of goods drops to zero.

But Cotton Mather was still not done. He said the Puritans should enact some new business rules:

“The rules for trading were these:

1. A man may not sell above the current price, i.e., such a price as is usual in the time and place...
2. When a man loses in his commodity for want of skill, etc., he must look at it as his own fault or cross, and therefore must not lay it upon another.
3. Where a man loses by casualty of the sea, or, etc., it is a loss cast upon himself by Providence, and he may not ease himself of it by casting it upon another; for so a man should seem to provide against all providences, etc., that he should never lose;...” (*John Winthrop's Journal*, as recorded in *The Annals of America*, p138)

Any nation that enforces these three rules will not have an economy for very long. These rules state that businesses cannot raise prices when the market changes, which means they will lose money and go bankrupt. They state that all losses *must* be absorbed by the business and cannot be passed on to customers – and since profit margins are not allowed to be high enough to absorb those costs, that means certain bankruptcy. With rules like these it's no wonder that so many of the early Puritans starved to death! The Puritans did everything they could to make it impossible to run a business.

Colonial Americans *loved* price controls. This example is taken from Regulation of Wages and Prices in Connecticut, which was passed in 1676 (more than 30 years later):

"...no merchant or trader shall advance above 2d upon the shilling for profit, charge, and venture from Boston, or other market of like distance..." (*The Public Records of the Colony of Connecticut*, as recorded by *The Annals of America*, p247)

It seems they finally *did* get around to passing laws making certain profits illegal.

Torture

The Puritans actually legalized torturing people in order to get them to confess. This is from the Massachusetts Body of Liberties (1641):

"No man shall be forced by torture to confess any crime against himself nor any other unless it be in some capital case, where he is first fully convicted by clear and sufficient evidence to be guilty, after which, if the cause be of that nature that it is very apparent there be other conspirators or confederates with him, then he may be tortured, yet not with such tortures as be barbarous and inhumane." (*Massachusetts Body of Liberties*, as recorded in *The Annals of America*, p165)

The Puritans hated it when *they* were tortured in the old world, but they legalized it in their society when it was in their benefit. Who needs due process when you can torture a confession out of someone?

Yes, it's true that he had to be convicted first, but keep in mind the Puritans did not exactly have a very high standard of what constituted "sufficient evidence". During the Salem Witch Trials the court believed that if someone looked at a child and that child went into fits, that was solid evidence that the accused person was a witch:

"The justices order the apprehended to look upon the said children, which accordingly they do; and at the time of that look... the afflicted are cast into a fit... the apprehended persons... are forthwith committed to prison on suspicion of witchcraft." (*Thomas Brattle*, as recorded in *The Annals of America*, p286)

Another test for witchcraft was tying a person up and trying to drown them. If they drowned then they were innocent, but if they floated they were a witch:

"...for if a witch cannot be drowned, this must proceed either from some natural cause, which it does not, for it is against nature for human bodies, when hands and feet are tied, not to sink under water... This miracle would the devil imitate in causing witches, who are his martyrs, not to sink when they are cast into the waters." (*Increase Mather*, as record in *The Annals of America*, p294)

In those days that is how people tested suspects for witchcraft: *they tried to drown them*. If they

survived then they were a witch. (For the record, Increase Mather was *condemning* this practice of his day, not defending it, but his words are an accurate summary of what actually happened.) This level of “evidence” would be appalling in even the most corrupt courts in the world, and yet it is how the Puritans did things.

Hatred of Democracy

The Puritans *hated* democracy. They were convinced it was of the devil and an affront to God Himself. This is what John Winthrop recorded in 1642:

"Now if we should change from a mixed aristocracy to a mere democracy, first, we should have no warrant in Scripture for it; there was no such government in Israel. We should hereby voluntarily abase ourselves, and deprive ourselves of that dignity which the providence of God has put upon us, which is a manifest breach of the Fifth Commandment; for a democracy is, among most civil nations, accounted the meanest and worst of all forms of government..." (*John Winthrop*, as recorded in *The Annals of America*, p169)

Do you know what the Fifth Commandment is? I'll let you read it for yourself:

Exodus 20:12: "Honour thy father and thy mother: that thy days may be long upon the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee."

You read correctly: it is to honor your father and mother. The Puritans actually believed that democracy was a violation of the Fifth Commandment! That conclusion is so far from being reasonable that it just boggles the mind. There are a lot of negative things you can say about democracy, but calling it a violation of the Fifth Commandment is completely ludicrous.

The Puritans believed that some people were just better than others, and those people should be in charge. Giving lesser people the right to vote was a horrifying thought – in fact, it was a *sin*:

"I say, we should incur scandal by undervaluing the gifts of God – as wisdom, learning, etc. - and the ordinance of magistracy, if the judgment and authority of any one of the common rank of the people should bear equal weight with that of the wisest and chiefest magistrate..." (*John Winthrop*, as recorded in *The Annals of America*, p169)

That's right. The Puritans believed that democracy was sinful. The better people should be in charge and the lesser people should just do what they were told. (Does that sound even *remotely* Christian to you? I'm pretty sure the Bible says something about being “respecters of persons”, and I don't think it approved of the practice.)

Caste System

In Puritan society there were a few poor people who managed to save up enough of their own money to be able to afford nicer clothing. This made the Puritans angry because the poor were starting to dress like the wealthy – which made it hard to tell the classes apart. The Puritans demanded that poor people start dressing like poor people. In fact, in 1651 they actually passed a law which made it *illegal* for the poor to wear nice clothes:

"It is therefore ordered by this Court, and the authority thereof, that no person within this jurisdiction, nor any of their relations depending upon them, whose visible estates, real and personal, shall not exceed the true and indifferent value of 200 pounds, shall wear any gold or silver lace, or gold and silver buttons, or any bone lace above 2s per yard, or silk hoods, or scarves, upon the penalty of 10s for every such offense..." (*The Colonial Laws of Massachusetts*, as recorded in *The Annals of America*, p210)

Not only did the Puritans do their best to make sure that the poor remained dressed in rags, but they actually established a special police force that went around town and made sure the poor weren't breaking the law. This group had the power to decide who was poor and who wasn't, and who could wear what clothing:

"It is further ordered by the authority aforesaid, that the selectmen of every town... are hereby enabled and required, from time to time, to have regard and take notice of apparel of any of the inhabitants of their several towns... and whosoever they shall judge to exceed their ranks and abilities in the costliness or fashion of their apparel in any respect... the selectmen aforesaid shall have power to assess such persons... provided this law shall not extend to the restraint of any magistrate..." (*The Colonial Laws of Massachusetts*, as recorded in *The Annals of America*, p211)

As you can see, *the magistrate exempted themselves from the law*. It seems that the laws only applied to the little people.

Does the Bible really say that poor people are required to dress poorly, and should be forbidden by law from wearing nice clothing? I'm pretty sure it doesn't. Forbidding the poor from having nice clothing is a staggering act of brutal selfishness.

Dancing

The Puritans *hated* dancing. Not just dancing as it exists today, but all forms of dancing that have ever existed in any society anywhere. In 1684 Increase Mather wrote *An Arrow Against Profane and Promiscuous Dancing*. This is what he had to say:

"Concerning the controversy about dancing, the question is not whether all dancing be in itself sinful. It is granted that pyrrhical or polemical saltation, i.e., when men

vault in their armor to show their strength and activity, may be of use. Nor is the question whether a sober and grave dancing of men with men or of women with women be not allowable; we make no doubt of that, where it may be done without offense, in due season and with moderation... But our question is concerning gynecandrical dancing, or that which is commonly called mixed or promiscuous dancing, viz., of men and women (be they elder or younger persons) together. Now this we affirm to be utterly unlawful and that it cannot be tolerated in such a place as New England without great sin." (*An Arrow Against Profane And Promiscuous Dancing*, as recorded in *The Annals of America*, p272)

By "promiscuous dancing" what he means is "men dancing with women". Mather condemns this as an incredibly serious sin. Now, the Puritans did not have modern "dirty dancing" in mind; what they hated were things like ballroom dancing and every other form of dancing, no matter how tame or innocent we might think it to be. Increase Mather went on to say that the Bible itself forbids all forms of dancing:

"... the Scripture condemns promiscuous dancing. This assumption is proved from the Seventh Commandment. It is an eternal truth to be observed in expounding the Commandments that whenever any sin is forbidden, not only the highest acts of that sin but all degrees thereof and all occasions leading thereto are prohibited." (*An Arrow Against Profane And Promiscuous Dancing*, as recorded in *The Annals of America*, p273)

For what it's worth, this is what the seventh commandment actually says:

Exodus 20:14: "Thou shalt not commit adultery."

Notice that the verse does not say "Thou shalt not dance in mixed groups". Adultery has a pretty specific definition, and it is completely different from dancing. Take a look at what the dictionary says:

Adultery: voluntary sexual intercourse between a married person and someone other than his or her lawful spouse.

Dancing: a successive group of rhythmical steps or bodily motions, or both, usually executed to music.

It should be obvious that dancing with someone in, say, a ballroom is *completely different* from having sex with them. Saying that dancing = adultery is ludicrous. Increase Mather cannot point to a single Bible verse that prohibits dancing, because there aren't any. Instead he says that any activity that *could* lead to a sin is, in itself, sinful. Since it is *theoretically possible* for dancing to lead to sin, dancing is therefore sinful.

Let's stop and think about that for a moment. The Puritans taught that any activity that could lead to a sin is sinful. As it turns out, that covers pretty much any activity that anyone might ever do! You could use that to condemn *literally everything*. Hanging out with friends? That could lead to a sin, so it's sinful. Calling your friend on your phone? That could lead to a sin, so it's sinful. Going to work? Driving down the road? All of those things could lead to sins, so they must be sinful! By that standard

even *going to church* would be sinful, since people certainly have sinned in church. Increase Mather's philosophy is so broad that it condemns all known human activities.

He even condemned it as sin if the people who were doing the dancing were not tempted to sin and *never even imagined* anything sinful:

"Whereas some object that they are not sensible of any ill motions occasioned in them, by being spectators or actors in such saltations, we are not bound to believe all which some pretend concerning their own mortification..." (*An Arrow Against Profane And Promiscuous Dancing*, as recorded in *The Annals of America*, p273)

The Puritans didn't care that *you* didn't have a problem with it. All that mattered was that someone, somewhere, didn't like it – and that was enough to condemn the whole activity as being of the devil. And remember, in Puritan society you were not allowed to disagree with your pastor. That would have been treason.

Conclusion

The passages listed in this document are not the only horrors that can be found in colonial America; there are others as well. This is not intended to be an exhaustive study. It is only meant to illustrate the point that the founding colonists were very different from what most people think.

Yes, it's true that they fled from persecution – but they did that in order to set up their own system of persecution. Yes, they were Christians – but they demanded that everyone else be Christians as well, or else they would be put to death. Yes, they built churches – and you were required to attend them every Sunday and you could never disagree with your pastor. If you did not attend the state church with the state-approved magistrate who was preaching the state-approved sermons, you were a criminal and you would be prosecuted. And if you dared to preach a sermon that the state did not like then you would face charges of treason.

Oh – and don't even think about trying to open a business. Prices were fixed, wages were fixed, and if you made too much money you would face ruinous fines. You could even be found guilty if there weren't any laws against what you were doing!

The truth is the Puritans and the other colonists weren't very different from the other societies of their day. What they were doing was commonplace during that era. These colonists weren't necessarily worse than other men – but that doesn't make these horrors any less appalling.

Colonial America was *not* a paradise on Earth. If the modern government did all the things these early colonies did, we would call it horrific tyranny – and we would be right.

CONTENDING FOR THE FAITH

One of the guiding principles of the modern church is that when it comes to theology and doctrine we should “major on the majors and minor on the minors”. What people mean by that is we should only make a big deal out of the most central and core doctrines of the faith, and be willing to “agree to disagree” on everything else. By seeking common ground and downplaying everything that is not a core doctrine, it is possible to find unity among a wide set of Christians. Then we can all work together to try to accomplish common goals.

This pragmatic approach to Christianity – that we should find unity by agreeing on a small subset of core doctrines and then ignoring everything else – has become the universal approach that everyone uses. But is pragmatism and compromise really Biblical? Let's take a step back and see how Jesus approached the topics of doctrine and interfaith dialog.

Early in the ministry of Jesus a man named Nicodemus came to speak to Him. The report that Nicodemus gave was, from our way of thinking, very encouraging. The Pharisees actually recognized Jesus as a powerful and wise teacher who came from God:

John 3:1-2: “There was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews: The same came to Jesus by night, and said unto him, Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him.”

There is no question how the modern church would have handled the rest of this discussion. The Pharisees actually recognized that Jesus came from God! Any modern church would have seen this as a great opportunity to build bridges to a very large religious group that had the respect of the common people. Sure, the Pharisees had some problems with their theology, but there was so much potential for agreement: the Pharisees accepted the Ten Commandments, they came from a background well versed in the sacrificial system, and they were experts in the Law. Given that the Pharisees clearly had some respect for Jesus (otherwise Nicodemus wouldn't have come in the first place!), why not take this opportunity to put differences aside and work together for the common good? Think of what could be accomplished for the poor if they joined forces! They could feed the needy, heal the sick, and maybe put together some protest groups to try to get the Roman occupation to back off.

If the modern church had existed in those days it would have found a way to come to some sort of an agreement with the Pharisees. After all, there was so much good that could have been done if they just worked together. Who would waste such a great opportunity by getting into areas of disagreement? This is exactly the same reasoning modern churches use when they form alliances with groups that *reject* the gospel in order to take care of the needy or advance certain political or moral causes. If the goal is good and people are willing to help then isn't that all that matters?

But is that what Jesus did? Absolutely not! Jesus actually *ignored* all of their common ground and instead took this opportunity to preach the gospel:

John 3:3: “Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

Jesus spent the entire discussion talking about the need to be born of the Spirit. Our Lord

discussed the gospel and ignored all of their common ground and all the good they could have done if they just laid their doctrinal differences aside and pursued the common good. Jesus was far more concerned with correcting Nicodemus' misunderstandings about salvation! As far as we can tell, no other topic was even mentioned. The only interfaith dialog Jesus was interested in engaging in was "You must be born again". He went right to the place where the Pharisees were wrong and He focused *exclusively* on that.

If you read through the gospels you will quickly discover that this is what Jesus did every time He had a conversation with someone. Jesus never searched for common ground; instead He searched for sin and corrected it. We can find another example of this later in His ministry when He entered into the home of one of the chief Pharisees in order to share a meal with him:

Luke 14:1-2: "And it came to pass, as he went into the house of one of the chief Pharisees to eat bread on the sabbath day, that they watched him. And, behold, there was a certain man before him which had the dropsy."

It was quite an honor to be invited into that home, and Jesus was a guest. By the modern way of thinking this would have been a terrific time to put together some kind of alliance to feed the poor, or care for the needy, or champion some pressing social issue. Jesus could have easily kept the topic of conversation focused on items that the Pharisees agreed with. After all, there were a lot of doctrines that they had in common, and Jesus was an *invited guest* in this man's home. Why focus on religious differences (which had already been raised in earlier conversations anyway) when there was so much of an opportunity to join forces and working together?

On top of that, the issue at hand was a very small point of an obscure Old Testament law: was it a sin to provide medical assistance on the seventh day of the week? Jesus taught that it was *not* a sin; the Pharisees taught that it *was* a sin. Jesus had already made His position quite clear, so you could argue that there was no need to bring it up again – and certainly not in this setting! What modern church would make an issue out of a small point of doctrine like that? After all, it had nothing to do with salvation or the gospel. It was a very minor issue – one that people could surely "agree to disagree" on, especially when there were poor people to be fed and a vicious Roman occupation to fight. Why not just set aside the "technical details" of the Law and focus on the bigger picture?

That is how the modern church would approach this encounter, but that is *not* what Jesus did. Instead Jesus made a point of healing that man in front of everyone and then *rebuking the very people who had invited Him over to eat*:

Luke 14:3-6: "And Jesus answering spake unto the lawyers and Pharisees, saying, Is it lawful to heal on the sabbath day? And they held their peace. And he took him, and healed him, and let him go; And answered them, saying, Which of you shall have an ass or an ox fallen into a pit, and will not straightway pull him out on the sabbath day? And they could not answer him again to these things."

No modern church, if invited over to someone's house like this, would find some obscure point of Old Testament law, make a big deal out of it, and then publicly rebuke the very person who invited him over for dinner – *but that is exactly what Jesus did*. The Lord saw that they were in error in one point (a point that, today, churches would all agree is "minor" and should be ignored) and so that is the very point He focused on and the very point He rebuked.

But He didn't stop there. When He looked around and saw other sin going on He rebuked that as

well:

Luke 14:10-11: “But when thou art bidden, go and sit down in the lowest room; that when he that bade thee cometh, he may say unto thee, Friend, go up higher: then shalt thou have worship in the presence of them that sit at meat with thee. For whosoever exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted.”

Jesus – while an invited guest in someone else's home! - saw that people, in pride, were trying to take the best seats for themselves and so He rebuked them for it. Can you imagine being invited over to someone's home, seeing some minor sin or error, and then rebuking them on the spot for it? No modern church would ever approach interfaith dialog that way, but that's what Jesus did!

The Lord did not stop there. In that very same dinner Jesus criticized the selection of people that the chief Pharisee had invited over for a meal:

Luke 14:12-14: “Then said he also to him that bade him, When thou makest a dinner or a supper, call not thy friends, nor thy brethren, neither thy kinsmen, nor thy rich neighbours; lest they also bid thee again, and a recompence be made thee. But when thou makest a feast, call the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind: And thou shalt be blessed; for they cannot recompense thee: for thou shalt be recompensed at the resurrection of the just.”

Jesus did *not* try to form an alliance with the Pharisees. Instead He rebuked them repeatedly while He was an *invited guest in one of their homes*, and He commanded them to repent of their pride and live their lives very differently. Even though Jesus had made these points before and even though Jesus knew the Pharisees disagreed with him, Jesus still brought them up again anyway and He still rebuked them for it. Jesus wasn't interested in the things that the Pharisees were doing right; instead He focused exclusively on what they were doing wrong. When He had a chance to speak with them that is the *only* thing He talked to them about – *their errors*.

How many pastors today, if invited to speak to a group that was engaged in some sort of heresy, would take the opportunity to rebuke that sin and correct them? How many Christian pastors, if invited to speak to Mormons, would spend the whole sermon rebuking Mormonism? No one would do that today – but that is *exactly* what Jesus did! He was relentless and would never ignore sin of any kind.

It didn't matter how big the sin was, either. Do you know what convinced the Pharisees to start plotting to kill Jesus? It is because Jesus healed someone on the Sabbath:

Matthew 12:9-14: “And when he was departed thence, he went into their synagogue: And, behold, there was a man which had his hand withered. And they asked him, saying, Is it lawful to heal on the sabbath days? That they might accuse him. And he said unto them, What man shall there be among you, that shall have one sheep, and if it fall into a pit on the sabbath day, will he not lay hold on it, and lift it out? How much then is a man better than a sheep? Wherefore it is lawful to do well on the sabbath days. Then saith he to the man, Stretch forth thine hand. And he stretched it forth; and it was restored whole, like as the other. Then the Pharisees went out, and held a council against him, how they might destroy him.”

Jesus saw that the Pharisees were wrong over what the modern church would call a very minor issue, and He rebuked them for it over and over and over again. He refused to “agree to disagree” or try to find unity and common ground. He saw that they were wrong and so He kept pushing the issue until they finally decided to kill Him.

Did Jesus “major on the majors and minor on the minors”? Did He “agree to disagree” on secondary issues? Absolutely not! He refused to ignore *any* sin or error, no matter how small. When He had discussions with people He actually *focused on their sin and error*, not on ways to find unity and common ground in order to work together! Jesus acted as if the most important thing was to correct whatever the error was, no matter how small it might be or how much it might anger people. Jesus could easily have healed people on days other than the Sabbath but He chose to do it on the Sabbath in order to make an issue out of it.

In other words, Jesus had a completely different view of truth than the modern church does. Jesus taught that *every single word* that God ever uttered had huge significance and was worth fighting *for* and worth fighting *over*:

Luke 4:4: “And Jesus answered him, saying, It is written, That man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word of God.”

Notice that Jesus mentioned *every* word of God. He didn't say “some words”, or “the most important words”, or “the words that are central to the gospel”. No, Jesus said that we need to live by *every single word of God*, with no exceptions! There was nothing we could disregard on the grounds of “seeking unity”. When Jesus gave the Great Commission He did not command His disciples to only teach *some* things, or to teach only the core doctrines, or to make whatever compromises were necessary in order to form alliances and not alienate people. Instead He commanded them to teach *all things* and to observe *all things*:

Matthew 28:19-20: “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen.”

That is exactly what the apostles did: they left nothing out and taught *everything*, no matter how divisive it might be. They even taught things that modern churches consider to be secondary doctrines! Interestingly, the apostle Paul considered himself to have done his job because he proclaimed *everything*:

Acts 20:26-27: “Wherefore I take you to record this day, that I am pure from the blood of all men. For I have not shunned to declare unto you all the counsel of God.”

Notice that Paul did not say “I taught you the gospel, and that is really all that matters. The other stuff is secondary and doesn't matter very much.” No, Paul said that he taught them *all* of the counsel of God. There is no hint that any disciple ever compromised *any* doctrine (no matter how small) in order to “pursue unity” or “forge alliances”. Instead the New Testament insists that we be completely blameless and “without spot”:

1 Timothy 6:12-14: “Fight the good fight of faith, lay hold on eternal life,

whereunto thou art also called, and hast professed a good profession before many witnesses. I give thee charge in the sight of God, who quickeneth all things, and before Christ Jesus, who before Pontius Pilate witnessed a good confession; That thou keep this commandment without spot, unrebukable, until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ:"

Paul does not say "Defend the core doctrines of the gospel, but beyond that feel free to compromise wherever necessary in order to build alliances, grow your church, and gain influence. Only the gospel matters; everything else is secondary and isn't worth fighting over." Instead Paul commands people to *fight* so that they can be "without spot" and "unrebukable". Do you know what spots are? They are very tiny things – blemishes that are almost unnoticeable! You might say that spots are *minor* – yet the New Testament insists that we be *without spot*. It is simply not good enough to "major on the majors" because in the eyes of God *everything* is major. God has never said anything that He hopes we will just ignore. According to Jesus *all* of His Words count:

Matthew 5:19: "Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven; but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven."

This verse ought to strike fear into the hearts of modern churches everywhere. *Jesus cares about the tiniest and most minute parts of His Word*. Does Jesus say we ought to major on the majors and not sweat the small stuff? Absolutely not! Instead Jesus gives us a dire warning about getting even *the least* doctrine wrong. It is *not* fine to get the big things right and the small things wrong; if you get *anything* wrong – even "small" things – there will be serious consequences for it when we stand before God and give an account! Jesus *never* divided any of His teachings into groups of "things that matter" and "things you can shove under the rug if it helps you build an audience or get along with other groups". Instead Jesus consistently rebuked even the smallest sins and errors every time He encountered them.

This is how the book of Psalms put it:

Psalm 119:127-128: "Therefore I love thy commandments above gold; yea, above fine gold. Therefore I esteem all thy precepts concerning all things to be right; and I hate every false way."

Which precepts of God did the psalmist care about? *All of them*. Which precepts did the psalmist consider to be right and worth caring about? *All of them*. Which false ways did the psalmist hate? *Every one of them*. Which precepts did Jesus or His disciples compromise on in order to gain a wider audience or forge alliances? *None of them*.

Yes, unity is something that God desires. But what God requires is for us to find unity *in* the truth, not unity *in spite of* the truth:

1 Corinthians 1:10: "Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment."

The New Testament teaches that we achieve unity by *all believing the same things!* It never says we should achieve unity by agreeing to throw our differences out the window and forge together in spite of having very different minds and very different judgments. It never says we should ignore all doctrines except for the most central ones and achieve unity by not believing much of anything. That is actually *the opposite* of what this verse is saying. We need to believe *everything* and be in agreement over it.

Some people argue against this by saying if you are that dogmatic about everything then you will have fellowship with a much smaller group of people than you would otherwise. But is your goal to have as big an audience as possible or to be faithful to what God has commanded? Jesus was *far* more concerned about defending the truth and rebuking sin than He was trying to maximize the size of His audience! Where does the Bible teach pragmatism? Where does it say that unity is more important than truth, and if some lesser truths start to cause division we should get rid of them? *It never says any of those things.* Instead it tells us to not be unequally yoked together with darkness:

2 Corinthians 6:14-15: “Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness? And what concord hath Christ with Belial? or what part hath he that believeth with an infidel?”

That doesn't sound like a call to interfaith dialog, does it? No, that sounds a lot more like a call to *avoid* making alliances with the ungodly. Paul isn't telling us to find Mormons and Muslims and Buddhists and work with them as long as we can find common ground. He's not telling us that we need to ignore minor (or major!) doctrinal differences if it will help the common good. Instead he is telling us to *avoid* joining with those in error (and to rebuke error wherever we find it), *not* to minimize our differences with them so we can forge ahead together!

Once again this is not just talking about unbelievers – it applies to the church as well. Even *within* the church the New Testament never misses an opportunity to rebuke even the most minor of errors:

1 Timothy 4:1-3: “Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils; Speaking lies in hypocrisy; having their conscience seared with a hot iron; Forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from meats, which God hath created to be received with thanksgiving of them which believe and know the truth.”

Are the doctrines of marriage and diet central to the gospel? I think most churches would say they are not, and therefore they aren't worth fighting over and we can “agree to disagree” in order to pursue unity. If some people believe one way and others believe a different way, well, we can just agree that we have different stances and move forward together.

But that's not what the Bible teaches, is it? No, it condemns these false teachings as “doctrines of devils” and actually speaks of these heresies as a departure from the faith! Those who have an errant view of these “minor and secondary” issues are wrong *and in sin* and they need to be rebuked for siding with *devils*. There is no sense of proportion here that “these are minor issues and, in the grand scheme of things, who cares?”.

God is very clear that He requires us to contend for the faith – not just part of the faith, but *all* of it. There are no minor doctrines to God; there is nothing that we can ignore and “agree to disagree” on. Jesus rebuked error every time He encountered it, no matter how small it was, and He said that those who were getting the *smallest* commands wrong were in big trouble.

On what grounds, then, do we say that “contending for the faith” means throwing out all doctrines except for the ones most essential to the gospel, and ignoring everything else? Jesus never did that. The apostles never did that. Churches do that all the time – but you will never find a Biblical basis for ignoring *anything* God has said, or pretending that some of the commandments and teachings of Jesus matter but most of them do not.

DEGREES OF ETERNAL DAMNATION

Here is a question for you: does the Bible teach that there are different degrees of suffering in Hell, or does it say that Hell the same for everyone? Do very wicked people get punished more, while less wicked people get punished less? How does it work?

Well, let's take a look and see what the Bible says. There are several different Scripture passages that speak to this. The first one I'd like to look at can be found in the book of Matthew. Jesus was talking about some cities where He had performed amazing miracles, but despite the fact that they saw Him *in person* doing great wonders, they did not repent. Jesus had this message for them:

Matthew 11:23: “And thou, Capernaum, which art exalted unto heaven, shalt be brought down to hell: for if the mighty works, which have been done in thee, had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day.
24 But I say unto you, That it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment, than for thee.”

Jesus made the point that if His miracles had been done in the wicked city of Sodom, those people would have repented. In fact, they would have repented so strongly that Sodom would never have been destroyed at all and would still exist as a city! The people of Capernaum, however, did not repent. Even though they saw the mighty works of Jesus – works that would have led the people of Sodom to repentance – they refused to believe. They were actually *more* wicked and hard-hearted than the people of Sodom.

Because of this, Jesus said that when the day of judgment comes, their judgment will be more severe than the judgment of Sodom. This tells us two things. First of all, Jesus considers the final judgment of Sodom to still be in the future. Even though that city was completely annihilated by fire and brimstone from Heaven, that was *not* the city's final judgment. There is still a day of judgment to come, when the people of that city will be judged for their wickedness. That will be the true judgment – not just for Sodom, but for all cities and all people.

Second, we can see that the day of judgment will not be the same for everyone. Jesus said that the city of Capernaum will be judged more harshly in the final judgment than the city of Sodom, because Capernaum saw the miracles of the Lord in person and still refused to repent.

The reason for this is because of this principle:

Luke 12:47: “And that servant, which knew his lord's will, and prepared not himself, neither did according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes.
48 But he that knew not, and did commit things worthy of stripes, shall be beaten with few stripes. For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required: and to whom men have committed much, of him they will ask the more.”

This teaching is simple: those who knew better and still did what was wrong will be punished more harshly than those who didn't know better. Now, those who did wrong without knowing it was wrong will still be punished; they just won't be punished as harshly.

In the case of Capernaum and Sodom, the people of Sodom never saw the Lord Jesus Christ. They never saw any of His miracles. If they had seen His miracles they would have repented – but they

never got that chance. The people of Capernaum, however, *did* see the Lord in person and *did* see His miracles. They were given a much greater opportunity – and they rejected it. Since they were given more they will be punished more. That is what Jesus was saying.

Some people teach that if a remote tribe never hears the gospel, God will not hold it against them and will let them into Heaven because they never had a chance to believe. That is actually *not* what the Bible teaches. Instead it says this:

Romans 2:12: “For as many as have sinned without law shall also perish without law: and as many as have sinned in the law shall be judged by the law;”

Those who never heard the law of God will perish without it. Those who have heard it will be judged by it. The people of Sodom never had the gospel preached to them, and yet God still annihilated their cities and promised them an even worse judgment to come. Ignorance is not an excuse; in order to be saved you must repent and believe.

This is why it is so important to send missionaries. If people are never told the gospel then they will perish without it. It is *vital* that everyone be told! As we can see, even Sodom would have repented if they had seen the works that Christ did. They would have gone to Heaven – but instead they were damned. That is the difference the gospel makes, and that is why we need to go and tell all the world what Christ has done.

But back to the question at hand. Matthew 11 is not the only place where Christ taught this principle. He had something similar to say in the previous chapter:

Matthew 10:14: “And whosoever shall not receive you, nor hear your words, when ye depart out of that house or city, shake off the dust of your feet.
15 Verily I say unto you, It shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrha in the day of judgment, than for that city.”

Why would it be more tolerable for Sodom than for these other cities? Because those cities saw the disciples come, and perform miracles, and share the gospel, and they still refused to believe. Since they rejected a greater witness than Sodom ever had, their judgment will be more harsh.

We find this same teaching taught in Mark 6:11, Luke 10:12, and Luke 10:14 as well. It is always the same thing: those who were given a greater witness and rejected it will be judged more harshly than those who received a lesser witness.

Up to this point we have been talking about cities. But what about individual people? Well, the book of Revelation tells us that on the final day of judgment people will be judged for all the deeds they have done:

Revelation 20:12: “And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God; and the books were opened: and another book was opened, which is the book of life: and the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works.

13 And the sea gave up the dead which were in it; and death and hell delivered up the dead which were in them: and they were judged every man according to their works.”

Each person will be held accountable for all the things they have done in their life. But there is

more. Jesus once gave this warning:

Matthew 12:36: “But I say unto you, That every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment.”

Jesus said that not only would people be held accountable for their *deeds*, but they would also be held accountable for *every idle word* that they spoke. When people stand before God on Judgment Day they will be held accountable for everything that they did *and* everything that they said.

Now, there are two possibilities. Those whose sins are *not* covered by the blood of Christ will have no defense. Revelation 20:15 tells us that those people will be cast into the Lake of Fire. We have already seen that those who were more wicked will be punished more harshly than those who were less wicked. All who are in the Lake of Fire will be tormented, but some will be tormented more than others, based on the deeds they did in life. It will be more tolerable for some than for others – but when you are being burned alive for all of eternity, “more tolerable” is not the same thing as “actually tolerable” or “comfortable”. It will be unbearable for *everyone* who is there. But it will be even worse for some than others.

The other possibility is that a person's sins *have* been covered by the blood of Christ. Those who repented and believed in Christ will not be cast into the Lake of Fire. However, they will still be judged. They will have to give an account of their words and their deeds. This judgment, though, is not about punishment; instead it is about rewards. We find it discussed in the first letter to the Corinthians:

I Corinthians 3:14: “If any man's work abide which he hath built thereupon, he shall receive a reward.

15 If any man's work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss; but he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire.”

You see, just as there are degrees of punishment in Hell, there are also degrees of reward in Heaven. Those who faithfully serve Christ will be rewarded for their efforts and will receive a reward. However, those who wasted their lives and only served themselves will not be rewarded. They will suffer loss, as the verse says. They will still be saved, and they will not be cast into the Lake of Fire, but they will fail to gain things that were given to others.

We can find this same idea taught other places as well. For example, Jesus once said this:

Matthew 5:19: “Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven; but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.”

Those who teach men to sin – even if it is just a little sin – will be called the least, while those who keep God's commands and teach others to do the same will be called great. Now, this is not talking about this life, but the life to come. Jesus warned that some who were great in this life will be held in very low esteem in the next:

Matthew 19:30: “But many that are first shall be last; and the last shall be first.”

God cares about our faithfulness – or lack thereof – and He responds accordingly. The choices

that we make have consequences.

DO PASTORS HAVE THE POWER TO MARRY PEOPLE?

The procedure for getting married is pretty well understood: you have to go and get a marriage license, and then you have to find someone to marry you. When it comes to performing the marriage ceremony people typically have two options: they can go down to the courthouse and get married by a justice of the peace, or they can go find a pastor and have him do the job. This procedure is so commonplace that people don't even think twice about it. If you ask someone "Who married you?" they will typically give you the name of their pastor – because people believe that pastors have the ability to take two people and join them together in marriage.

But do they *really* have that ability? Stop and think about it. What gives pastors the ability to join people in holy matrimony? Who gave them that magical power? I am being serious here. Where did this ability come from?

You can check the Bible, but you won't find it there. The Bible charges pastors with many responsibilities: they are to preach the gospel, take care of their flocks, baptize people, and so forth, but the Bible *never* tasks them with marrying people. It's never even *mentioned*. Jesus Christ charged the Church with going into all the world, making disciples, and baptizing people, but He *never* mentioned the idea that His Church should be marrying people. He didn't even hint at it.

The apostles wrote a lot of letters to various churches instructing them in how to follow the Lord, but they never mentioned the idea that churches ought to be involved in marrying people. They talked about feeding the poor, healing the sick, making converts, and even church discipline, but they never mentioned churches holding marriage ceremonies – *not a single time*.

In fact, no church in the entire Bible is ever said to have performed a marriage. No disciple, apostle, or deacon ever performed a wedding in the Bible. You *never* see a pastor taking two people and marrying them. *It never happened*.

What I am trying to say is this: the idea that pastors have a magical ability to unite two people in marriage *does not come from the Bible*. There is absolutely nothing in the Bible that says that pastors have that ability. There is also nothing in the Bible that says that churches ought to be involved in performing marriages. *It's not there*. I understand that churches have taken this role upon themselves, but God never gave them that responsibility.

This can only mean that pastors *do not* have the power to unite people in marriage. Pastors have no more power to marry people than garbage collectors or tax accountants. I understand that people commonly believe that they need to go to a pastor in order to get married, but there's no Biblical basis for that. It may be traditional, but it's man's tradition – not God's.

So who *does* have the power to marry people? Well, according to Jesus Christ, only one person can do that:

Matthew 19:4: "And he answered and said unto them, Have ye not read, that he which made them at the beginning made them male and female,
5 And said, For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: and they twain shall be one flesh?
6 Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh. What therefore **God hath joined together**, let not man put asunder."

Do you see that? Who takes two people and joins them together in marriage? *God does*. Only

God has that power. No man can unite people in marriage; it is God who does the joining. How does it work? Well, it's pretty simple: a man leaves his parents and cleaves to his wife, and God unites them into one. That's literally what the verse says. At that point they have been joined together. They are no longer two people; instead they are one flesh.

Now, here's what that means in practical terms. In the marriage ceremony, the marriage license itself means nothing. It may be required from a legal standpoint, but that piece of paper carries no weight with God. Having a signed marriage license does not make you married, and *not* having one does not mean that you are unmarried. After all, Adam and Eve didn't have a marriage license, but the Bible tells us that they were husband and wife. There are countless societies that never had marriage licenses, but that didn't mean those couples were living in sin. To God a marriage license is just a meaningless piece of paper. It carries no weight and has no authority.

Likewise, at the end of the ceremony when the pastor says "I now pronounce you man and wife", his pronouncement means nothing. Saying those words does *not* make the couple married, and *not* saying those words does not render them unmarried. What the pastor says is *utterly irrelevant*.

The key part of the marriage ceremony is when the man takes the woman to be his wife, and the wife takes the man to be her husband. The two make a covenant together in the sight of God – a lifelong covenant. When they do that – when they exchange their vows and commit to being husband and wife – at that point they are married because at that point *God* joins them together.

Now, the consummation of the marriage is important, but it is *not* what makes two people a couple. We know this because Adam and Eve were referred to as husband and wife long before they ever consummated their union. Take a look for yourself. This is Genesis 2:25:

Genesis 2:25: "And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed."

Eve is referred to as Adam's wife *immediately* – as soon as she was created and given to Adam! However, we don't see that relationship consummated until much later:

Genesis 4:1: "And Adam knew Eve his wife; and she conceived, and bare Cain, and said, I have gotten a man from the Lord."

If that's not enough evidence for you, here's something else to consider: God has always been very clear about the fact that sex is only permissible *within* marriage. Sex within marriage is good; sex outside of marriage is a serious sin. In other words, you have to *already be married* before you can have sex. Therefore the marriage must take place *first* – which means that the act of the physical union *cannot* be a part of the marriage process.

Adam and Eve are a great example of how marriage actually works. God brought Eve to Adam, Adam accepted her as his wife, and they became a married couple. This is despite the fact there was no marriage license, there was no pastor to pronounce them married, and there weren't even any witnesses (although I'd like to point out that witnesses are a very good idea because they will hold the couple to their vow). All it took to marry them was their covenant to each other, made in the sight of God. That was enough.

The reason all of this matters is because we've come to believe that people are united in marriage *by other people*, instead of by God. This leads to the idea that since the marriage was *created* by other people, it can also be dissolved by other people. Since the government grants the marriage, the government can also grant the divorce.

But as we've seen, the government has absolutely *nothing to do* with uniting people in marriage. Likewise, pastors are *not* a part of the process (no matter what they claim). It is *God* who unites people in marriage – and only God can dissolve the marriage. You can go down to the courthouse and get a divorce, but all the government can give you is a meaningless piece of paper. The courthouse is not the one who married you in the first place; it was God who did that! This means that *God has to grant your divorce*. If He doesn't then you don't have one; you are still married to your original spouse.

I have a lot to say about divorce, but since I've already written about that extensively elsewhere I won't repeat it all here. The point I want to make is that getting a divorce is very different from what people think. Since God is the one who united you in the first place, only God can separate you. If you divorced your spouse for an unbiblical reason (which is too complicated a subject to get into here), then God does not recognize your divorce *and still considers you to be married to your original spouse*.

Should you decide to get married, keep in mind that the government and the pastor plays no role in uniting you in holy matrimony. God is the one who is joining the two of you together – and He is doing it *for life*. A marriage is not as easy to get out of as you might suppose. Just because you consider yourself to be divorced and are now married to someone else, does *not* mean that God agrees with you. If you did not get divorced for a Biblical reason then God considers you to simply be having an affair and living in sin with someone you are *not* married to. That may not matter very much to you now, but I assure you that on Judgment Day, when you stand before God and give an account for your life, it will matter a *great deal* to you then.

ARMINIANISM VS CALVINISM – DOES IT MATTER?

Whenever a person starts talking about the doctrine of predestination, it usually doesn't take very long for someone else to say “Well, you know, it doesn't really matter. Some people believe one way and other people believe another way. In the end it makes no difference.” This idea that “it doesn't really matter” is not limited to the predestination debate. You will hear the same thing said about a great many theological topics! The doctrine of creation “doesn't really matter”. The doctrines of eschatology (the study of end times) “don't really matter”. These days, if it's not directly related to the gospel itself then the Church is eager to jettison that topic and talk about something else. Even doctrines that deal directly with the gospel itself (such as the Virgin Birth) are being glossed over because they are “divisive”.

There are some people who believe that the truth isn't actually important. Many churches distance themselves from doctrine as much as possible, to the point where doctrine itself is seen as some sort of bad thing. If the topic isn't the gospel then we are told that we should just “agree to disagree” and move on to something that's more important. The reason the Church is doing this is to avoid division; they believe that the best way to unite the body of Christ is by rejecting all of the teachings of the Bible except for the most basic truths of all.

I believe that this philosophy is grossly wrong. You will not find this attitude anywhere in the Bible. None of the apostles believed that “it doesn't matter”. In fact, Jude once decided to *not* talk about the gospel because he thought that it was more important to address the problem of heresy:

Jude 1:3: “Beloved, when I gave all diligence to write unto you of the common salvation, it was needful for me to write unto you, and exhort you that ye should earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints.”

As you can see, Jude commanded his readers to *earnestly contend for the faith*. He thought that the truth was worth defending, and he commanded us to defend it. The apostle Paul likewise commanded us to hold on to the truth:

2 Timothy 1:13: “Hold fast the form of sound words, which thou hast heard of me, in faith and love which is in Christ Jesus.”

Sadly, many churches are no longer doing this. Instead they are abandoning doctrine after doctrine in a foolish quest for superficial unity. They are ignoring the fact that Jesus Himself said that the truth is divisive:

Matthew 10:34: “Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword.

35 For I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter in law against her mother in law.”

The simple reality is that *every single truth in the Bible is divisive*. There are no truths that are not a source of contention – not even the truth that God exists. Throwing out the very words of God in order to make friends is a bad idea. The Lord has not called us to pragmatism; instead He has called us

to *hold fast* to what He has told us.

God did not divide His words into “things that matter” and “things you can throw out and ignore”. Every word of God matters; every truth in the Bible is important and should be defended. I think these quotes sum it up pretty well:

“It’s popular to just smile and say of the protestant church, “On the essentials of salvation we all agree, but in the non-essentials there’s room for lots of different opinions.” Baloney. The Bible is not a document written to provide a debating society with lots of different positions. It’s the Word of God and it’s not subject to man’s opinion. Though we may not like it all, we don’t have the right to re-interpret it to suit our desires.” (source unknown)

“I challenge anyone to provide a solid Bible foundation for the “in essentials unity” doctrine. I don’t want a lesson in church history. What old-time fundamentalists did or did not do is interesting and sometimes educational but it has zero authority. I don’t want a lesson in pragmatism. Whether or not “unity in essentials” would further “revival” or “evangelism” or “bringing America back to God” or “creation science” or any number of other objectives is neither here nor there, because pragmatism has no authority. The sole authority for faith and practice is the Bible, and the fact is that there is no support for “in essentials unity” in the Bible. It is a man-made principle created to further a pragmatic agenda.” (David Cloud)

“Many have been carried away from full obedience by a noble-sounding motto which has been applied to Christian work. ‘In essentials unity, in nonessentials liberty, and in all things charity.’ Some things are not essential to salvation but they are essential to full obedience, and the Christian has no liberty under God to sort out the Scriptures into essentials and nonessentials! It is our duty to declare the whole counsel of God, and to do it wherever we are.” (David Nettleton)

The great problem we have today is that the Church thinks like this: “You can believe that particular error and still be saved, so that error is not worth confronting. It’s better to leave it alone and get on with the business of preaching the gospel.” That may sound wise, but it is utterly foolish. Jude certainly did not believe that way, and the apostle Paul didn’t either. The disciples aggressively attacked heretics; you will never find them saying “Just preach Jesus and don’t worry about it”. Even *Jesus Himself* rebuked heresy:

Matthew 22:29: “Jesus answered and said unto them, Ye do err, not knowing the scriptures, nor the power of God.”

If your response to error is *ever* “it doesn’t really matter” then *you are in a state of sin*. That attitude shows a lack of respect for God, for His Word, and for the truths He has revealed. Every single one of His words matter. Every single truth He has revealed matters. Every doctrine is worth defending and every doctrine ought to be defended. The modern Church has become far too tolerant of error. If you truly cannot understand why heresy is bad or why the truth should be defended then I fear for your soul. Let me repeat this one more time: *there are no optional truths*.

Which brings us back to the subject at hand. Calvinism and Arminianism are radically different

interpretations of the Bible – in fact, they are so different that they are mutually exclusive. They hold opposing views on who God is, how salvation and faith works, and on grace itself – just to name a few. These differences are more than just philosophical. There is a tremendous difference between a God who has made salvation available to everyone and is hoping that people will respond to that invitation, and a God who chooses to save some people and cast the rest into Hell. These two interpretations offer opposing viewpoints on the nature and power of God. The difference is night and day, and they *cannot* both be true.

It is extremely foolish to say “Well, the nature of God doesn't really matter. The limits on God's power aren't really important. It makes no difference how salvation works. As long as God exists and salvation does work, we're good to go.” That is utter madness! If the nature of God didn't matter then God wouldn't have spent the *entire Bible* revealing who He was. If the inner workings of salvation weren't important then God wouldn't have spent so much of the New Testament explaining it in great detail. It is the height of arrogance to pat God on the head and say “Yeah, God, nice of you to explain all that, but really, who cares? Just forget all that and get on to the important stuff.”

But there is another reason why it matters. I have noticed that some Arminians have a very passionate hatred for the God of Calvinism. I've heard them say that they will never believe in predestination because God would never choose to send someone to Hell. They say that a God like that wouldn't be worth serving; He would be a monster on par with the Devil. I have even heard some say that they would actually *rather go to Hell* than serve a God like that. They have a deep hatred for the God of Calvinism.

However, if Calvinism is actually true then that attitude is a serious problem because it means that *they utterly despise God*. That is dangerous ground to be standing on! It is never a good idea to tell God that you think He is evil and you will never serve Him because He is cruel and unjust. Jesus told us that the first and greatest commandment is to love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, *and you can't do that if you despise who He is*.

I think the truth is that many people want to believe in Arminianism for emotional reasons. They just don't want Calvinism to be true. It's very difficult to miss the clear message of passages like this one:

Romans 9:10: “And not only this; but when Rebecca also had conceived by one, even by our father Isaac;
11 (For the children being not yet born, neither having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works, but of him that calleth;)
12 It was said unto her, The elder shall serve the younger.
13 As it is written, Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated.
14 What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God? God forbid.
15 For he saith to Moses, I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion.
16 So then it is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that sheweth mercy.”

Romans 9 could not possibly have been any more clear. God loved Jacob and hated Esau *not* because of anything they had done, but to prove the point that the Lord does as He pleases. God has mercy on some people and He withholds that mercy from others. If Arminianism is true then verse 15 would say this: “I have mercy and compassion on everyone, but some people reject me. I show mercy

on everyone but some people refuse me. I loved both Jacob and Esau, but Esau turned away from me and there was nothing I could do about it.” But that is *not* what it says! No matter how much you might wish it said that, *that is not what it says*.

It makes no sense to read these verses and say “Well, God loved Jacob because he was good, and He hated Esau because Esau was evil.” No one who approaches this chapter honestly would ever arrive at that interpretation. These verses simply do not say that. The whole point of verses 15 and 16 is that God does *not* have mercy on everyone. It is true that God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, so that whoever believes in Him will have everlasting life. God did love the world, and God did give His Son, and whoever believes on Him will absolutely have everlasting life. But the fact remains that the only people who will ever believe are those who God chose before the world began. We are not saved because we have chosen God; we are saved because God has chosen us.

Since I have already written about Calvinism elsewhere, I will not repeat that (rather lengthy) discussion here. I think the truth is a serious issue, and deserves a stronger response than “Who cares?”

It is certainly possible for two different Christians to study a subject with honest intentions and come to opposite conclusions. However, that does *not* mean that both conclusions are valid and the actual truth isn't important. *Somebody* is wrong, and someone is guilty of teaching a heretical view of God – and that ought to matter to us.

EGYPT

Egypt is one of the most puzzling pieces of end-times prophecy. The problem is that the Bible has a lot to say about Egypt, but people don't really know how to put all of the pieces together. All of the theories that I have heard seem to ignore one or more pieces of the puzzle, and that is never a good sign. In order for a theory to be valid it must encompass all of the evidence. If a theory requires you to throw out some evidence then the theory is almost certainly wrong.

What I would like to do is take a look at the various pieces to illustrate what we *do* know and what we do *not* know. Perhaps an investigation will shed some light on the subject.

Ezekiel 29

In the book of Ezekiel the Lord says that He is going to judge Egypt for its sins:

Ezekiel 29:2: “Son of man, set thy face against Pharaoh king of Egypt, and prophesy against him, and against all Egypt:

3 Speak, and say, Thus saith the Lord God; Behold, I am against thee, Pharaoh king of Egypt, the great dragon that lieth in the midst of his rivers, which hath said, My river is mine own, and I have made it for myself.

4 But I will put hooks in thy jaws, and I will cause the fish of thy rivers to stick unto thy scales, and I will bring thee up out of the midst of thy rivers, and all the fish of thy rivers shall stick unto thy scales.

5 And I will leave thee thrown into the wilderness, thee and all the fish of thy rivers: thou shalt fall upon the open fields; thou shalt not be brought together, nor gathered: I have given thee for meat to the beasts of the field and to the fowls of the heaven.

6 And all the inhabitants of Egypt shall know that I am the Lord, because they have been a staff of reed to the house of Israel.

7 When they took hold of thee by thy hand, thou didst break, and rend all their shoulder: and when they leaned upon thee, thou brakest, and madest all their loins to be at a stand.”

That part of the passage is pretty straightforward. In verse 3 we are told that God is against Egypt because of its pride – Pharaoh claims that the Nile belongs to him and he made it. Pride is a terrible offense to God; the Bible tells us that God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble (James 4:6). God is therefore going to humble the Egyptians by severely judging their land:

Ezekiel 29:8: “Therefore thus saith the Lord God; Behold, I will bring a sword upon thee, and cut off man and beast out of thee.

9 And the land of Egypt shall be desolate and waste; and they shall know that I am the Lord: because he hath said, The river is mine, and I have made it.

10 Behold, therefore I am against thee, and against thy rivers, and I will make the land of Egypt utterly waste and desolate, from the tower of Syene even unto the border of Ethiopia.

11 No foot of man shall pass through it, nor foot of beast shall pass through it, neither shall it be inhabited forty years.

12 And I will make the land of Egypt desolate in the midst of the countries that are desolate, and her cities among the cities that are laid waste shall be desolate forty years: and I will scatter the Egyptians among the nations, and will disperse them through the countries.”

This is where it becomes obvious that this passage is part of end-times prophecy and was not fulfilled in the past. There has never been a time when Egypt has been abandoned for 40 years, but one day that will happen. Because Pharaoh said that the Nile was his and he made it, God will make the land of Egypt desolate and waste. No foot of man *or beast* will pass through it for 40 years. Egypt *and the surrounding countries* will be desolate, and the Egyptians will be scattered.

God is very clear about the exact area that will be destroyed: it is “from the tower of Syrene” to “the border of Ethiopia”. Syrene is in southern Egypt; today it is known as Aswan. There is an enormous dam there – the Aswan High Dam. The country of Ethiopia is located to the south of Egypt. Since all of Egypt will be devastated from Syrene (in southern Egypt) to Ethiopia (a country south of Egypt), it seems that only *southern* Egypt will be devastated. Since Cairo is in the north, it appears that it will *not* be included in the portion of Egypt that will be “utterly waste and desolate”. This desolation of Egypt will last for 40 years, and during that period the Egyptians will be scattered among the nations.

But this is not the end of Egypt. God has plans for them:

Ezekiel 29:13: “Yet thus saith the Lord God; At the end of forty years will I gather the Egyptians from the people whither they were scattered:

14 And I will bring again the captivity of Egypt, and will cause them to return into the land of Pathros, into the land of their habitation; and they shall be there a base kingdom.

15 It shall be the basest of the kingdoms; neither shall it exalt itself any more above the nations: for I will diminish them, that they shall no more rule over the nations.

16 And it shall be no more the confidence of the house of Israel, which bringeth their iniquity to remembrance, when they shall look after them: but they shall know that I am the Lord God.”

After the 40 years are over, God will return the Egyptians to their land but they will be a base kingdom – “the basest of kingdoms”, in fact. They will no longer have any prominence and will never again rule over the nations.

As we look over this chapter it becomes obvious that its fulfillment is still in the future. Egypt is not the basest of kingdoms; it is still a powerful nation (despite the massive turmoil that has been sweeping the country). The details of this passage have not yet been fulfilled.

The question is, when will this happen? At what point will Egypt be devastated and then abandoned for 40 years? Will this happen before, during, or after the Tribulation? That brings us to our next piece of end-times prophecy.

Psalm 83

In Psalms 83 we are told of a coalition of nations that is threatening Israel's very existence. These nations have come together in order to wipe Israel off the face of the Earth. Interestingly, Israel has never been simultaneously threatened by all of these nations. This psalm is a prophecy that has not yet been fulfilled – but many people believe that it will be fulfilled in the near future.

Some have suggested that Egypt is a part of this prophecy by claiming that the reference to the Hagarenes in Psalm 83:6 is a reference to Egypt. Others have disputed this and argued that Hagarenes are just Ishmaelites (Arabs). But take a look at the passage itself:

Psalm 83:6: “The tabernacles of Edom, and the Ishmaelites; of Moab, and the Hagarenes;”

As you can see, the Ishmaelites are already explicitly mentioned in the passage! The Hagarenes, then, must be something different. Genesis tells us that Hagar was an Egyptian:

Genesis 16:1: “Now Sarai Abram's wife bare him no children: and she had an handmaid, an Egyptian, whose name was Hagar.”

Since the Ishmaelites are listed as their own people, the reference to “the Hagarenes” must be referring to the people of Hagar. Since Hagar was an Egyptian, “the Hagarenes” must mean “the Egyptians”. Given that Psalm 83 appears to describe the nations that immediately surround Israel, and Egypt is a nation that borders Israel, that interpretation makes a lot of sense. Psalms 83 describes an upcoming conflict where Israel's immediate neighbors band together in an attempt to utterly destroy Israel. It does appear that Egypt is included in that group.

Since I have already analyzed Psalm 83 in other papers, I will not repeat that analysis here. It is enough to say that Psalm 83 records a time when Egypt will ally with other nations in order to threaten Israel.

Now, Ezekiel 29 records a time when southern Egypt will be devastated and abandoned for 40 years. It is entirely possible (and perhaps even likely) that Egypt is devastated as a result of trying to destroy Israel in the Psalm 83 conflict, but that is just a guess. Psalm 83 does not say that Egypt is destroyed as a result of joining this coalition, and Ezekiel 29 does not mention the coalition either. At this point it is just speculation.

But the Bible has more to say about Egypt – a lot more, actually. That brings us to our next passage.

Isaiah 19

This entire chapter is focused on Egypt and has some pretty amazing things to say. However, working these pieces into the overall picture is not simple.

The first part of this chapter has been quoted quite a lot recently:

Isaiah 19:1: “The burden of Egypt. Behold, the Lord rideth upon a swift cloud, and shall come into Egypt: and the idols of Egypt shall be moved at his presence, and the heart of Egypt shall melt in the midst of it.

2 And I will set the Egyptians against the Egyptians: and they shall fight every one against his brother, and every one against his neighbour; city against city, and kingdom against kingdom.”

Verse 2 certainly describes Egypt as of 2013! There has been a tremendous amount of civil unrest. However, this is not the first time that Egypt has experienced internal turmoil. It is very dangerous to say “Well, the Bible is speaking of civil unrest, and Egypt is experiencing civil unrest, so that must be the fulfillment of that prophecy.” In order to be a genuine fulfillment the prophecy must be fulfilled *in its entirety*. It is not enough to just fulfill one verse of a longer passage. It will take time to determine if the current trends in Egypt will line up with everything else the passage has to say – and it has a *lot* to say.

The passage continues:

Isaiah 19:3: “And the spirit of Egypt shall fail in the midst thereof; and I will destroy the counsel thereof: and they shall seek to the idols, and to the charmers, and to them that have familiar spirits, and to the wizards.

4 And the Egyptians will I give over into the hand of a cruel lord; and a fierce king shall rule over them, saith the Lord, the Lord of hosts.”

Here we see that after the civil war, the Egyptians will turn to idols and witchcraft. God will given them over to a “cruel lord”, and a “fierce king” will rule over them. But things will only get worse for Egypt:

Isaiah 19:5: “And the waters shall fail from the sea, and the river shall be wasted and dried up.

6 And they shall turn the rivers far away; and the brooks of defence shall be emptied and dried up: the reeds and flags shall wither.

7 The paper reeds by the brooks, by the mouth of the brooks, and every thing sown by the brooks, shall wither, be driven away, and be no more.

8 The fishers also shall mourn, and all they that cast angle into the brooks shall lament, and they that spread nets upon the waters shall languish.

9 Moreover they that work in fine flax, and they that weave networks, shall be confounded.

10 And they shall be broken in the purposes thereof, all that make sluices and ponds for fish.”

The land of Egypt depends upon the Nile, but the waters will fail and the river will be dried up. This, of course, will devastate the farmers (who sow things “by the brooks”) and the fishers. It will be an ecological disaster. The country will be turned over to fools and will be devastated:

Isaiah 19:11: “Surely the princes of Zoan are fools, the counsel of the wise counsellors of Pharaoh is become brutish: how say ye unto Pharaoh, I am the son of the wise, the son of ancient kings?”

12 Where are they? where are thy wise men? and let them tell thee now, and let them know what the Lord of hosts hath purposed upon Egypt.

13 The princes of Zoan are become fools, the princes of Noph are deceived; they have also seduced Egypt, even they that are the stay of the tribes thereof.

14 The Lord hath mingled a perverse spirit in the midst thereof: and they have caused Egypt to err in every work thereof, as a drunken man staggereth in his vomit.

15 Neither shall there be any work for Egypt, which the head or tail, branch or rush, may do.”

The country will be full of fear – and they will be terrified of Israel:

Isaiah 19:16: “In that day shall Egypt be like unto women: and it shall be afraid and fear because of the shaking of the hand of the Lord of hosts, which he shaketh over it.

17 And the land of Judah shall be a terror unto Egypt, every one that maketh mention thereof shall be afraid in himself, because of the counsel of the Lord of hosts, which he hath determined against it.”

So far all of this fits in more-or-less with our theories about the future of Egypt. This passage could be saying that Egypt's civil war (which is probably still in the future) will eventually lead to a dictatorship. The Nile will dry up and things will get bad. It's possible that if Egypt attacks Israel, Israel may do something that will devastate southern Egypt and cause that part of the country to be abandoned for 40 years. Perhaps that is why Israel became a terror unto Egypt. Their attack could have caused the Nile to dry up.

But let's continue on with the rest of the passage:

Isaiah 19:18: “In that day shall five cities in the land of Egypt speak the language of Canaan, and swear to the Lord of hosts; one shall be called, The city of destruction.

19 In that day shall there be an altar to the Lord in the midst of the land of Egypt, and a pillar at the border thereof to the Lord.

20 And it shall be for a sign and for a witness unto the Lord of hosts in the land of Egypt: for they shall cry unto the Lord because of the oppressors, and he shall send them a saviour; and a great one, and he shall deliver them.

21 And the Lord shall be known to Egypt, and the Egyptians shall know the Lord in that day, and shall do sacrifice and oblation; yea, they shall vow a vow unto the Lord, and perform it.

22 And the Lord shall smite Egypt: he shall smite and heal it: and they shall return even to the Lord, and he shall be intreated of them, and shall heal them.”

Now things aren't quite so simple, are they? How on earth does all *this* fit into our picture?

First of all, I know that some people have claimed that the Great Pyramid is the “altar to the Lord”. That is utter nonsense. The Great Pyramid is not an altar by any stretch of the imagination. This passage is *not* talking about that.

That aside, notice the overall message here. Egypt will cry out to the Lord, and God will send “a great one” to deliver them. The Egyptians will know the Lord and will turn to Him, and He will heal

them. There will be five cities in Egypt who will speak “the language of Canaan” and who will swear to the Lord. Those are some remarkable events! But *when are they going to happen?* How do these pieces fit together?

The passage isn't over yet. There are three more verses in this chapter:

Isaiah 19:23: “In that day shall there be a highway out of Egypt to Assyria, and the Assyrian shall come into Egypt, and the Egyptian into Assyria, and the Egyptians shall serve with the Assyrians.

24 In that day shall Israel be the third with Egypt and with Assyria, even a blessing in the midst of the land:

25 Whom the Lord of hosts shall bless, saying, Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel mine inheritance.”

So how do we fit *that* in? Is this something that happens during the Millennium? How much of this chapter will be fulfilled before the Millennium and how much of it will be fulfilled afterward? It's a complex problem. The more pieces we find, the more complicated the situation becomes.

But there are *even more* pieces to consider. We're not done yet!

Daniel 11

In this chapter Daniel has some things to say about the coming Antichrist. He paints a very chilling picture of an evil man:

Daniel 11:36: “And the king shall do according to his will; and he shall exalt himself, and magnify himself above every god, and shall speak marvellous things against the God of gods, and shall prosper till the indignation be accomplished: for that that is determined shall be done.

37 Neither shall he regard the God of his fathers, nor the desire of women, nor regard any god: for he shall magnify himself above all.

38 But in his estate shall he honour the God of forces: and a god whom his fathers knew not shall he honour with gold, and silver, and with precious stones, and pleasant things.

39 Thus shall he do in the most strong holds with a strange god, whom he shall acknowledge and increase with glory: and he shall cause them to rule over many, and shall divide the land for gain.”

The passage goes on to talk about the countries that the Antichrist is going to conquer – and Egypt is included in that list:

Daniel 11:40: “And at the time of the end shall the king of the south push at him: and the king of the north shall come against him like a whirlwind, with chariots, and with horsemen, and with many ships; and he shall enter into the countries, and shall overflow and pass over.

41 He shall enter also into the glorious land, and many countries shall be

overthrown: but these shall escape out of his hand, even Edom, and Moab, and the chief of the children of Ammon.

42 He shall stretch forth his hand also upon the countries: and the land of Egypt shall not escape.

43 But he shall have power over the treasures of gold and of silver, and over all the precious things of Egypt: and the Libyans and the Ethiopians shall be at his steps.

44 But tidings out of the east and out of the north shall trouble him: therefore he shall go forth with great fury to destroy, and utterly to make away many.

45 And he shall plant the tabernacles of his palace between the seas in the glorious holy mountain; yet he shall come to his end, and none shall help him.”

Notice that when the Antichrist rises to power and begins his world conquest, one of the countries that he conquers is Egypt. In fact, we are told that he will have power over “all the precious things of Egypt”. That means that at the time that all of this happens, Egypt is still a country, Egypt is still inhabited, and Egypt still has precious things.

But there is one more piece that we need to consider.

Joel 3

In the book of Joel we are told something very interesting about Egypt:

Joel 3:16: “The Lord also shall roar out of Zion, and utter his voice from Jerusalem; and the heavens and the earth shall shake: but the Lord will be the hope of his people, and the strength of the children of Israel.

17 So shall ye know that I am the Lord your God dwelling in Zion, my holy mountain: then shall Jerusalem be holy, and there shall no strangers pass through her any more.

18 And it shall come to pass in that day, that the mountains shall drop down new wine, and the hills shall flow with milk, and all the rivers of Judah shall flow with waters, and a fountain shall come forth out of the house of the Lord, and shall water the valley of Shittim.

19 Egypt shall be a desolation, and Edom shall be a desolate wilderness, for the violence against the children of Judah, because they have shed innocent blood in their land.

20 But Judah shall dwell for ever, and Jerusalem from generation to generation.”

When the Millennial Kingdom begins, God will dwell in Zion – and Egypt will be a desolation. That is a very important point, but how does it fit in with the rest of the pieces? How do we fit all of this information together?

The Puzzle Pieces

Let's put together a list of everything that we know.

Psalm 83:6 tells us that Egypt will join a coalition of other nations that are allied against Israel. These nations – all of whom appear to be Israel's immediate neighbors – will join forces in order to utterly annihilate Israel. However, the passage does *not* tell us how things turn out. We don't know what happens to Egypt as a result of joining this coalition.

Ezekiel 29 tells us that because Egypt claimed that the Nile belonged to them and they made it, God will destroy southern Egypt (from what is currently Aswan, in southern Egypt, to the border of Ethiopia) to such an extent that no man or beast will even set foot in it for 40 years. The Egyptians will be scattered among the nations. At the end of that time God will bring them back and make them the least of all kingdoms. They will never again rule over the nations.

Isaiah 19 tells us that there will be a civil war in Egypt, and a fierce king will arise and rule over them. The Nile will be dried up and the Egyptians will be terrified of Israel. Five cities will speak the language of Canaan, and there will be an altar to the Lord. The Egyptians will cry out because they are being oppressed, and when the Lord sends a great one to deliver them they will worship God and serve Him. There will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria, and God will call Egypt “his people”.

Daniel 11 tells us that the Antichrist will conquer Egypt and take away its precious things.

Joel 3 tells us that when the Millennial Kingdom begins, Egypt will be a desolation because of their violence against the Jews and because they shed innocent blood.

So how do we fit these pieces together? Typically people connect Psalm 83 with Ezekiel 29 and then call it a day. However, there is more to it than that. We need a theory that can cover all of the available facts – and that is where things get tricky.

First of all, the evidence is pretty strong that the Psalm 83 war will take place *before* the Ezekiel 38 Gog-Magog war, and that both of these will occur *before* the Tribulation begins. (Since I have already discussed this in detail elsewhere I will not repeat it here.) Egypt seems to be a part of the Psalm 83 conflict. Since Egypt is a part of Psalm 83 but is not a part of Ezekiel 38, it seems safe to assume that as a result of Psalm 83, Egypt becomes neutralized in some way and ceases to be Israel's enemy. When Israel is attacked by Gog-Magog, Egypt does not participate. Her status has changed.

So perhaps as a result of Psalm 83, Egypt does become devastated and Ezekiel 29 is fulfilled. However, the devastation of Egypt only applies to the *southern* part of Egypt. Only the south of Egypt is abandoned for 40 years – not the entire country. Cairo is in northern Egypt, and the bulk of Egypt's population lives in the north, not the south. Even after this prophecy is fulfilled, Egypt will still exist as a country.

We need to remember that Egypt is an oil-producing country. Egypt has oil fields that are *not* located in the south, and these oil fields will most likely survive. These oil fields could certainly be treasures that the Antichrist would want to seize. Those could be the precious things that the Antichrist wants to take. In fact, the Antichrist could be the one who fiercely oppresses the Egyptians and who causes them to cry out to God! The “great one” that God sends to deliver them could be *Jesus Christ Himself* at His Second Coming. The conversion of the cities, the construction of the altar, the conversion of the Egyptians, and the building of the highway could all happen during the Millennium.

We are told in Joel 3 that Egypt will be a desolation, but that could be a reference to Ezekiel 29. It is possible that southern Egypt continues to be desolate into the Millennium itself and is only healed later. The regathering of Egyptians into that territory could happen in the Millennium.

This does have an important consequence, however. If southern Egypt is abandoned for 40 years as a result of the Psalm 83 conflict, and if it is *still* desolate when the Millennium begins (which is what Joel 3 seems to suggest), then that means that the Millennium must begin no more than 40 years after Psalm 83 takes place. After the Psalm 83 conflict occurs and southern Egypt is devastated, a countdown begins.

I realize it is possible that southern Egypt will be devastated, then healed, and then devastated again, but that doesn't seem to match what Ezekiel 29 says. That passage says that God will bring one terrible event to devastate Egypt, and after that He will heal them *and that will be the end of it*. It speaks of *one* massive devastation, not two.

One of the fascinating things about end-times prophecy is that as its fulfillment draws closer it becomes much easier to understand how everything fits together. We can see events start to take shape. At this point in history we are still in the early stages of end-times events. Psalm 83 is still quite some time away; as of 2013 we are missing a number of key players, and the other nations are in too much turmoil to be ready to join any kind of united coalition. But we can see that things are starting to line up.

Egypt is hard to understand because there are so many passages that talk about that nation's future, but as time goes on the passages will become clearer. God has great plans for that nation – plans to break them and plans to heal them. One day God will look at Egypt and call the Egyptians “his people”. That day may be far away, but it is coming.

GENEROSITY

The subject of giving comes up a great deal in our churches. Whenever churches start having budget problems, the pastor preaches a sermon on tithing. Whenever churches want to expand or renovate something, they ask their congregation to give them more money. Churches spend a lot of time and effort trying to get as much money out of their congregations as they possibly can. There are a lot of issues that churches tend to overlook, but tithing is not one of them.

Since I have already talked about tithing elsewhere, I'm not going to repeat that here. Instead I'd like to talk about something else: the subject of generosity. God has called Christians to be a compassionate and generous people. Now, whenever someone mentions generosity people immediately think about tithing. However, that's not what I want to talk about today. I'm *not* talking about giving money to your local church. What I want to do instead is offer a different perspective on life. All too often we forget our calling and purpose. In the rush and pressures of daily life we forget who we are, why we are here, and what we are supposed to be doing. We get side-tracked and lose sight of what is truly important.

In 2 Corinthians 8 the apostle Paul tells us something amazing: that the desperately-poor Christians in Macedonia actually raised money to meet the needs of others. Even though these people had serious financial needs of their own, they cared so much about the needs of others that they gave despite their own affliction:

2 Corinthians 8:1: “Moreover, brethren, we do you to wit of the grace of God bestowed on the churches of Macedonia;
2 How that in a great trial of affliction the abundance of their joy and their deep poverty abounded unto the riches of their liberality.”

Even though this church was desperately poor, they still cared about other churches and they still gave. In fact, they were so insistent that they wouldn't take no for an answer. They insisted on making this gift:

2 Corinthians 8:3: “For to their power, I bear record, yea, and beyond their power they were willing of themselves;
4 Praying us with much intreaty that we would receive the gift, and take upon us the fellowship of the ministering to the saints.”

Why did they do this? Because of their abundance of joy and their deep love for their fellow Christians. They didn't do it because they were expecting something back, or because they wanted to prove something to someone. No, they did it out of love.

There are many televangelists who will tell you that if you give sacrificially then God will repay you. Men on television say “Just send me a check for \$1000 and watch God multiply it tenfold! All of your financial worries will be solved if you just give me money.” Even pastors fall into this trap, telling their congregations that if they give money to God then God will give it back to them.

What these people are doing is telling you that you can get money from God if you just give money to Him first. In other words, they are urging you to bribe God so that He will bless you financially. If you want God to meet your needs then you have to pay Him first. Once you have paid off

God, He will then act on your behalf.

That teaching is *completely wrong*. The apostle Paul had very harsh words for one man who thought he could purchase gifts from God:

Acts 8:20: “But Peter said unto him, Thy money perish with thee, because thou hast thought that the gift of God may be purchased with money.”

In this particular case the man was trying to buy a gift of the Spirit, but the principle is the same: *you cannot bribe God*. God is not a vending machine that will operate once you put coins into the slot! The truth is that God blesses you because He loves you. God watches over you because He loves you. God meets your needs because He loves you. God doesn't do this because He expects to get paid for it; He does it because He loves you! What kind of parent would only help their son if their son paid them first? What would you think of a parent like that?

And yet that is how people tell us to think about God! Stop and think about it for a moment. When did Jesus die for us? Was it after we had paid Him enough money? Was it after we had done Him enough favors? No, it was while we were *His enemies*:

Romans 5:6: “For when we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly.

7 For scarcely for a righteous man will one die: yet peradventure for a good man some would even dare to die.

8 But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.”

For some reason we get into this habit of thinking that we have to earn God's blessings, but that is not the case. If you are giving money to God in order to get something back from Him then you have completely misunderstood who God is. That is the wrong reason to be giving – and besides, God never promised to give you \$5 back for every dollar you give to Him. If you think that giving money to God is some sort of guaranteed get-rich-quick scheme then you have badly lost your way.

Yes, it's true that God has promised Heavenly rewards to those who serve Him:

Matthew 19:21: “Jesus said unto him, If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come and follow me.”

The subject of Heavenly treasure is a fascinating one, but since I've already discussed it elsewhere I won't repeat that discussion here. The point I want to make is that, although Jesus has promised Heavenly rewards to those who serve Him, He never promised that when we give to Him in this life He would return the favor by sending us checks in the mail. He also never said that He would only provide for our needs if we first paid Him off. God simply doesn't work that way.

God's love for us is vast and deep; it is so strong that nothing can separate us from it. Paul was very clear about this:

Romans 8:35: “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?

36 As it is written, For thy sake we are killed all the day long; we are accounted as

sheep for the slaughter.

37 Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us.

38 For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come,

39 Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Notice that Paul does not say “If you want God to love you then you have to pay Him first.” He never says that God's love for you depends on your financial contributions! The truth is that *nothing* can separate you from God – not death, or life, or angels, or *anything*.

Why were the Macedonians so willing to give out of their extreme property? It was because they understood what God had called them to do. They understood that they were the servants of God, and they wanted to be about the Father's business. They knew that they were here to build the kingdom of God, and that was their priority.

Do you remember what Christ commanded us to do in the Sermon on the Mount?

Matthew 6:31: “Therefore take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed?

32 (For after all these things do the Gentiles seek:) for your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things.

33 But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.”

What did Jesus tell us to do? To seek the kingdom of God and His righteousness. *That is our life mission*. That should be the focus of our time, our efforts, and our energy.

Here is something to think about: can we honestly say that we are about our Father's business? If we step back and take a look at our life, can we say that our lives are all about the kingdom of God? Is that really what we're doing? I'm not asking how much you are giving; I'm challenging you to stop and take a look at your life. When you stand before God and are judged, will you be able to tell Him that your life was focused on building the kingdom of God?

The Macedonians gave generously because they really *were* about the Father's business. Their heart was in the right place and they were a people of compassion. When they saw that there were other Christians who were in need, they moved to meet those needs – even though they had to pay a price to do so. They didn't do this in order to get God to do them a favor, or to seem “spiritual”; they did it because they saw a need and they wanted to meet it. They did it out of love, and they did it freely and without hesitation because they understood their purpose in life. They knew what they were here to do.

One of the things Christ warned about was getting so entangled in the cares of this world that we become useless for God:

Mark 4:18: “And these are they which are sown among thorns; such as hear the word,

19 And the cares of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the lusts of other things entering in, choke the word, and it becometh unfruitful.”

Jesus is warning us that it is possible to become so entangled in “the lusts of other things” that we become unfruitful. We can become so distracted by our lives and desires that we forget why we are

here and what we are supposed to be doing. God hasn't called us to get rich, live a fancy life, and fulfill all of our dreams. He hasn't called us to be like the world and follow our heart in a mad pursuit after fleshly pleasures. Instead He called us to die to ourselves (and what we want out of life), take up our cross, and follow Him:

Mark 8:34: “And when he had called the people unto him with his disciples also, he said unto them, Whosoever will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me.”

Jesus commanded us to die to our own will and to live to God's will. He wants us to *focus* – not on what we want but on what God wants. That is what it means to deny ourselves! There are many things that we want in this life that have absolutely nothing to do with God. You can either spend your life serving yourself and doing what you want, or you can spend it serving God and doing what He wants, *but you cannot do both*. God has called you to die to your own will and live to His.

This is the secret to generosity. If you are trying to amass as much wealth as you possibly can then generosity is going to be painful. Since being generous is hampering your plans and making your life more difficult, you will be tempted to avoid it or view it with displeasure. However, if your goal is to serve God and nurture the body of Christ, then being generous isn't a problem because it aligns with your life purpose. In that case, being generous is much easier.

The apostle Paul told the Corinthians that he wanted them to demonstrate the same generosity and compassion that the Macedonians had shown:

2 Corinthians 8:6: “Insomuch that we desired Titus, that as he had begun, so he would also finish in you the same grace also.

7 Therefore, as ye abound in every thing, in faith, and utterance, and knowledge, and in all diligence, and in your love to us, see that ye abound in this grace also.

8 I speak not by commandment, but by occasion of the forwardness of others, and to prove the sincerity of your love.”

Why was Paul so insistent about this? Because he wanted the Corinthians to “prove the sincerity” of their love. It's very easy to tell someone “I love you”. Words are cheap and effortless; they don't cost very much. Deeds, though, are a very different matter. It is one thing to tell someone that you love them; it is altogether different to reach into your pocket and meet their financial needs. It is all well and good to *tell* people that you love them, but until you put your love into action your love isn't really very helpful. If you want to prove that your love is sincere then you need to act upon it. In other words, you need to put your money where your mouth is.

This is how James put it:

James 2:15: “If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food,

16 And one of you say unto them, Depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled; notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful to the body; what doth it profit?

17 Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone.”

This is something that we really need to take to heart. It's not enough to tell people “Go in peace; be warm and happy”. We need to *meet their needs*. We need to provide for others. We need to do

more than just *say* we care about people; we need to put our faith into action and provide for others! That is what the Macedonians did (even though they were very poor themselves!), and that is what Paul commanded the Corinthians to do. Love should not exist on its own; it ought to produce works. If it is not producing works then it is dead.

Let's keep in mind the fact that God is not asking us to do something that He has not done Himself. Do you remember the tremendous sacrifice that God made on our behalf?

2 Corinthians 8:9: "For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be rich."

Jesus did not just *say* that He loved us; instead He showed it by laying aside His glory and coming to Earth to suffer and die for us. He became poor for our sakes so that we might be rich. He put His love into action and met our needs, and He calls us to do the same. Jesus gave up more than we can imagine in order to meet our desperate needs. What are we willing to give up in order to meet the needs of those around us?

Now, it's true that some people have more to give than others. But God wants us to give what we have, not what we don't have:

2 Corinthians 8:11: "Now therefore perform the doing of it; that as there was a readiness to will, so there may be a performance also out of that which ye have.

12 For if there be first a willing mind, it is accepted according to that a man hath, and not according to that he hath not.

13 For I mean not that other men be eased, and ye burdened:

14 But by an equality, that now at this time your abundance may be a supply for their want, that their abundance also may be a supply for your want: that there may be equality:

15 As it is written, He that had gathered much had nothing over; and he that had gathered little had no lack."

If we give willingly (and not reluctantly, or grudgingly) then God will accept what we have. We may not have nearly as much to give as other people, but the same was true for the Macedonians. They didn't give out of their great wealth; instead they gave out of their poverty. They could have said "Well, we don't have very much so there's no use in even bothering. Let someone else handle it." - but they didn't. Instead they willingly and lovingly gave to God what they *did* have.

Do you remember the story of the widow who gave two mites?

Luke 21:1: "And he looked up, and saw the rich men casting their gifts into the treasury.

2 And he saw also a certain poor widow casting in thither two mites.

3 And he said, Of a truth I say unto you, that this poor widow hath cast in more than they all:

4 For all these have of their abundance cast in unto the offerings of God: but she of her penury hath cast in all the living that she had."

The actual amount that the poor widow gave was negligible, and yet it impressed Christ far

more than the large gifts that the rich gave. The reason for this is because the rich gave out of their wealth; they would never miss the money that they were giving. They were so wealthy that they could give large gifts to the Temple without hampering their lifestyle in any way. The poor widow, though, was a very different story: she literally gave everything that she had. Since she gave what she had to give, that pleased God. The Macedonians learned this lesson and took it to heart. They did not have much, but they gave what they had – and they could do that because they had their priorities straight. They understood what life was really all about.

Christ commands the body of Christ to care for one another. Since the Macedonians had something, they gave it to those who needed it. If one day the Macedonians were in dire need then other churches would provide for them. That was how the members of the body bore one another's burdens.

This doesn't mean that Christians are required to take a vow of poverty. Some people have this idea that God requires Christians to be poor, and that being poor is somehow more spiritual than being rich. That is not the case! What God commands us to do is *not* to be poor, but instead to be generous – and those are two very different things. The truth is that there are some people in the Bible who were very wealthy, and they had their wealth because God chose to give it to them. Solomon is a great example of this:

1 Kings 3:11: “And God said unto him, Because thou hast asked this thing, and hast not asked for thyself long life; neither hast asked riches for thyself, nor hast asked the life of thine enemies; but hast asked for thyself understanding to discern judgment;

12 Behold, I have done according to thy words: lo, I have given thee a wise and an understanding heart; so that there was none like thee before thee, neither after thee shall any arise like unto thee.

13 And I have also given thee that which thou hast not asked, both riches, and honour: so that there shall not be any among the kings like unto thee all thy days.”

Solomon did not ask for great wealth, but God gave it to him anyway. Having wealth is not a sin. The problem arises when we lose sight of Christ and start thinking that we are here to build up kingdoms for ourselves. The question is not “How much money do you have?”, but rather “What are you going to do with what God has given to you?”

There are some people who go in a different direction and interpret this teaching as an endorsement of communism. However, that is a very great error. Under the communistic system people are not allowed to keep what they earn; instead the fruits of their labor are taken from them by force and given to someone else. Communism is a demonic system that is nothing more than institutionalized theft. It is very important to God that people be allowed to reap what they sow, and that they enjoy the work of their hands. In fact, that is one of the blessings of the Millennium:

Isaiah 65:22: “They shall not build, and another inhabit; they shall not plant, and another eat: for as the days of a tree are the days of my people, and mine elect shall long enjoy the work of their hands.”

Communism is a direct attack on that verse. Under communism, one person plants and another person eats it. Under communism, one person builds and someone else inhabits it. A man's work is taken from him by force and given to someone else. God sees that as a terrible evil, and He intends to

stamp it out. In the Millennium people will keep what they have earned. Their wages will not be confiscated and given to others. Instead they will “long enjoy the work of their hands”.

There is a *tremendous* difference between giving to someone who is in need, and taking money by force to give it to that needy soul. The difference is very profound! Asking your neighbor for help is fine; breaking into his house and stealing his possessions is not. If someone asks you for money and you give it to them then that is fine; however, if someone mugs you and steals your wallet and takes your money then that is *not* fine. In both cases the person may end up with your money, but the way the person obtains it *really matters* to God. You do *not* have permission to steal from others in order to meet your own needs. God made this quite clear:

Proverbs 6:30: “Men do not despise a thief, if he steal to satisfy his soul when he is hungry;
31 But if he be found, he shall restore sevenfold; he shall give all the substance of his house.”

Notice that God commands those who steal from others to *make restitution*. He does not say “Well, as long as you need the money then it's perfectly fine. Just make sure you steal from the rich who can afford it.” Stealing is always wrong, no matter how much you may need the money.

In conclusion, God wants us to care for one another and love one another. He commands us to give to one another willingly:

2 Corinthians 9:7: “Every man according as he purposeth in his heart, so let him give; not grudgingly, or of necessity: for God loveth a cheerful giver.”

How much should we give? “As he purposeth in his heart”. The main thing God is concerned about is that we give to meet one another's needs – and that we do so cheerfully and willingly.

HOLINESS

Psalm 99 paints an amazing picture of our holy God. This psalm makes it abundantly clear that our God is not some sort of made-up myth or fantasy. He is not a useless stone idol that is incapable of hearing cries for help or responding in any way. He is not helpless, weak, foolish, or uncaring. The reality is that our God is full of power and might! He reigns over all things and makes the world itself tremble:

Psalm 99:1: “The Lord reigneth; let the people tremble: he sitteth between the cherubims; let the earth be moved.

2 The Lord is great in Zion; and he is high above all the people.

3 Let them praise thy great and terrible name; for it is holy.”

You see, *the Lord reigns!* God does not sit in Heaven and watch the world go by. He does not idly lay around and watch nations rise and fall as one might watch a television program. God is not disconnected from His creation, but instead actively reigns over it. He is the one who raises up kings and removes them from power. He is the one who blesses people or curses them. He is high above all peoples and nations, and He requires everyone to bow down and worship Him. He is the true sovereign – the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. He commands everyone to worship Him or else face His wrath.

Many people think that God is some sort of cosmic genie who only exists in order to grant our wishes. Others believe that He is some kind of harmless grandfather figure who would never hurt anyone. However, the Bible tells us that both of these pictures are wrong. Our God is a God of justice, who passionately cares for the righteous and opposes the wicked. He loves the truth and He executes judgment and righteousness:

Psalm 99:4: “The king's strength also loveth judgment; thou dost establish equity, thou executest judgment and righteousness in Jacob.

5 Exalt ye the Lord our God, and worship at his footstool; for he is holy.”

God is against the wicked, but He is merciful to those who seek forgiveness and grace. He will not overlook sin, but He will forgive those who repent. Likewise, He is with all those who call upon Him:

Psalm 99:6: “Moses and Aaron among his priests, and Samuel among them that call upon his name; they called upon the Lord, and he answered them.

7 He spake unto them in the cloudy pillar: they kept his testimonies, and the ordinance that he gave them.

8 Thou answeredst them, O Lord our God: thou wast a God that forgavest them, though thou tookest vengeance of their inventions.”

Our God is a very *active* God. He reigns over the nations and He guides history along the course He wants it to have. He shows mercy on the repentant and He takes vengeance upon the wicked. He hates evil but loves righteousness. Above all else, however, our God is **holy**:

Psalm 99:9: “Exalt the Lord our God, and worship at his holy hill; for the Lord our God is holy.”

One of the key characteristics of God is His unfathomable holiness. All throughout the Bible we are told that our God is a holy God. His holiness is beyond our imagination! In fact, His holiness is so staggering that it has been hidden from our sight. There are only a few people who were given the privilege of entering the throne room of God and seeing His holiness, and those who did were overwhelmed by what they saw. When Isaiah stood in the presence of God and saw the Lord on His throne, he was filled with horror at his own sinfulness:

Isaiah 6:1: “In the year that king Uzziah died I saw also the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple.

2 Above it stood the seraphims: each one had six wings; with twain he covered his face, and with twain he covered his feet, and with twain he did fly.

3 And one cried unto another, and said, Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory.

4 And the posts of the door moved at the voice of him that cried, and the house was filled with smoke.

5 Then said I, Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts.”

The complete and total holiness of God was so great that it made Isaiah see how *unholy* he actually was. Even though Isaiah was a godly man who feared the Lord, he instantly realized that in comparison to God he was utterly unclean and wretched. Just standing in the presence of God was enough to make him cry out that he was undone.

That is what it is really like to see God. That is what it is like to experience a level of holiness that we cannot even imagine. Not only is it overwhelming, but it is *convicting*. It is easy to think that we're holy, but it is something else altogether to walk into the presence of Holiness itself. That is when it becomes very clear just how far off the mark we really are.

God's holiness far surpasses that of everyone else:

1 Samuel 2:2: “There is none holy as the Lord: for there is none beside thee: neither is there any rock like our God.”

Revelation 15:4: “Who shall not fear thee, O Lord, and glorify thy name? for thou only art holy: for all nations shall come and worship before thee; for thy judgments are made manifest.”

There is simply no one else like Him! Everything about God is holy. For example, the Bible tells us that God's **name** is holy:

Psalm 99:3: “Let them praise thy great and terrible name; for it is holy.”

Psalm 145:21: “My mouth shall speak the praise of the Lord: and let all flesh bless his holy name for ever and ever.”

Incidentally, this is why it is such a great sin to take the name of the Lord in vain. The name of God is *not* just another name; it is supremely holy and reflects the holiness of God. It is a terrible sin to take something that is holy and debase it by using it as a curse:

Deuteronomy 5:11: “Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain: for the Lord will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain.”

The name of God is holy, and we must treat it that way. In fact, failing to keep the Lord's name holy is so serious that it can have national consequences:

Hosea 4:1: “Hear the word of the Lord, ye children of Israel: for the Lord hath a controversy with the inhabitants of the land, because there is no truth, nor mercy, nor knowledge of God in the land.

2 By swearing, and lying, and killing, and stealing, and committing adultery, they break out, and blood toucheth blood.

3 Therefore shall the land mourn, and every one that dwelleth therein shall languish, with the beasts of the field, and with the fowls of heaven; yea, the fishes of the sea also shall be taken away.”

I find it fascinating that in the world today it's common to see news stories about millions of fish that have suddenly died for no apparent reason. Huge numbers of animals are dropping dead on a regular basis, and no one seems to understand why. Maybe the reason these strange events keep happening is because *the Lord has a controversy with the inhabitants of the land*. Maybe it's because God takes His holiness seriously, and there are actually *consequences* to sin.

The Bible also tells us that **the place where God dwells** is holy:

2 Chronicles 30:27: “Then the priests the Levites arose and blessed the people: and their voice was heard, and their prayer came up to his holy dwelling place, even unto heaven.”

Psalms 20:6: “Now know I that the Lord saveth his anointed; he will hear him from his holy heaven with the saving strength of his right hand.”

Isaiah 57:15: “For thus saith the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, whose name is Holy; I dwell in the high and holy place, with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones.”

Since God is holy, it makes sense that His home is holy. There are many different things that people think about when they imagine Heaven, but few stop to realize that Heaven is a *holy* place. In fact, the Bible tells us that Heaven is *the* “high and holy place”. It is a place that reflects the character of God. Since that is where God dwells, it is quite possible that Heaven is the holiest of all places.

Heaven itself is actually focused on the utter holiness of God. There are beings in the presence of God who never stop proclaiming that God is holy:

Isaiah 6:3: “And one cried unto another, and said, Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory.”

Revelation 4:8: “And the four beasts had each of them six wings about him; and they were full of eyes within: and they rest not day and night, saying, Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, which was, and is, and is to come.”

When these beings say that God is “holy, holy, holy”, they are not just being repetitive. Each use of the word amplifies the one that came before it. Imagine that each repetition acts as an exponent, to raise the previous utterance by an order of magnitude. His holiness is utterly staggering.

Not only is God's dwelling place holy, but God's **words** are also holy:

2 Timothy 3:15: “And that from a child thou hast known the holy scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.”

This is why we call it the *Holy Bible*. It is not just another book; it is a holy thing from our holy God, and we ought to treat His words with great reverence and care! Far too many people let the words of God languish on their shelves, unheard and unloved. Do you really think it honors God if we can't even be bothered to *read* the words He has given to us? Do you think it pleases Him when we ignore what He has to say?

But what does it mean to be holy? When we say that God is holy, what are we saying? Well, if you look up the word “holy” in the dictionary, you'll discover that it defines holy as being like God or being set apart for divine use:

1. specially recognized as or declared sacred by religious use or authority; consecrated: *holy ground*.
2. dedicated or devoted to the service of God, the church, or religion: *a holy man*.
3. saintly; godly; pious; devout: *a holy life*.
4. having a spiritually pure quality: *a holy love*.
5. entitled to worship or veneration as or as if sacred: *a holy relic*.

When we say that something is holy we mean that it is set apart for God's use. In fact, one definition of holy is “set apart”. In the Old Testament there were certain items which were set apart for Temple use. Since these things were holy, they were not allowed to be used by the common people for ordinary use. For example, the anointing oil was holy and could not be copied:

Exodus 30:31: “And thou shalt speak unto the children of Israel, saying, This shall be an holy anointing oil unto me throughout your generations.
32 Upon man's flesh shall it not be poured, neither shall ye make any other like it, after the composition of it: it is holy, and it shall be holy unto you.”

God was very strict about this: the holy anointing oil *could not be used for anything else*. It was dedicated strictly for Temple service and that was the only thing it could be used for. You could not make some and use it for the Temple, and then make some more and use it for your own desires. It was set apart for a specific purpose and it was a sin to abuse it for profane purposes.

That is what holiness meant: holy things were set apart, and could only be used for the specific

purpose that God designated. They had to be used God's way, and in God's time, and for God's purpose, or else there would be very grave consequences. On top of that, those who used them had to do so with great care. When a person interacted with a holy thing, they had to be careful to stay holy themselves. Otherwise their lack of holiness could *kill them*:

Exodus 28:35: “And it shall be upon Aaron to minister: and his sound shall be heard when he goeth in unto the holy place before the Lord, and when he cometh out, that he die not.”

Exodus 28:43: “And they shall be upon Aaron, and upon his sons, when they come in unto the tabernacle of the congregation, or when they come near unto the altar to minister in the holy place; that they bear not iniquity, and die: it shall be a statute for ever unto him and his seed after him.”

The exact specifics of these two situations aren't really important to our discussion today. What matters is that Aaron had to be careful to do exactly as God said and maintain his holiness, because if he didn't he would *die*. In order to interact with a holy God he had to be holy himself! Holiness was not optional. It is a very serious business.

It's important to realize that *God has not changed*. The Bible tells us that God never changes:

Malachi 3:6: “For I am the Lord, I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed.”

James 1:17: “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning.”

In order to approach God and stand in His presence you must be perfectly holy. Your sins must be forgiven and you must be blameless and without spot. The only way to obtain this holiness is through the shed blood of Jesus Christ. The reason Jesus came and died was to pay the penalty for our sins. Since He suffered in our place and took upon Himself the punishment that we deserved, we can be declared guiltless and set free. In other words, Jesus purchased our forgiveness with His own blood.

If we come to Christ, repent of our sins, and put our faith in Him, He will forgive us and give us His righteousness. When God looks at us He does not see our own sinfulness; instead He sees the perfect righteousness of Christ:

Romans 4:22: “And therefore it was imputed to him for righteousness.
23 Now it was not written for his sake alone, that it was imputed to him;
24 But for us also, to whom it shall be imputed, if we believe on him that raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead;
25 Who was delivered for our offences, and was raised again for our justification.”

If we are clothed in His righteousness then we can stand before God blameless and holy. However, if we are not clothed in Him then we will be cast out. Jesus warned about this in one of His parables. He spoke of a man who tried to enter a king's wedding feast without the appropriate attire. When the king saw him he cast him out:

Matthew 22:11: “And when the king came in to see the guests, he saw there a man which had not on a wedding garment:

12 And he saith unto him, Friend, how camest thou in hither not having a wedding garment? And he was speechless.

13 Then said the king to the servants, Bind him hand and foot, and take him away, and cast him into outer darkness, there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

14 For many are called, but few are chosen.”

Those who try to enter Heaven wearing their own righteousness, instead of the righteousness of Christ, will be cast out. This is because our righteousness is utterly vile in the sight of God:

Isaiah 64:6: “But we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags; and we all do fade as a leaf; and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away.”

We are *all* unclean. We are all unholy – but Jesus can change that, if we come to Him in repentance and faith.

When Jesus saves us and gives us His holiness, He also gives us a new purpose in life. God has called us to be a holy people:

Romans 12:1: “I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service.”

Ephesians 1:4: “According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love:”

Ephesians 5:27: “That he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish.”

1 Peter 1:15: “But as he which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation;

16 Because it is written, Be ye holy; for I am holy.”

God is very clear about this: since He is holy, He commands *us* to be holy. God has saved us for a purpose and called us for a reason. We are to be a living sacrifice, dedicated to holiness and set apart for the service of God. Just as the items in the Temple were set apart for divine use, so we are set apart for the service of God. We have been separated from worldliness and dedicated to God.

Some people act as if holiness is optional. The Bible says otherwise:

Hebrews 12:14: “Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord:”

You see, our God is *serious*. He is not to be taken lightly, and His commands cannot be brushed aside as if they don't really matter. He once destroyed the entire world for its wickedness! He has promised to destroy it again – this time with fire instead of water:

2 Peter 3:10: “But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up.”

He is *very serious* about sin. In the Old Testament, if a priest approached God without the holiness that was required he was instantly killed. You *had* to be holy.

We have somehow forgotten that God has burned entire cities to the ground because of their sin:

Jude 1:7: “Even as Sodom and Gomorrha, and the cities about them in like manner, giving themselves over to fornication, and going after strange flesh, are set forth for an example, suffering the vengeance of eternal fire.”

We have forgotten about the nations He leveled and the civilizations He has torn asunder. We have lost our fear of God and treat Him far too lightly. Instead of looking at our sin in horror, as Isaiah did when he encountered God, we have become comfortable with it. We have lost track of the fact that those who remain in their sins and refuse holiness will be damned by God for all of eternity, and will be tormented day and night, forever and ever.

Those who are without Christ and still living in their sins *must* repent while there is still time. If they do not – if they reject Christ's offer of mercy and grace – then they will face the wrath of God for all of the endless ages of eternity. Since they lack holiness and are corrupt, they will be tormented forever. Their lack of holiness will destroy them.

However, those of us who *are* in Christ must not neglect holiness either. We must pursue it, casting off our sins and seeking to live a life that pleases God. *This is not optional.* It's true that our works do not and cannot save us, but our works do reveal our heart. They reveal who we really are. If our lives are lacking in holiness then that demonstrates we aren't Christians at all:

1 John 2:4: “He that saith, I know him, and keepeth not his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him.

5 But whoso keepeth his word, in him verily is the love of God perfected: hereby know we that we are in him.

6 He that saith he abideth in him ought himself also so to walk, even as he walked.”

You can say all day long that you are a Christian, but if your life lacks holiness then your faith is dead. You can make all the claims you want, but your life proves who you really are. If you are living a carnal life of sin and have rejected the path of holiness, then you are not a Christian. It is not any more complicated than that.

Christians are people who God has saved and set apart for His use. If a person calls himself a Christian but does not follow God, then how can he possibly be set apart for God's use? How can you be a living sacrifice if you have rejected God and gone after your own way? It simply doesn't work that way. You must make a choice. You can follow holiness and find blessing, or you can dishonor God and face destruction:

Psalm 2:12: “Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and ye perish from the way, when his wrath is kindled but a little. Blessed are all they that put their trust in him.”

HOW DID JESUS VIEW THE OLD TESTAMENT?

In modern times it has become common to view the Old Testament with a certain measure of distrust. It is commonly thought that the older parts of the Bible are not really historical accounts and may not be entirely accurate. Some teach that, although there may be spiritual truths to be gained from it, some of the Old Testament is just traditions that have been handed down that may not necessarily correspond to actual historical events. Instead of reading the Old Testament as a historical textbook, people suggest reading it as a book of moral stories that should not be taken too literally.

That brings up an interesting question. The foundation of Christianity is Jesus, who is the eternally existing Son of God – fully God, and yet fully man as well. Jesus knows all things and He certainly knows how the world was created, what historical events did or did not happen, and how accurate the Old Testament really is. He spent years living among mankind and He trained His apostles in all things regarding the truth. Since Jesus knows the truth, how did He view the Old Testament? Did He see it as a collection of moral stories, or as actual and literal history?

If you read through the gospels you will never find a time when Jesus corrects an Old Testament account. He never contradicts the Scripture on any point, or says that it was in error. Jesus never condemns anyone for believing in it, nor does He correct people for thinking that its stories actually took place. This is in spite of the fact that Jesus did not hesitate to correct error wherever He saw it! He took the religious leaders of His day to task time and time again for teaching error (Matthew 22:29), and sometimes His whole ministry seemed to be focused on telling people things that they did not want to hear (John 6:60). Jesus was very bold about speaking unpopular truths (Luke 4:25-29), but He never contradicted or opposed the Old Testament. Instead we find Him supporting it – even parts that are quite surprising.

Abraham

Jesus taught that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were real people who Christians would one day meet in Heaven:

Matthew 8:11: “And I say unto you, That many shall come from the east and west, and shall sit down with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven.”

It is impossible for anyone to sit down and have a meal with an imaginary person! If we will one day meet these three men in the Kingdom of Heaven then they have to actually exist.

Sodom

Jesus taught that Sodom was a real city that actually existed, and which was destroyed by God for its sin:

Matthew 11:23: “And thou, Capernaum, which art exalted unto heaven, shalt be brought down to hell: for if the mighty works, which have been done in thee, had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day.

24 But I say unto you, That it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment, than for thee.”

Notice how Jesus says that if they had repented then the city of Sodom would still exist. If the city was purely fictional then that would be impossible! Jesus even taught that Sodom was destroyed by fire and brimstone, just as was taught in Genesis 19:24:

Luke 17:28: “Likewise also as it was in the days of Lot; they did eat, they drank, they bought, they sold, they planted, they builded;

29 But the same day that Lot went out of Sodom it rained fire and brimstone from heaven, and destroyed them all.”

This would have been a perfect time to correct the historical account if this city was just a myth or the account was exaggerated, but Jesus did not do that.

David

Jesus taught that David actually existed:

Matthew 12:3: “But he said unto them, Have ye not read what David did, when he was an hungred, and they that were with him;

4 How he entered into the house of God, and did eat the shewbread, which was not lawful for him to eat, neither for them which were with him, but only for the priests?”

This is a reference to 1 Samuel 21:1-6. Jesus supported the Old Testament account that David, who was on the run from King Saul at the time, went to the temple and got food for himself and his men. If David never existed then Jesus had many opportunities to correct the record, but instead of doing so He allowed people to repeatedly call Him the “son of David” (Matthew 15:22, 20:30, and 21:9, just to list a few).

Jonah

Jesus taught that Jonah was actually in the great fish for three days:

Matthew 12:39: “But he answered and said unto them, An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign be given to it, but the sign of

the prophet Jonas:

40 For as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale's belly; so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.

Jesus compared the reality of what happened to Jonah to the reality of His death, burial, and resurrection. If the story of Jonah was just a myth then Jesus could have easily told people this, but He did not do so. Instead Jesus taught that Nineveh repented at the preaching of Jonah, just as is written in Jonah 3:5:

Matthew 12:41: “The men of Nineveh shall rise in judgment with this generation, and shall condemn it: because they repented at the preaching of Jonas; and, behold, a greater than Jonas is here.”

If the men of Nineveh are going to stand up on Judgment Day and condemn “this generation” because they repented at the preaching of Jonah, then they must be real people who actually did repent when Jonah came to preach to them.

Queen of Sheba

Jesus taught that the Queen of Sheba actually existed and made a trip to King Solomon to hear his wisdom:

Matthew 12:42: “The queen of the south shall rise up in the judgment with this generation, and shall condemn it: for she came from the uttermost parts of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and, behold, a greater than Solomon is here.”

If the Queen of Sheba is going to rise up on Judgment Day and condemn “this generation” on the grounds that she went to hear the wisdom of Solomon, then she must be a real person who actually did that. Jesus did not dispute the account we find in 1 Kings 10:1-10; instead He confirmed it.

Abel

Jesus taught that Abel was a real person who was killed for his righteousness (Genesis 4:8):

Matthew 23:35: “That upon you may come all the righteous blood shed upon the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel unto the blood of Zacharias son of Barachias, whom ye slew between the temple and the altar.”

If Abel was not a real person then it would make no sense to punish Israel for the death of a fictional being! Jesus taught that Abel actually existed and was unjustly killed. The apostle John also testified to the historical reality of this event:

I John 3:12: “Not as Cain, who was of that wicked one, and slew his brother. And wherefore slew he him? Because his own works were evil, and his brother's righteous.”

We never find the disciples of Jesus ever questioning anything in the Old Testament. Instead they always accepted it as actual, accurate history.

Naaman

Jesus taught that Naaman the Syrian really was miraculously cleansed of his leprosy as the Old Testament taught (see 2 Kings 5:1-14):

Luke 4:27: “And many lepers were in Israel in the time of Eliseus the prophet; and none of them was cleansed, saving Naaman the Syrian.”

If there were many lepers in Israel in those days but only Naaman was cleansed, then Naaman must have been a real person. Jesus does not try to correct any part of the written account (not even the part where Naaman had to wash in the Jordan seven times before being cleansed), but instead accepts it all as it was written.

The Serpent in the Wilderness

In Numbers 21:8-9 we find an account of a time when the Israelites were in the wilderness. Since Israel had spoken out against God, the Lord sent serpents against them that killed many people. When the Israelites cried out to God to remove the snakes, God instead commanded Moses to craft an image of a snake on a pole. Whoever looked at the image would be healed.

Jesus taught that this event was something that really happened:

John 3:14: “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up:
15 That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life.”

The Lord could have easily said that Moses never lifted up a serpent and the whole story was fictional, but instead He taught it as actual history. In fact, He actually compared it to His upcoming crucifixion. Jesus explained that Moses was pointing to the redemptive work that He would accomplish on the cross – whoever looked to Him for salvation (instead of their own works) would be saved. Salvation does not come by our efforts, but by looking at something outside of us.

Manna

Jesus taught that, just as Exodus 16:15 said, the Israelites really did eat manna when they were in the wilderness:

John 6:58: “This is that bread which came down from heaven: not as your fathers did eat manna, and are dead: he that eateth of this bread shall live for ever.”

Jesus did not teach that manna was some mythical food. He instead said that it was a real thing that was actually eaten by their ancestors.

The Burning Bush

Jesus taught that God really did speak to Moses through a burning bush (as we find recorded in Exodus 3:2-3):

Mark 12:26: “And as touching the dead, that they rise: have ye not read in the book of Moses, how in the bush God spake unto him, saying, I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob?”

The Lord could have easily said that God never spoke to Moses through a bush at all, and that it was just a misunderstanding or a corruption of the text, but instead He taught it as actual history.

Balaam

One of the most amazing stories in the Old Testament is the account of Balaam's donkey. In Numbers 22:28-30 we are told that Balaam once had an argument with his donkey, who actually talked to him. The apostle Peter, who was with Jesus for years, did not dismiss this story of a talking donkey as a fairy tale. Instead he taught that it really happened:

2 Peter 2:15: “Which have forsaken the right way, and are gone astray, following the way of Balaam the son of Bosor, who loved the wages of unrighteousness; 16 But was rebuked for his iniquity: the dumb ass speaking with man's voice forbad the madness of the prophet.”

The Old Testament treated Balaam as a real person who was later killed by the Israelites (Joshua 13:22), and this disciple of Jesus treated him the same way. This would have been a perfect time for the apostles to explain that this never really happened, but instead they confirmed the Old Testament account.

The Flood

Jesus taught that the great flood of Genesis 6-8 was a real event that killed everyone who was not on the Ark. He did *not* teach that it was a local flood that could have easily been avoided if Noah had just moved to a different location:

Matthew 24:37: “But as the days of Noe were, so shall also the coming of the Son of man be.

38 For as in the days that were before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noe entered into the ark,

39 And knew not until the flood came, and took them all away; so shall also the coming of the Son of man be.”

Luke 17:26: “And as it was in the days of Noe, so shall it be also in the days of the Son of man.

27 They did eat, they drank, they married wives, they were given in marriage, until the day that Noe entered into the ark, and the flood came, and destroyed them all.”

The Lord could have easily explained that the great flood was a minor local event that didn't flood the whole world, and that there were many survivors who were not on the Ark because the flood wasn't global. Instead of doing that, though, He confirmed the Genesis account and said that the great flood destroyed *everyone*. The apostle Peter, who spent years with Jesus, likewise taught that only eight people were saved and everyone else in the world died:

1 Peter 3:20: “Which sometime were disobedient, when once the longsuffering of God waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was a preparing, wherein few, that is, eight souls were saved by water.”

2 Peter 3:5: “For this they willingly are ignorant of, that by the word of God the heavens were of old, and the earth standing out of the water and in the water:

6 Whereby the world that then was, being overflowed with water, perished:

7 But the heavens and the earth, which are now, by the same word are kept in store, reserved unto fire against the day of judgment and perdition of ungodly men.”

Neither Jesus nor Peter taught that the flood was a local event. Instead they spoke of it being a worldwide judgment in which the *entire world* was overflowed with water. Only the eight people on board the ark were saved.

Adam

In the book of Luke, the genealogy of Jesus includes Methusaleh, Enoch, and Adam:

Luke 3:37: “Which was the son of Mathusala, which was the son of Enoch, which

was the son of Jared, which was the son of Maleleel, which was the son of Cainan,
38 Which was the son of Enos, which was the son of Seth, which was the son of
Adam, which was the son of God.”

Jesus could have easily corrected the people of His day and told them that there was no literal Adam who was the father of the entire human race, but He did not. Notice that all of the people in His genealogy are listed as actual, historical people who really lived! No difference is put between Joseph (His adopted father) and Adam.

Moreover, Jesus treated the Genesis account of creation as something that really happened:

Mark 10:6: “But from the beginning of the creation God made them male and female.

7 For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and cleave to his wife;

8 And they twain shall be one flesh: so then they are no more twain, but one flesh.”

In evolutionary terms, the creation of mankind was at the very *end* of history. Evolutionists teach that the universe is around 14 billion years old and mankind only appeared at the end of a long, slow, and gradual process. No evolutionist would teach that mankind appeared at the “beginning of the creation”; instead mankind appeared at the *end*. If history was a book, evolutionists teach that mankind appeared in the last line of the last page.

Here we have Jesus, the creator of the universe, weighing in on the topic. Jesus never hesitated to correct error wherever He saw it. He could have told people that they had completely misunderstood Genesis and in reality creation took a very long time, mankind only appeared at the end of history (not at the beginning), and that more complex life forms came from simpler life forms. But He did not do any of that. Instead He acted as if Genesis 1 was literally true.

His apostles did the same thing. Paul taught that the reason we can be saved by the death of Christ is because sin entered the world through one man – Adam – and that all death was caused by the original sin of Adam:

Romans 5:12: “Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned:

13 (For until the law sin was in the world: but sin is not imputed when there is no law.

14 Nevertheless death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over them that had not sinned after the similitude of Adam's transgression, who is the figure of him that was to come.”

The reason that salvation works is because Adam literally existed and Genesis 3 actually happened. If Adam was not the father of the human race, or if sin did not come into the world through him, or if there was death before Adam existed, then no one can be saved. The gospel depends on a literal interpretation of Genesis:

Romans 5:15: “But not as the offence, so also is the free gift. For if through the offence of one many be dead, much more the grace of God, and the gift by grace, which is by one man, Jesus Christ, hath abounded unto many. . .

17 For if by one man's offence death reigned by one; much more they which receive

abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness shall reign in life by one, Jesus Christ.)

18 Therefore as by the offence of one judgment came upon all men to condemnation; even so by the righteousness of one the free gift came upon all men unto justification of life.

19 For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous."

Salvation depends on a literal Adam sinning, on that sin being the thing that brought death into the world, and on Adam passing that sin down to all of his descendants. Because that is what happened, the sacrifice of one man (Jesus) can bring righteousness and everlasting life. If we are not descendants of Adam then we cannot be saved. If death existed before Adam then Christ cannot save us from death. (How can death be the punishment for sin if there has always been death? In that case the whole gospel falls apart.)

The Torah

Jesus consistently taught that Moses wrote the first five books of the Bible. He never credits any of it to anyone else:

Mark 12:26: "And as touching the dead, that they rise: have ye not read in the book of Moses, how in the bush God spake unto him, saying, I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob?"

Matthew 19:7: "They say unto him, Why did Moses then command to give a writing of divorcement, and to put her away?

8 He saith unto them, Moses because of the hardness of your hearts suffered you to put away your wives: but from the beginning it was not so."

Mark 7:10: "For Moses said, Honour thy father and thy mother; and, Whoso curseth father or mother, let him die the death:"

Luke 5:14: "And he charged him to tell no man: but go, and shew thyself to the priest, and offer for thy cleansing, according as Moses commanded, for a testimony unto them."

Luke 24:27: "And beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself."

John 1:17: "For the law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ."

John 5:45: "Do not think that I will accuse you to the Father: there is one that accuseth you, even Moses, in whom ye trust.

46 For had ye believed Moses, ye would have believed me; for he wrote of me.
47 But if ye believe not his writings, how shall ye believe my words?"

Jesus never questioned the Mosaic authorship of the first five books of the Bible, or said that those books weren't entirely accurate and should not be considered historical. Instead Jesus *condemned* people for not believing the things that Moses wrote, and said that if people would not believe Moses then they would not believe Him either. If Moses had never existed, or had not written what people claimed he had, Jesus could have easily corrected them – but He did not. Instead He repeatedly affirmed that Moses wrote the Torah and people ought to believe it.

Isaiah

Today there are some scholars who claim that the first half of Isaiah was written by one person, and the second half (which contains a lot of prophecies) was written much later by someone else. Yet Jesus taught that *both* portions of the book were written by Isaiah himself. For example, here Jesus says that Isaiah 29:13 was written by Isaiah:

Mark 7:6: "He answered and said unto them, Well hath Esaias prophesied of you hypocrites, as it is written, This people honoureth me with their lips, but their heart is far from me."

Jesus also said that Isaiah 53:1 (in the second, disputed half of the book) was also written by Isaiah:

John 12:37: "But though he had done so many miracles before them, yet they believed not on him:

38 That the saying of Esaias the prophet might be fulfilled, which he spake, Lord, who hath believed our report? And to whom hath the arm of the Lord been revealed?"

In that same chapter of John the Lord quotes from Isaiah 6:10, again attributing it to Isaiah:

John 12:39: "Therefore they could not believe, because that Esaias said again,
40 He hath blinded their eyes, and hardened their heart; that they should not see with their eyes, nor understand with their heart, and be converted, and I should heal them.

12:41 These things said Esaias, when he saw his glory, and spake of him."

Jesus could have easily taught that Isaiah was written by multiple people over a long span of time, but instead of doing so He taught that the entire book (including the prophecies) were written by Isaiah.

Daniel

Jesus taught that the book of Daniel (and its prophecies) was written by Daniel:

Matthew 24:15: “When ye therefore shall see the abomination of desolation, spoken of by Daniel the prophet, stand in the holy place, (whoso readeth, let him understand:)”

Instead of saying that Daniel 12:11 was written much later by someone else, Jesus affirms that it was written by Daniel himself.

More Powerful Than Miracles

Today people often think that if only they had the power to do miracles, people would see the miracles and believe. The idea is that miracles are more powerful and more convincing than the Bible itself – but that is not what Jesus taught.

In Luke 16 Jesus told of a rich man who went to Hell, and who had a conversation with Abraham. Jesus ends the account by saying that the Scripture was actually more powerful than miracles – even the miracle of *raising the dead*:

Luke 16:29: “Abraham saith unto him, They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them.

16:30 And he said, Nay, father Abraham: but if one went unto them from the dead, they will repent.

16:31 And he said unto him, If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead.”

Jesus taught that if you will not believe the words in the Old Testament, then even hearing the witness of someone who was raised from the dead will not convince you. The Scriptures are a more powerful testimony than any miracle. If you will not believe them then *nothing more can be done for you*. (Who taught that? Jesus did.)

Instead of finding cases where Jesus questioned the truth of the Old Testament or told people not to take it so seriously, Jesus affirmed it at every turn and constantly pointed people back to it.

Written By God

Jesus taught that, although the Old Testament was written by men, its true author was God Himself:

Matthew 22:31: “But as touching the resurrection of the dead, have ye not read that which was spoken unto you by God, saying,

32 I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob? God is not the God of the dead, but of the living.”

Matthew 22:43: “He saith unto them, How then doth David in spirit call him Lord, saying,

44 The LORD said unto my Lord, Sit thou on my right hand, till I make thine enemies thy footstool?”

Instead of teaching that the Scriptures were a work of men and were full of errors, Jesus taught that God was the one who did the writing and His Spirit authored its words and spoke through men. He did not say that Psalm 110:1 was the work of David; instead He said that it was the work of the Holy Spirit, who wrote it through David. Men may have done the actual physical writing, but God was the author and the one who spoke through them.

Every Word

Jesus once defended the existence of the resurrection based on the tense of a single word in the Old Testament:

Mark 12:26: “And as touching the dead, that they rise: have ye not read in the book of Moses, how in the bush God spake unto him, saying, I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob?

27 He is not the God of the dead, but the God of the living: ye therefore do greatly err.

The Lord is saying that since the Old Testament said “*I am*” Abraham's God instead of “*I was*” Abraham's God, that must mean that Abraham is still alive and so there must be a resurrection! Not only did Jesus trust every word in the Old Testament, but He also taught that the *tense* of every word could be trusted.

Jesus never taught that the Scriptures had been corrupted over the years and were not completely accurate. He did not say that we should avoid reading too much into them. He never cautioned us against trusting the text on the grounds that we don't have the original manuscripts, so we don't really know what God said. He never taught that we should try to decide for ourselves what was real and what was a corruption. No, Jesus believed every single word. He even went so far as to say that He would preserve His Word against corruption so that it could always be fully trusted:

Matthew 5:17: “Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil.

18 For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled.”

Luke 16:15: “And he said unto them, Ye are they which justify yourselves before men; but God knoweth your hearts: for that which is highly esteemed among men is abomination in the sight of God.

16 The law and the prophets were until John: since that time the kingdom of God is preached, and every man presseth into it.

17 And it is easier for heaven and earth to pass, than one tittle of the law to fail."

Jesus clearly believed that it was impossible for His Word to pass away. Instead of teaching people to question it (which He constantly did in regard to the teachings of the Pharisees), He expected people to know it and believe it. He taught that it was impossible for the Scripture to fail, or to not come to pass, or to be in error:

John 10:34: "Jesus answered them, Is it not written in your law, I said, Ye are gods?
35 If he called them gods, unto whom the word of God came, and the scripture cannot be broken;
36 Say ye of him, whom the Father hath sanctified, and sent into the world, Thou blasphemest; because I said, I am the Son of God?"

Jesus had complete faith in every part of the Old Testament. He never questioned any of it. Instead He condemned people for not knowing what it said:

Matthew 22:29: "Jesus answered and said unto them, Ye do err, not knowing the scriptures, nor the power of God."

He condemned people for adding their own traditions to the Scriptures:

Matthew 15:3: "But he answered and said unto them, Why do ye also transgress the commandment of God by your tradition?"

He condemned people for replacing what the Word of God said with the traditions and opinions of men:

Mark 7:7: "Howbeit in vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men.
7:8 For laying aside the commandment of God, ye hold the tradition of men, as the washing of pots and cups: and many other such like things ye do.
7:9 And he said unto them, Full well ye reject the commandment of God, that ye may keep your own tradition."

Jesus had stern words for those who would ignore what He had to say and believe something else instead:

John 12:48: "He that rejecteth me, and receiveth not my words, hath one that judgeth him: the word that I have spoken, the same shall judge him in the last day."

There were plenty of opportunities for Jesus and His disciples to correct people's view of Scripture – but instead of doing that they constantly and consistently reaffirmed it, teaching that it all happened, it was all real, and it could all be trusted – even down to the tense of every word.

Hall of Fame of Faith

I will close with this. In Hebrews 11 we are given a list of the heroes of faith – people who had tremendous faith in God and who were an example to all of us today. This list is presented to us as an actual list of real historical events – things that real people did and events that truly happened. This list testifies to the reality of Cain and Abel, the rapture of Enoch, Sarah giving birth when she was too old, Abraham offering Isaac as a sacrifice, the Israelites crossing the Red Sea on dry ground, the walls of Jericho falling down, and even the existence of Samson:

Hebrews 11:4: “By faith Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, by which he obtained witness that he was righteous, God testifying of his gifts: and by it he being dead yet speaketh.

5 By faith Enoch was translated that he should not see death; and was not found, because God had translated him: for before his translation he had this testimony, that he pleased God. . .

11 Through faith also Sara herself received strength to conceive seed, and was delivered of a child when she was past age, because she judged him faithful who had promised. . .

17 By faith Abraham, when he was tried, offered up Isaac: and he that had received the promises offered up his only begotten son,

18 Of whom it was said, That in Isaac shall thy seed be called:

19 Accounting that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead; from whence also he received him in a figure. . .

29 By faith they passed through the Red sea as by dry land: which the Egyptians assaying to do were drowned.

30 By faith the walls of Jericho fell down, after they were compassed about seven days. . .

32 And what shall I more say? for the time would fail me to tell of Gedeon, and of Barak, and of Samson, and of Jephthae; of David also, and Samuel, and of the prophets:”

Jesus and the apostles consistently taught that everything in the Old Testament could be trusted. They testified to the truth of these verses:

Psalm 119:160: “Thy word is true from the beginning: and every one of thy righteous judgments endureth for ever.”

Proverbs 30:5: “Every word of God is pure: he is a shield unto them that put their trust in him.”

Now, it is true that if you search the Scriptures diligently you will find someone who cast doubt on the word and commandments of God. You can find him here:

Genesis 3:1: “Now the serpent was more subtil than any beast of the field which

the Lord God had made. And he said unto the woman, Yea, hath God said, Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden?"

Who taught people to doubt? That would be the devil.

MARRIAGE AFTER THE RESURRECTION

Will there be marriage after the resurrection? For most people this is an easy question to answer: of course not! Everyone knows that marriage is “till death do us part”. Once you die that's the end, and there is no more marriage after that. Jesus clearly said that when people are raised from the dead they cannot marry or be given in marriage. Marriage is for this life only; it will not exist in the endless ages of eternity.

But is that really the case? I realize that this belief is very common, but it *is* possible for a belief to be both common and wrong. For example, nearly everyone believes that angels sang at the birth of Christ. This is despite the fact that they did no such thing:

Luke 2:13: “And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying,
14 Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.”

Did the angels *sing* “glory to God in the highest”? No, they did not. They *said* it; they did not sing it. This isn't difficult to discover. It's right there in one of the most famous passages in the Bible – and yet nearly everyone misses it and gets it wrong.

So what does the Bible actually say about marriage after the resurrection? Well, first of all, it's true that death ends the marriage relationship. The Bible is clear about that:

1 Corinthians 7:39: “The wife is bound by the law as long as her husband liveth; but if her husband be dead, she is at liberty to be married to whom she will; only in the Lord.”

The wife is bound to her husband as long as he is alive. Once her husband dies, though, she isn't married to him anymore. At that point she can go marry someone else. If she tried marrying someone else while her husband is still alive she would be in a lot of trouble, but once her husband is dead she is free. The fact that she was married before doesn't matter; she is free to marry again if she chooses.

We can see that the living are allowed to get married again, but what about the dead – can they remarry as well? Is it possible to get married after the Lord returns and takes us to Heaven, or is marriage off the table at that point? At first glance the answer seems pretty straightforward:

Matthew 22:30: “For in the resurrection they neither marry, nor are given in marriage, but are as the angels of God in heaven.”

This account is repeated in Mark 12 and Luke 20. Virtually everyone I have ever known has looked at this verse and said “Yes, there's no marriage in Heaven. Marriage is for this life only. It couldn't be more clear.”

But I think there's more going on here than it seems. In our rush to get an answer we've overlooked a number of critical details. We have been a bit sloppy. I don't think this passage is nearly as clear as it appears to be.

First of all, let's back up and get some context. At this point in Christ's ministry Jesus had angered the religious leaders of His day, and they wanted Him dead. One of their ploys to get rid of

Jesus was to trap Him with questions that were impossible to answer. They were hoping that no matter what Jesus said, they could seize on His words and get Him killed.

This question from the Sadducees about marriage was no different. The whole reason they asked Jesus this question was to make Him look like a fool:

Matthew 22:23: “The same day came to him the Sadducees, which say that there is no resurrection, and asked him,
24 Saying, Master, Moses said, If a man die, having no children, his brother shall marry his wife, and raise up seed unto his brother. . .”

In other words, this wasn't one of those occasions when the disciples came to Jesus with a genuine question about the resurrection in an attempt to gain insight and understanding. No, the Sadducees were just trying to publicly humiliate Jesus over His belief in the resurrection. They weren't being sincere; they were mocking the Lord.

The reason this matters is because *Jesus does not give clear, direct answers to questions that are just traps*. For example, earlier in this chapter someone asked Jesus about paying taxes. Look at what Jesus did:

Matthew 22:17: “Tell us therefore, What thinkest thou? Is it lawful to give tribute unto Caesar, or not?
18 But Jesus perceived their wickedness, and said, Why tempt ye me, ye hypocrites?
19 Shew me the tribute money. And they brought unto him a penny.
20 And he saith unto them, Whose is this image and superscription?
21 They say unto him, Caesar's. Then saith he unto them, Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's.”

The Pharisees were trying to trap Jesus with an impossible question. If Jesus said “Yes, the tribute is lawful”, then not only would He have been endorsing Roman rule and its accompanying paganism, but He would have angered the people – and the Pharisees could have used that to stir up the crowd and kill him. If Jesus had said “No, the tribute is not lawful”, then the Pharisees could have had the Romans arrest Him for treason. The Pharisees were hoping that no matter what Jesus said, they could use His answer to get Him killed (or at least imprisoned).

But to their tremendous surprise, the way Jesus responded gave the Pharisees nothing to use against Him. Since His response was untouchable they were forced to do nothing and walk away. At the same time, though, what Jesus said *did not actually answer the question*. What things belong to Caesar? How much was lawful, and how much was not? Were the Romans doing what was right, or had they gone too far? Was it lawful for the Romans to require that much tribute from the people? Jesus didn't say. For all intents and purposes He left their question *unanswered*. Since they weren't looking for a real answer Jesus didn't give them one.

The Sadducees were trying exactly the same thing. They came up with a ridiculous scenario where a single woman was married to 7 different men and didn't have children with any of them (which meant that none of them had a strong claim to her). They then demanded to know which man would be her husband in the resurrection, since she was a wife to all of them. Once again, they didn't really care about the answer; they just wanted to make Jesus look like a fool and mock Him for His belief in the resurrection.

Now, remember, the answer to this question should have been obvious. As we have already

seen, *death ends the marriage relationship!* Once either of the parties in the marriage dies, that marriage is over. Therefore the woman would not be the wife of any of them! The Sadducees were trying to claim that the marriage bond somehow lasts beyond death, even though the Bible is quite clear that it does no such thing.

Since the Sadducees were being deliberately stupid, Jesus rebukes them for their stupidity:

Matthew 22:29: “Jesus answered and said unto them, Ye do err, not knowing the scriptures, nor the power of God.

30 For in the resurrection they neither marry, nor are given in marriage, but are as the angels of God in heaven.”

The Scriptures had already answered their question, and if the Sadducees had studied the Scriptures and believed them they wouldn't have made such a terrible error. The woman is obviously not going to be the wife of any of them.

Verse 30 is where all of the trouble starts. Jesus seems to be saying that after people are raised from the dead they can no longer get married. This looks like a very clear-cut denial of marriage after the resurrection, but there's a problem. Just as Jesus didn't really answer the question about taxes, He doesn't really answer the question about marriage after the resurrection either. Yes, Jesus said that in the resurrection they will not marry or be given in marriage. But *which resurrection is Jesus talking about?*

You see, the Bible actually speaks of *three* different resurrections. The first resurrection occurs at the Rapture, when Jesus Christ returns to Earth at the sound of the last trumpet. At that point the dead Church saints are raised back to life, and the living ones are translated:

I Corinthians 15:51: “Behold, I shew you a mystery; We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed,

52 In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed.

53 For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality.”

Do you see that word “mystery” in verse 51? Whenever that word is used in the Bible it has a very specific meaning. It is used to indicate that whatever is being talked about is something entirely new – a secret that has never been revealed before. In other words, when Paul told the Corinthians about the Rapture he was teaching them *an entirely new doctrine*. The Old Testament never mentioned the Rapture (although it may have given some hints in a few places), and it was not known during the life of Christ either.

This means that when the Sadducees asked about marriage after the resurrection they were not talking about the Rapture. After all, they didn't know anything about it, and Christ didn't reveal it to them! So the Rapture is *not* the resurrection that Jesus mentions in verse 30.

The second resurrection does not occur until after the Tribulation period and just before the Millennial Kingdom begins. That is when the Tribulation martyrs will be raised from the dead (along with all the saints from the Old Testament):

Revelation 20:4: “And I saw thrones, and they sat upon them, and judgment was given unto them: and I saw the souls of them that were beheaded for the witness of Jesus, and for the word of God, and which had not worshipped the beast, neither his

image, neither had received his mark upon their foreheads, or in their hands; and they lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years.

5 But the rest of the dead lived not again until the thousand years were finished. This is the first resurrection.

6 Blessed and holy is he that hath part in the first resurrection: on such the second death hath no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with him a thousand years.”

In this resurrection the martyrs are raised back to life. As you can see, none of the wicked are raised from the dead at this point – and the wicked weren't raised back to life at the Rapture either. The resurrection of the wicked doesn't occur until *after* the thousand years of the Millennial Kingdom. In the final resurrection, all those who died during the Millennium – along with all the wicked who have died throughout the ages – are raised from the dead and stand before God to be judged. This occurs in what the Bible calls the last day:

Revelation 20:11: “And I saw a great white throne, and him that sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away; and there was found no place for them.

12 And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God; and the books were opened: and another book was opened, which is the book of life: and the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works.

13 And the sea gave up the dead which were in it; and death and hell delivered up the dead which were in them: and they were judged every man according to their works.”

This last resurrection is the *only* one in which the wicked are raised from the dead. The reason this is important is because only *one* of the three resurrections was revealed in the Old Testament, and it happens to be this last one. We find it briefly mentioned in the book of Daniel:

Daniel 12:2: “And many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.”

As you can see, in this resurrection both the righteous and the wicked are raised back to life. There is only one resurrection in which that occurs, and it's the one that happens on the last day. I want to emphasize that *this is the only resurrection that the people of Christ's day knew about*. We can see this from what Martha told Jesus concerning the resurrection of Lazarus:

John 11:23: “Jesus saith unto her, Thy brother shall rise again.

24 Martha saith unto him, I know that he shall rise again in the resurrection at the last day.”

Was Martha looking for the Rapture? Nope. Instead she was looking forward to the resurrection that occurs “at the last day” - in other words, before the great judgment at the end of the world. She wasn't aware of anything else. (Interestingly, when Mary told this to Jesus He replied that *He* was the resurrection and the life, and those who believed on Him would never die. But He said nothing about

the Rapture or the other resurrections. Those teachings were kept a secret until after His ascension.)

I say all that to say this: the Sadducees asked Jesus about the only resurrection that was known in their day. That resurrection happened to be the *last* one – the one that takes place on Judgment Day. This means that Jesus' answer applies *only to that resurrection*. It is a bit of a stretch to take an answer directed at the third resurrection and apply it to the others. After all, these three resurrections happen at different times, they involve different groups of people, and they take place under different circumstances. They are *not* the same, and they should *not* be treated as if they are interchangeable.

As a Christian, are you going to be raised from the dead after the Millennium is over? Absolutely not! If you die before the Lord returns then you will be raised from the dead at the Rapture. This means that the answer Jesus gave the Sadducees *does not apply to you* – and that is the *only* passage in the entire Bible that says that marriage is off-limits in the afterlife. Let me repeat that: the only passage in the Bible that says “No, there is no marriage after the Resurrection” is talking about a resurrection *that you will not be a part of*. If you die at all (and you may not, for the Lord's return may be nearer than we think), you will be raised back to life more than a *thousand years* before that resurrection!

But there's more to consider. Did you know that the people the Sadducees were talking about in their question were *actually other Sadducees*? Take a look:

Matthew 22:25: “Now there were with us seven brethren: and the first, when he had married a wife, deceased, and, having no issue, left his wife unto his brother:”

These weren't random brethren off the street; they were Sadducees. This means that the people involved in this question weren't God-fearing Christians, but were lost people who rejected the Messiah, didn't believe in the resurrection, and were in rebellion against God. *Of course* there was going to be no marriage after the resurrection for them! When they are raised from the dead they will stand before God, be judged for their sins, and then cast into the Lake of Fire forever. Their fate is eternal damnation. Whatever happens to unbelievers after they are raised from the dead is *completely different* from what the righteous will experience. Do *not* confuse their fate with yours. Of course they're not going to marry or be given in marriage! Why would there be marriage in Hell?

Now, I need to point out that this question is recorded three times in the Bible (in Matthew, Mark, and Luke). In each instance the question is slightly different and the answer is slightly different. It's quite possible that Jesus was asked this question more than once; after all, He did minister for three years. The book of Luke is different from the other two accounts in that it records a version of the question that has a much more positive answer:

Luke 20:34: “And Jesus answering said unto them, The children of this world marry, and are given in marriage:

35 But they which shall be accounted worthy to obtain that world, and the resurrection from the dead, neither marry, nor are given in marriage:

36 Neither can they die any more: for they are equal unto the angels; and are the children of God, being the children of the resurrection.”

In Luke Jesus is *not* talking about the wicked being raised for the purpose of eternal judgment; instead He is speaking of the righteous being raised up for eternal life. He clearly says that the people of *this* world marry, but the people of the *next* world will not.

But once again, pay attention to what is going on. The resurrection in question is the one that

occurs on Judgment Day, when God will destroy this world, judge the dead, and then create a New Heaven and Earth. In that New Earth there will be no more death – and as we can see, there will be no more marriage either. But that doesn't answer our question. I'm not asking if there is marriage in the Eternal State, or in the New Heaven and Earth; I want to know if there's marriage in the Millennium. Knowing that there is no marriage *after* the Millennium *does not answer the question*.

What about those who are raised from the dead at the Rapture and who live through the Millennium? After all, there will certainly be marriage in *that* world! Those who survive the Tribulation will go on to repopulate the whole world; they will have children, and their children will have children, and so forth. All throughout the Millennium millions upon millions of non-immortal, non-resurrected people will get married. The saints of God will be raised from the dead and live in a world where marriage exists. Will *they* get to participate in marriage, or not? Will marriage be reserved only for those who survived the Tribulation, or will *all* of the living (including the resurrected ones) be allowed to participate in it?

That is the real question, and Christ's conversation with the Sadducees *doesn't answer it*. However, Christ did touch on the answer at another time. What He said was quite unexpected:

Matthew 19:28: “And Jesus said unto them, Verily I say unto you, That ye which have followed me, in the regeneration when the Son of man shall sit in the throne of his glory, ye also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.
29 And every one that hath forsaken houses, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my name's sake, shall receive an hundredfold, and shall inherit everlasting life.”

In this passage Christ actually *is* talking about the Millennium. Peter wanted to know what Jesus would give to the disciples as their reward for following Him, and Jesus told him that during the Millennium they would sit on twelve thrones and judge the twelve tribes of Israel. Jesus then said that those who sacrificed other things for Him, *including wives*, would receive “an hundredfold”. In other words, Jesus would richly repay them for the things they had lost.

Does this mean that Jesus would give them 100 wives? Of course not! But let's think about this. Is it too much to think that those who gave up a house for Christ might receive one back in the Millennium? After all, they're going to be living on Earth for a thousand years and they'll need a place to live. Since serving Christ cost them their home, is it *really* that much of a stretch to think that Christ will give them a place to live so they won't be homeless? Likewise, is it really that hard to believe that He might give land to those who lost their land for His sake? Finally, is it truly so hard to believe that those who lost their wife for the cause of Christ (or who never married at all) might receive a wife during the thousand years they will spend on the Earth during the Millennium? Seeing how *Jesus Himself is the one who mentioned this possibility*, is that really so far-fetched?

I agree that in Jesus' response in Luke to the Sadducees He seems quite clear that there will be no marriage in the Eternal State. But the Eternal State will apply to *everyone*. The Millennium is different: it will be filled with millions of Tribulation survivors who will *absolutely* be getting married and having children. Is it that difficult to believe that we will be getting married and having children as well? After all, *there are no verses that say we won't*.

Stop and think about that for a minute. How many verses in the Bible say that the resurrected saints will *not* be getting married during the Millennium? *Zero*. In fact, let's take a look at Isaiah 65. In that chapter the Bible speaks of that glorious era and has this to say about it:

Isaiah 65:21: “And they shall build houses, and inhabit them; and they shall plant vineyards, and eat the fruit of them.

22 They shall not build, and another inhabit; they shall not plant, and another eat: for as the days of a tree are the days of my people, and mine elect shall long enjoy the work of their hands.

23 They shall not labour in vain, nor bring forth for trouble; for they are the seed of the blessed of the Lord, and their offspring with them.”

Here we are told that during the Millennium people will build houses and live in them. They will plant vineyards and enjoy their fruit. They will even *have offspring*, as verse 23 says. If that passage isn't clear enough for you about the presence of children in the Millennium, take a look at this one:

Isaiah 11:6: “The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them.

7 And the cow and the bear shall feed; their young ones shall lie down together: and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.

8 And the sucking child shall play on the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the cockatrice' den.”

There will *clearly* be children born during the Millennium. And who will be having these children? According to Isaiah 65, it will be God's people *and God's elect*. Are *we* not God's elect? Of course we are:

1 Thessalonians 1:2: “We give thanks to God always for you all, making mention of you in our prayers;

3 Remembering without ceasing your work of faith, and labour of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ, in the sight of God and our Father;

4 Knowing, brethren beloved, your election of God.”

Isaiah 65 clearly addresses *God's elect*. Notice that the chapter does *not* say “Everyone will be doing this except for the resurrected Church” - and yet that's how people tend to interpret that passage today. We think that those who survive the Tribulation will get to experience the full joys of living in the Millennial Kingdom, but the Church will be excluded. The Tribulation survivors will marry and have offspring, but the Church will be left out. But doesn't the chapter say that *God's elect* will be doing these things? Do you deny that we are God's elect?

Some people say “But the Church will be the Bride of Christ. That's why there's no marriage.” That objection sounds wise, but it's actually silly. Did you know that in the Old Testament, Israel was the wife of Jehovah? It's true:

Isaiah 54:5: “For thy Maker is thine husband; the Lord of hosts is his name; and thy Redeemer the Holy One of Israel; The God of the whole earth shall he be called.”

Jeremiah 3:20: “Surely as a wife treacherously departeth from her husband, so have ye dealt treacherously with me, O house of Israel, saith the Lord.”

This is far too big a subject to delve into here, but the point is that Israel was God's *wife* – and yet that didn't stop the Israelites from marrying one another and having children. The relationship that the Church will one day have with Christ is something that *Israel already had in the Old Testament*. Yet that obviously did *not* preclude them from marrying one another.

As you can see, the case against marriage after the Rapture is not as strong as people think. I think there's a very real possibility that the resurrected saints of God *will* marry and have children during the Millennium. After all, you have to realize that marriage is not a bad thing. God Himself created it back in Genesis when He formed Eve and gave her to Adam. I'd like to point out that when God gave Adam his bride, Adam and Eve were both *sinless immortals*. God obviously thought there was nothing wrong with two sinless immortals having children. If God considered marriage to be “very good” in the pre-sin, pre-Fall world, then why would they be a horrible evil in the Millennium – especially when *millions of other people will be getting married during that period?*

You might say “Well, there are all sorts of theological complications that come up when two incorruptible immortals have children. Besides, the whole thing just sounds awkward.” Yet, the *Bible itself* never raises any objections to the idea of resurrected saints getting married during the Millennium.

Is it possible that we think too little of God? Things that sound impossible to us are not the least bit impossible to God. I find it hard to believe there are any complications so great that even God Himself cannot work them out. After all, God loves us and can do above and beyond our wildest imagination:

Ephesians 3:20: “Now unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us,”

God's power is beyond our wildest dreams – but our dreams are pretty lousy. When we think of the future we think of famine, not feasting. We think of God taking things away and leaving us high and dry while others have all the fun. But I find it difficult to believe that life in this sin-filled Earth will be much better than life in the Millennium, or that our only chance of experiencing marriage and children is in *this* age.

Do you know how important relationships are to God? In Luke 16 Jesus gives one of His most unusual parables. At the end of this parable He makes the point that the wicked are more clever than the saints because they use their wealth to make friends. Jesus said that the saints ought to do the same thing, because the relationships they forge in this life will still be there in the next:

Luke 16:8: “And the lord commended the unjust steward, because he had done wisely: for the children of this world are in their generation wiser than the children of light.

9 And I say unto you, Make to yourselves friends of the mammon of unrighteousness; that, when ye fail, they may receive you into everlasting habitations.”

The closest relationship you can have with another person is marriage. Not only does marriage involve a great deal of emotional intimacy, but it is also the only place where physical intimacy is allowed. On top of that, it is the only time when God takes two people and turns them into one:

Matthew 19:4: “And he answered and said unto them, Have ye not read, that he which made them at the beginning made them male and female,
5 And said, For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: and they twain shall be one flesh?
6 Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder.”

God is the one who made them male and female, and God is the one who takes them and makes them one flesh. This “one flesh” is very important to God. The only time it ever happens is within marriage. He absolutely hates divorce, because it separates what God has joined together:

Malachi 2:16: “For the Lord, the God of Israel, saith that he hateth putting away: for one covereth violence with his garment, saith the Lord of hosts: therefore take heed to your spirit, that ye deal not treacherously.”

In case it isn't clear from this verse, Malachi 2 is talking about the subject of divorce. God says that He *hates* it. Jesus Himself said that what God has joined together, let not man put asunder (Matthew 19:6). In marriage God takes two people and joins them into one. What He wants is for them to *stay* one.

I realize that death does end marriage; I'm not arguing that it doesn't. But does it seem likely to you that the only time people will *ever* be allowed to experience the closest possible relationship is in *this* age? Does it really seem likely that once we become resurrected immortals, perfect and incorruptible and *finally* able to be perfect husbands and wives, that marriage will be off the table *forever*? That during all the endless ages of eternity we will never have that sort of relationship with anyone ever again?

That brings up some questions. What about all those who *do* get married during the Millennium? There will be lots of non-resurrected people who will survive until Judgment Day itself. Death may end marriage, but *they won't die*. Will God just say “Enough!” and wipe out all of the marriages that exist at that time? Will the God who hates divorce gather people together on that last day and divorce billions of people? Will He tell those couples (some of whom will undoubtedly have small children at the time) “That's it; you're divorced now. Time for you to split up and go your separate ways. You can alternate the children on weekends.” Once again, even if the resurrected immortals can't marry during the Millennium, *the Tribulation survivors will*. What of those who are still alive at the end? Will God just break up their families and force everyone to separate? Or is it possible that just as God replaced the Mosaic Covenant with the Covenant of Grace, God will replace the marriage covenant with something better?

Stop and think for a moment. God created *two* genders, not one. In the Bible He was very specific that the two genders were not to confuse themselves with each other; they were even forbidden from wearing clothing that pertained to the other gender. God did *not* create a sexless society. Each gender was given their own unique roles and abilities (for example, only women could have children). Does it really seem likely to you that the only time *in all of eternity* that people will be able to marry and have children will be on this sin-cursed planet that is filled with death and pain, and that those things will be forbidden for all the sinless ages to come? Remember, *none* of those things were created after the Fall; they all existed before then.

Did God not say that His kingdom would continue to grow forever?

Isaiah 9:6: “For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace.

7 Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgment and with justice from henceforth even for ever. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform this.”

Yes, that's exactly what it says. So tell me: *how it is going to grow if there are never any new people?* Doesn't the very word “growth” imply that you continually *add new things*? I admit it's possible that God could enlarge His kingdom by creating new races that can reproduce. But isn't it also possible that *we* will be doing the reproducing?

The Bible tells us that the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable (Romans 11:29). In the parables Christ told concerning those who were given talents to use for His kingdom, the people who used them wisely were always given *more than they had before*. Christ didn't take away what they had; instead He *added to it* and gave them greater responsibilities.

In the Old Testament Israel celebrated something called the Passover. In that feast they looked forward to the coming of the Lamb of God, who would die for their sins. This event was celebrated once a year. When Christ actually came, He put an end to the Passover and replaced it with something else. Now the Church celebrates communion, which looks back upon the sacrifice of the Lamb. Communion, though, isn't celebrated once a year; instead it is celebrated whenever the Church wants. It's true that Passover was ended, but it was replaced by something else that served a similar purpose.

Based on Christ's answer to the Sadducees, it seems certain that after Judgment Day God will put an end to marriage. Nearly everyone believes that this is simply the end, but I'm not so sure about that. I think there's a chance that God will replace marriage with another bond that is *not* “until death do you part”, for there will be no death in that world. I think the marriage covenant will be replaced with something better.

Yes, Christ did say in Matthew 22:30 that we will be as the angels, and angels do not marry. But in Luke's version of the story Jesus explained what He meant by “as the angels of God in Heaven”:

Luke 20:36: “Neither can they die any more: for they are equal unto the angels; and are the children of God, being the children of the resurrection.”

In other words, “as the angels of God” means that we will be immortal. Taking it to mean “we will be eternal bachelors, living alone” may be going much too far.

When Christ fulfilled the Mosaic Law and put an end to it God replaced it with the Covenant of Grace, which was superior to it. Perhaps one day marriage will end (although it will certainly exist in the Millennium). But I think there is more to the story. I will be quite surprised if there isn't something similar – but vastly better – in the Eternal State. After all, *God* is the one who said that it is not good for man to be alone (Genesis 2:18), and He said that *before* the Fall, not after it.

There is one last point I'd like to make before I close. I realize that the apostle Paul told the Corinthians that it was better to be single than to be married. Not only would marriage make life harder (by adding all sorts of problems and trials that you would otherwise not have), but it would also make it more difficult to serve the Lord in this world:

1 Corinthians 7:28: “But and if thou marry, thou hast not sinned; and if a virgin

marry, she hath not sinned. Nevertheless such shall have trouble in the flesh: but I spare you. . .

32 But I would have you without carefulness. He that is unmarried careth for the things that belong to the Lord, how he may please the Lord:

33 But he that is married careth for the things that are of the world, how he may please his wife.”

As we can see, in this sin-filled world it is better to remain single, if at all possible. However, Paul admits that not everyone is able to remain single without struggling with lust and other temptations. It is better for some people to marry, even though it does add challenges and distractions.

Some might say that for this reason alone it doesn't make sense for resurrected people to get married. After all, at that point we'll be perfect in every way. Since we will be incorruptible, temptations will forever be a thing of the past. If that's the case then why marry at all? Why not just stay single and serve the Lord in that capacity?

That makes sense, except for one thing: the next life isn't going to be like this one. The rules and problems that apply now won't apply then. In this life we struggle and work, but in the next life we will rest. Take a look:

Hebrews 4:9: “There remaineth therefore a rest to the people of God.

10 For he that is entered into his rest, he also hath ceased from his own works, as God did from his.

11 Let us labour therefore to enter into that rest, lest any man fall after the same example of unbelief.”

We clearly aren't at rest now; if we were resting then we wouldn't be told work hard so we can enter into that rest! The meaning is clear: in this life we labor and struggle and work and toil, but in the next life we will rest. We will cease from our works.

Does this mean that we're going to spend all of eternity doing nothing? Of course not. Revelation 22:3 says that we will continue to serve God through all the endless ages of eternity, and Revelation 22:5 says we will reign with Him forever. But it won't be like things are now. Toiling with the sweat of our brow was part of the curse from the Fall – and God is going to put an end to that curse.

We are only given glimpses of what the future will be like. I think those glimpses are worth pondering, because God clearly wants our heart to be on Heaven and not on Earth. If it's true that marriage (in some form, at least) will exist in the Millennium and perhaps even beyond that, then it makes the problems of this life easier to deal with. If you can always have it later then why not give it up now to better serve Christ? It's not like you're missing out forever. Knowing that we are going to a better world with better promises makes life in this world much easier to take. Who cares about losing earthly things if we're going to receive eternal things in exchange?

There are quite a few people who are depressed at the thought that there is no marriage after the Resurrection. They think that God is going to take away something meaningful and replace it with loneliness. I have to ask, though: has God *ever* done that before? After all, we're talking about the God who created billions of galaxies in order to give light to the Earth at night (which is one of the most extravagant things I've ever heard of). Do we really believe that life in eternity will be more lonely and the relationships more distant than what we have today?

Perhaps there won't be marriage in the Eternal State. Even if that's the case, I firmly believe it's only because God is going to create something better to put in its place. God isn't going to take our cup

away so He can break it and then set the pieces on fire; if He removes it at all it's so that He can fill it to the point where it overflows and abounds. We will have *more* in eternity, not less – just wait and see. Even the best moments of this life cannot begin to compare with what is coming.

MEPHIBOSHETH

Today's lesson is about the life of Mephibosheth (the son of Jonathan and the grandson of King Saul). However, in order to understand why he is such a tragic character we need to step back and take a look at Israel's history. When God brought Israel to Mount Sinai and gave them His Law, God commanded Israel to be a theocracy. This meant that Israel did not have a king or governing body; instead God Himself reigned over the nation.

However, the day came when Israel got tired of this arrangement. They no longer wanted to be led by the judges that God had raised up. Instead of being ruled over by a God that they couldn't see, they wanted a human king to reign over them and lead them into battle:

1 Samuel 8:4: "Then all the elders of Israel gathered themselves together, and came to Samuel unto Ramah,
5 And said unto him, Behold, thou art old, and thy sons walk not in thy ways: now make us a king to judge us like all the nations.
6 But the thing displeased Samuel, when they said, Give us a king to judge us. And Samuel prayed unto the Lord.
7 And the Lord said unto Samuel, Harken unto the voice of the people in all that they say unto thee: for they have not rejected thee, but they have rejected me, that I should not reign over them."

God was not pleased with Israel's request for a king. He commanded Samuel to warn them that a king would do terrible things and would abuse them. Israel, though, didn't care. They had rejected God as their ruler and were determined to have a human king no matter what the cost.

So God sent the prophet Samuel to appoint Saul as their king. Saul was everything that Israel wanted – which is to say, he was tall and handsome:

1 Samuel 9:2: "And he had a son, whose name was Saul, a choice young man, and a goodly: and there was not among the children of Israel a goodlier person than he: from his shoulders and upward he was higher than any of the people."

Saul was literally the most handsome man in the entire country. He was exactly the kind of man that Israel was looking for. After all, Israel wasn't concerned about honoring God or having godly leadership. They just wanted a big, manly king who could lead their armies.

However, Saul proved to be a terrible king. He had no heart to follow God, and his sins eventually cost him his kingdom. His first great sin was committed when he was at Gilgal. The king was supposed to wait for Samuel to offer the burnt offering (which symbolized dedication to God), but when Samuel didn't arrive on time the king offered it himself. This was a grave violation, because only the priests were allowed to make offerings – and Saul was not a priest. After the king did this Samuel confronted him and told him that because of this sin, his kingdom would not be passed on to his children:

1 Samuel 13:13: "And Samuel said to Saul, Thou hast done foolishly: thou hast not kept the commandment of the Lord thy God, which he commanded thee: for now

would the Lord have established thy kingdom upon Israel for ever.

14 But now thy kingdom shall not continue: the Lord hath sought him a man after his own heart, and the Lord hath commanded him to be captain over his people, because thou hast not kept that which the Lord commanded thee.”

This is the first point where Mephibosheth's life started to go wrong. Mephibosheth hadn't even been born yet, but his grandfather had already committed a sin against God that was so serious it cost him his kingdom. If Saul had been obedient then God would have “established thy kingdom upon Israel forever”. Given that Saul's son Jonathan was a wise man who loved God, and given that Mephibosheth was also a faithful man, it's entirely possible that Mephibosheth could have been chosen to lead Israel. But thanks to Saul's disobedience that opportunity was lost. Mephibosheth would never be king.

But things were going to get worse. One day God commanded Saul to attack Amalek and utterly destroy them. God made it very clear that He wanted Amalek to be completely annihilated – right down to their animals:

I Samuel 15:2: “Thus saith the Lord of hosts, I remember that which Amalek did to Israel, how he laid wait for him in the way, when he came up from Egypt.

3 Now go and smite Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have, and spare them not; but slay both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass.”

Saul did indeed wage war against Amalek, but when he defeated them he did not utterly destroy them. The king saved the best of the loot for himself, and even spared the life of Amalek's king:

I Samuel 15:8: “And he took Agag the king of the Amalekites alive, and utterly destroyed all the people with the edge of the sword.

9 But Saul and the people spared Agag, and the best of the sheep, and of the oxen, and of the fatlings, and the lambs, and all that was good, and would not utterly destroy them: but every thing that was vile and refuse, that they destroyed utterly.”

Needless to say, God was not pleased. The Lord sent Samuel to tell the king that because of this grievous sin, God had rejected him as king over Israel:

I Samuel 15:22: “And Samuel said, Hath the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams.

23 For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry. Because thou hast rejected the word of the Lord, he hath also rejected thee from being king.”

Saul's disobedience not only cost his heirs the throne, but it cost him the throne as well. God then sent Samuel to anoint David as king over Israel – but Saul had no intention of stepping aside and following God's will. Even though God had rejected Saul as king, Saul was still determined to hold on to the throne. He spent years trying to hunt down David (who was Israel's rightful king) and assassinate him. In the end Saul's sins caught up with him:

1 Samuel 31:1: “Now the Philistines fought against Israel: and the men of Israel fled from before the Philistines, and fell down slain in mount Gilboa.

2 And the Philistines followed hard upon Saul and upon his sons; and the Philistines slew Jonathan, and Abinadab, and Melchishua, Saul's sons.

3 And the battle went sore against Saul, and the archers hit him; and he was sore wounded of the archers.

4 Then said Saul unto his armourbearer, Draw thy sword, and thrust me through therewith; lest these uncircumcised come and thrust me through, and abuse me. But his armourbearer would not; for he was sore afraid. Therefore Saul took a sword, and fell upon it.

5 And when his armourbearer saw that Saul was dead, he fell likewise upon his sword, and died with him.

6 So Saul died, and his three sons, and his armourbearer, and all his men, that same day together.”

Saul wasn't the only one who died that day; three of his sons died as well. Now, Jonathan was not a wicked person; he feared God and served Him. Yet, because of the terrible sins of Saul, he died in battle fighting the Philistines. Saul's sins cost Jonathan his life.

Things were not going well for Mephibosheth. Saul's sins not only cost Mephibosheth his kingdom, but they also cost him his father. The terrible sins of Saul had far-reaching consequences that touched the lives of many other people. Sin affects more than just the sinner; its effects ripple out and have the power to devastate many lives. Things were going from bad to worse and there wasn't anything Mephibosheth could do about it.

Once Saul was dead, one might expect David to finally start to reign over Israel. After all, God had anointed him as Israel's rightful king, and the old king was gone. However, Abner took Saul's son Ishbosheth and made him king over Israel – leaving David in control of just Judah:

2 Samuel 2:8: “But Abner the son of Ner, captain of Saul's host, took Ishbosheth the son of Saul, and brought him over to Mahanaim;

9 And made him king over Gilead, and over the Ashurites, and over Jezreel, and over Ephraim, and over Benjamin, and over all Israel.

10 Ishbosheth Saul's son was forty years old when he began to reign over Israel, and reigned two years. But the house of Judah followed David.”

In fact, Saul's entire house was determined to resist David. The Bible tells us that they fought each other for a long time:

2 Samuel 3:1: “Now there was long war between the house of Saul and the house of David: but David waxed stronger and stronger, and the house of Saul waxed weaker and weaker.”

Eventually David won and became the undisputed king of both Israel and David. Ishbosheth was murdered (not by David, but by some assassins that David had nothing to do with). David was finally anointed king over all Israel.

Meanwhile, Mephibosheth was having even more problems. Thanks to the haste and

carelessness of his nurse, he was crippled for life:

2 Samuel 4:4: “And Jonathan, Saul's son, had a son that was lame of his feet. He was five years old when the tidings came of Saul and Jonathan out of Jezreel, and his nurse took him up, and fled: and it came to pass, as she made haste to flee, that he fell, and became lame. And his name was Mephibosheth.”

The reason this happened, once again, is because of Saul. In I Samuel 29:1 we are told that Saul was encamped at Jezreel. That is where he fought the Philistines, and that is where he and Jonathan were killed. When the news came out that Saul and Jonathan were dead, Mephibosheth's nurse grabbed him and ran – but in her haste she dropped the child and he was crippled.

Why was he dropped? Because Saul and Jonathan had been killed. Why had they been killed? Because of Saul's disobedience. Why had Saul been made king in the first place? Because Israel had abandoned God and wanted a king.

Thanks to Saul, Mephibosheth lost his kingdom, his father, and his ability to walk. None of these things were his fault! His life had been utterly devastated because of the sins of his *grandfather*.

Nor did Mephibosheth have any particular reason to be hopeful for the future. After all, the house of Saul had spent years trying to kill David and seize his throne. Mephibosheth must have believed that it was just a matter of time before David tracked him down and killed him as well. That would have been the logical thing for David to do – and if you read through the Old Testament, that is what kings usually did. Once a king rose to power he usually assassinated all of his rivals in order to make his throne more secure. The last thing a king wanted was to have a potential rival around who might try to seize the throne! Saul's sons had certainly tried that in the past.

But that's not what David did. You see, Mephibosheth was saved by the goodness of his father. Although Saul had been evil and tried to kill David, Jonathan was different. He loved David and protected him:

1 Samuel 18:1: “And it came to pass, when he had made an end of speaking unto Saul, that the soul of Jonathan was knit with the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul.”

He even spoke up for David when his father attacked him:

1 Samuel 19:4: “And Jonathan spake good of David unto Saul his father, and said unto him, Let not the king sin against his servant, against David; because he hath not sinned against thee, and because his works have been to thee-ward very good:
5 For he did put his life in his hand, and slew the Philistine, and the Lord wrought a great salvation for all Israel: thou sawest it, and didst rejoice: wherefore then wilt thou sin against innocent blood, to slay David without a cause?”

Jonathan loved David and worked hard to protect him, and David was grateful. When David became king he looked for a way to repay Jonathan's kindness:

2 Samuel 9:1: “And David said, Is there yet any that is left of the house of Saul, that I may shew him kindness for Jonathan's sake?
2 And there was of the house of Saul a servant whose name was Ziba. And when

they had called him unto David, the king said unto him, Art thou Ziba? And he said, Thy servant is he.

3 And the king said, Is there not yet any of the house of Saul, that I may shew the kindness of God unto him? And Ziba said unto the king, Jonathan hath yet a son, which is lame on his feet.

4 And the king said unto him, Where is he? And Ziba said unto the king, Behold, he is in the house of Machir, the son of Ammiel, in Lodebar.”

David sent for Mephibosheth, who was brought to the king. It's very likely that Mephibosheth was not happy about having his hiding place revealed, and he probably thought that his unlucky life was about to come to an end. Saul's house had done everything they could to kill David, and Mephibosheth had no reason to believe that this encounter was going to go well for him. All he could do is throw himself at the king's mercy and hope for the best, and that is what he did:

2 Samuel 9:5: “Then king David sent, and fetched him out of the house of Machir, the son of Ammiel, from Lodebar.

6 Now when Mephibosheth, the son of Jonathan, the son of Saul, was come unto David, he fell on his face, and did reverence. And David said, Mephibosheth. And he answered, Behold thy servant!”

At this point something completely unexpected happened: David had mercy upon Mephibosheth. Now, there was nothing forcing David to do this. The house of Saul was David's enemy, and they would have killed David if they could. David owed Mephibosheth nothing, but he decided to show Mephibosheth great kindness:

2 Samuel 9:7: “And David said unto him, Fear not: for I will surely shew thee kindness for Jonathan thy father's sake, and will restore thee all the land of Saul thy father; and thou shalt eat bread at my table continually.

8 And he bowed himself, and said, What is thy servant, that thou shouldest look upon such a dead dog as I am?”

David wasn't obligated to do any of this. He could have kept Saul's lands for himself, but instead he gave Mephibosheth the land (and therefore the wealth) of Saul. Mephibosheth was even given the tremendous honor of dining with the king himself. Since Mephibosheth was lame, David commanded Saul's servant Ziba to take care of Mephibosheth's new property:

2 Samuel 9:9: “Then the king called to Ziba, Saul's servant, and said unto him, I have given unto thy master's son all that pertained to Saul and to all his house.

10 Thou therefore, and thy sons, and thy servants, shall till the land for him, and thou shalt bring in the fruits, that thy master's son may have food to eat: but Mephibosheth thy master's son shall eat bread alway at my table. Now Ziba had fifteen sons and twenty servants.

11 Then said Ziba unto the king, According to all that my lord the king hath commanded his servant, so shall thy servant do. As for Mephibosheth, said the king, he shall eat at my table, as one of the king's sons.

12 And Mephibosheth had a young son, whose name was Micha. And all that dwelt

in the house of Ziba were servants unto Mephibosheth.

13 So Mephibosheth dwelt in Jerusalem: for he did eat continually at the king's table; and was lame on both his feet.”

Mephibosheth's life had been radically changed, all thanks to the amazing grace of David.

If the story was ended here it would be pretty inspirational. Mephibosheth had a terrible life and suffered the consequences of the sins of other people. Circumstances beyond his control put him in a terrible place – a place where there was no hope and no way out. There was simply nothing Mephibosheth could have done to fix things. In fact, he had no reason to suspect that anything was in his future except for death at the hands of King David.

Then King David found him, had mercy on him, and gave him wealth and honor. Instead of living in hiding, Mephibosheth lived in Jerusalem and dined with the king. Instead of a life of dishonor, he was suddenly given both wealth and honor. His circumstances were changed in a way he never could have imagined.

Sadly, the story *doesn't* end here. There is more, and it's not pretty. Once again Mephibosheth is going to suffer the consequences of the sins of other people.

One day David committed adultery with Bathsheba and then arranged for her husband, Uriah the Hittite, to be killed. God was not pleased with what David had done and sent Nathan the prophet to confront David. Nathan told David that there would be consequences for his sin. Among other things, God was going to raise up adversaries against David:

2 Samuel 12:10: “Now therefore the sword shall never depart from thine house; because thou hast despised me, and hast taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be thy wife.”

True to His word, the Lord stirred up trouble against David. Absalom – David's own son – launched a rebellion against him. When this rebellion started David fled Jerusalem for his life. As he was fleeing, Ziba (Mephibosheth's servant) showed up:

2 Samuel 16:1: “And when David was a little past the top of the hill, behold, Ziba the servant of Mephibosheth met him, with a couple of asses saddled, and upon them two hundred loaves of bread, and an hundred bunches of raisins, and an hundred of summer fruits, and a bottle of wine.

2 And the king said unto Ziba, What meanest thou by these? And Ziba said, The asses be for the king's household to ride on; and the bread and summer fruit for the young men to eat; and the wine, that such as be faint in the wilderness may drink.

3 And the king said, And where is thy master's son? And Ziba said unto the king, Behold, he abideth at Jerusalem: for he said, To day shall the house of Israel restore me the kingdom of my father.”

As it turns out, Ziba was lying. He told a very plausible lie in order to make Mephibosheth look bad – and to make himself look good. David fell for the lie and gave Ziba everything that belonged to Mephibosheth:

2 Samuel 16:4: “Then said the king to Ziba, Behold, thine are all that pertained unto Mephibosheth. And Ziba said, I humbly beseech thee that I may find grace in

thy sight, my lord, O king.”

Thanks to a very clever lie, Ziba stole everything that Mephibosheth owned. Ziba, the man that *David* had appointed over Mephibosheth's property, had proven to be a liar and a thief! When Absalom's rebellion was put down and David returned to Jerusalem, Mephibosheth tried to clear up the record. He told David that Ziba had deceived him:

2 Samuel 19:24: “And Mephibosheth the son of Saul came down to meet the king, and had neither dressed his feet, nor trimmed his beard, nor washed his clothes, from the day the king departed until the day he came again in peace.

25 And it came to pass, when he was come to Jerusalem to meet the king, that the king said unto him, Wherefore wentest not thou with me, Mephibosheth?

26 And he answered, My lord, O king, my servant deceived me: for thy servant said, I will saddle me an ass, that I may ride thereon, and go to the king; because thy servant is lame.

27 And he hath slandered thy servant unto my lord the king;”

Mephibosheth was genuinely upset over what happened to king David. He was not a part of the rebellion and spent the entire time mourning. Ziba deceived Mephibosheth and lied in order to steal his property.

At this point you would expect Mephibosheth to ask the king to do something about Ziba, but he doesn't do that. Instead he humbly threw himself upon the king's mercy:

2 Samuel 19:27: “...but my lord the king is as an angel of God: do therefore what is good in thine eyes.

28 For all of my father's house were but dead men before my lord the king: yet didst thou set thy servant among them that did eat at thine own table. What right therefore have I yet to cry any more unto the king?”

Mephibosheth doesn't make a scene or even ask for anything in particular. He sees himself as a dead man that had been brought back to life again. All he does is correct the record and ask David for mercy.

It would be nice if we could end this story by saying that David listened to Mephibosheth, but that's not what happened. Instead the king told him to shut up and that Ziba was going to keep half the property:

2 Samuel 19:29: “And the king said unto him, Why speakest thou any more of thy matters? I have said, Thou and Ziba divide the land.

30 And Mephibosheth said unto the king, Yea, let him take all, forasmuch as my lord the king is come again in peace unto his own house.”

In the end King David *doesn't* make it right. Ziba's lie wins, and Mephibosheth is once again harmed by circumstances out of his control. The sins of others have damaged his life.

Mephibosheth is mentioned one more time in the Bible. In 2 Samuel 21 we are told that Israel was hit with a three-year famine. When David inquired of God about it, he was told that the famine was punishment for Saul's murder of the Gibeonites. David then asked the surviving Gibeonites what he

could do to appease their wrath. They said that since Saul had murdered them, seven of his descendents should die:

2 Samuel 21:3: “Wherefore David said unto the Gibeonites, What shall I do for you? and wherewith shall I make the atonement, that ye may bless the inheritance of the Lord?”

4 And the Gibeonites said unto him, We will have no silver nor gold of Saul, nor of his house; neither for us shalt thou kill any man in Israel. And he said, What ye shall say, that will I do for you.

5 And they answered the king, The man that consumed us, and that devised against us that we should be destroyed from remaining in any of the coasts of Israel,

6 Let seven men of his sons be delivered unto us, and we will hang them up unto the Lord in Gibeah of Saul, whom the Lord did choose. And the king said, I will give them.

7 But the king spared Mephibosheth, the son of Jonathan the son of Saul, because of the Lord's oath that was between them, between David and Jonathan the son of Saul.”

When David turned over seven of Saul's sons to the Gibeonites to be executed, he spared Mephibosheth because of the oath that was between David and Jonathan. Jonathan's faithfulness saved Mephibosheth's life.

All in all, Mephibosheth is probably one of the most depressing characters in the Bible. Even though he was by all accounts a good and faithful man, he suffered tremendously due to the sins of other people. Mephibosheth reaped the consequences of the failure of others, and his life was full of pain that was caused *entirely* by other people. All of the terrible circumstances of his life were out of his control. There was nothing he could have done to make his life turn out any better.

Mephibosheth should be a warning to all those who believe that good things happen to good people and bad things happen to bad people. The Bible records no wickedness on the part of Mephibosheth, but he still had a terrible life. Unlike the case of Job, there is no record that any of these things happened as some sort of spiritual test – yet Mephibosheth still had a painful life. The one good thing that happened to him – the kindness of David – was just as much out of his control as all the bad things that happened to him. Likewise, the villain Ziba never suffered for his terrible betrayal. His lie about Mephibosheth enabled him to steal a lot of property, *and he got to keep it*. Ziba stole a fortune and lived to brag about it. No hero in shining armor rode in to save the day. The bad guy got what he wanted, the king refused to bring the wicked to justice, and Mephibosheth lost.

In our lives we often think that since we are Christians, God should take care of us and prevent disasters from happening. Since we are saved we shouldn't have to suffer. Oh, sure, when it comes to persecution for the faith then that's one thing, but when it comes to life's other problems we often feel that we should be immune. Why should financial disasters happen to *me*? Why should *I* be the one who gets sick or gets laid off? Why should I have to suffer the unfair setbacks of life? I didn't even do anything! How is that fair?

Likewise, we think that the wicked *should* be suffering. Why aren't *they* experiencing disasters? Why are they leading long and happy lives when they are doing such horrifying things? Why are they living to a ripe old age in wealth and comfort? Life just doesn't seem fair!

The truth is that *life isn't fair*. God never promised that good things would happen to good people or that bad things would happen to bad people. He never said that the wicked would be cursed

with bad luck while the righteous would have good luck. What He *did* say is that He would be with us through all of our trials and that He would never leave us or forsake us. He said that all things would work together for good for those who love God, and that we should cast all our cares upon Him for He cares for us.

He also said that this life is not all there is. Those who have repented of their sins and believed in Jesus – no matter how painful their life on Earth may have been – will go on to inherit everlasting life and joy. They will live in the presence of God in a place where there is no crying or suffering or pain. Their lives will be eternally blessed and their pain will be eternally behind them.

However, those who have not repented and believed – no matter how happy their lives on Earth may have been – will go on to face the endless wrath of God. When they are judged they will be cast into the Lake of Fire, where they will be tormented day and night forever and ever. They will never again experience happiness or joy or peace. Instead they will be faced with endless, unbearable torment.

So take heart. The trials and pains of this life are not forever – and remember, Christ's life on Earth wasn't exactly trouble-free either. This world may bring us a great deal of pain, but it won't last forever. Better days are coming for those who believe in Christ, and when they arrive they will last *forever*.

PAUL'S APOSTLESHIP

In modern times there are many people who question the apostleship of Paul. They claim that he wasn't really an apostle, or that God didn't really speak through him, or that Paul was wrong on many issues. Paul's credibility is under a great deal of attack – but what many people do not know is that this is nothing new. Even in Paul's day many people questioned his credentials and rejected his message.

What I'd like to do is take some time to examine this issue. Was Paul really an apostle? What are his credentials? Is there any way we can tell if God was actually speaking through him? Let's take a look and see what we can find out.

First of all, Paul did claim to be an apostle. In fact, he went so far as to say that his apostleship came from Jesus Christ Himself:

Galatians 1:1: “Paul, an apostle, (not of men, neither by man, but by Jesus Christ, and God the Father, who raised him from the dead;)”

Of course, anyone can claim to be an apostle; just claiming something doesn't make it true. Is there any way we can tell if God really was with Paul? Did God validate Paul's ministry?

Well, let's take a look. First of all, Paul cast out demons:

Acts 16:16: “And it came to pass, as we went to prayer, a certain damsel possessed with a spirit of divination met us, which brought her masters much gain by soothsaying:

17 The same followed Paul and us, and cried, saying, These men are the servants of the most high God, which shew unto us the way of salvation.

18 And this did she many days. But Paul, being grieved, turned and said to the spirit, I command thee in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her. And he came out the same hour.”

It is impossible to cast out demons without the power of God. If God was not with Paul then he could never have done this. As if that were not enough, Paul also had the power to lay his hands on people and give them a special manifestation of the Holy Ghost:

Acts 19:6: “And when Paul had laid his hands upon them, the Holy Ghost came on them; and they spake with tongues, and prophesied.”

That's pretty impressive! Once Paul laid hands on these people, they were able to speak in tongues and even prophesy. Paul could never have done that if God was not with him.

Paul also healed the sick:

Acts 19:11: “And God wrought special miracles by the hands of Paul:

12 So that from his body were brought unto the sick handkerchiefs or aprons, and the diseases departed from them, and the evil spirits went out of them.”

His gift of healing was so profound that people actually took handkerchiefs from Paul and

brought them to those who were sick, and that was enough to heal them. God certainly did perform “special miracles by the hands of Paul”!

But that's not all. Not only did Paul cast out demons and heal the sick, but he also *raised the dead*:

Acts 20:9: “And there sat in a window a certain young man named Eutychus, being fallen into a deep sleep: and as Paul was long preaching, he sunk down with sleep, and fell down from the third loft, and was taken up dead.

10 And Paul went down, and fell on him, and embracing him said, Trouble not yourselves; for his life is in him.

11 When he therefore was come up again, and had broken bread, and eaten, and talked a long while, even till break of day, so he departed.

12 And they brought the young man alive, and were not a little comforted.”

As you can see, God used Paul to cast out demons, give gifts of the Holy Spirit, heal the sick, and raise the dead. *None* of those things would have been possible if God had not been with Paul. In fact, those are very rare gifts! There are very few people who have ever raised the dead, and being able to heal someone by giving them your handkerchief is pretty much unheard-of. God was with Paul in truly extraordinary ways.

But there's more. The way that God initially called Paul to serve Him is also unique:

Acts 9:3: “And as he journeyed, he came near Damascus: and suddenly there shined round about him a light from heaven:

4 And he fell to the earth, and heard a voice saying unto him, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?

5 And he said, Who art thou, Lord? And the Lord said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest: it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks.

6 And he trembling and astonished said, Lord, what wilt thou have me to do? And the Lord said unto him, Arise, and go into the city, and it shall be told thee what thou must do.

7 And the men which journeyed with him stood speechless, hearing a voice, but seeing no man.”

Jesus *personally* called Paul to serve Him in a truly remarkable encounter. Paul was hand-picked by Jesus in the presence of witnesses. In other words, *God* called Paul to serve Him – and Paul did exactly that, even though the personal cost was very high. Paul did not get rich from serving God; instead he suffered tremendously:

2 Corinthians 11:24: “Of the Jews five times received I forty stripes save one.

25 Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day I have been in the deep;

26 In journeyings often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils by mine own countrymen, in perils by the heathen, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren;

27 In weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness.

28 Beside those things that are without, that which cometh upon me daily, the care of all the churches.”

God was with Paul in truly extraordinary ways, and God validated Paul's ministry by the tremendous power He displayed through Paul. Stop and think for a minute: what are the credentials of those who attack and belittle Paul? How many demons have they cast out? How many sick people have they miraculously healed? How many people have they raised from the dead? Can they lay claim to even a tenth of Paul's miracles?

It is simply ludicrous to claim that God was not with Paul. There is no way that Paul could have done all the things he did if God was not with him. The problem is that people don't like the things that Paul said, so they try to get around Paul's writings by saying that he wasn't really an apostle. In doing this they aren't attacking Paul; they are actually attacking the God who spoke through Paul. The entire Bible – both Old and New Testaments – are the words of *God*, not the words of men. Those who attack them are attacking God, and God does not take that lightly. The Bible itself says that the writings of Paul carry the same weight as the rest of Scripture:

2 Peter 3:15: “And account that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation; even as our beloved brother Paul also according to the wisdom given unto him hath written unto you;

16 As also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things; in which are some things hard to be understood, which they that are unlearned and unstable wrest, as they do also the other scriptures, unto their own destruction.”

Notice how Paul's writings are included in the same category as “the other scriptures”! Also notice how Paul is referred to as their *beloved brother*. Many people today do not see Paul as beloved; instead they hate him and reject his words. Since Paul tells people things that they don't want to hear, they refuse to hear it.

Paul spent a lot of time in the New Testament defending his apostleship. The reason he did that was because so many people were rejecting what he had to say. In all this time nothing has changed: some people didn't like Paul back then, and some people still don't like him now.

When people attack the writings of Paul they are actually attacking the integrity of the Word of God. If Paul can't be trusted then why can any other passage in the Bible be trusted? If God didn't really speak through Paul (a man who *raised the dead*), then why should we believe God spoke through anyone? Either the Bible is the Word of God or it isn't; you can't have it both ways.

In Paul's letter to the Corinthians he explained what the real issue is:

1 Corinthians 14:37: “If any man think himself to be a prophet, or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things that I write unto you are the commandments of the Lord.

38 But if any man be ignorant, let him be ignorant.”

That is the heart of the matter. Paul didn't write of his own prerogative; the things that he wrote are nothing less than the commandments of the Lord – and God proved this to be true by the mighty works He accomplished through Paul. Those who reject Paul's writings are rejecting God's commandments. That rejection carries a high price:

Colossians 3:25: “But he that doeth wrong shall receive for the wrong which he hath done: and there is no respect of persons.”

Just remember: there is no respect of persons with God. When you stand before God and are judged for the way you lived your life, you will be faced with a question: did you accept and believe the Word of God, or did you accept the parts that you liked and reject the rest?

THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS

If you read each of the four accounts of the resurrection of Jesus separately then you will probably find them simple to understand. However, if you compare them with one another then things will quickly become complicated. It is actually a little tricky to reconcile every detail of all four accounts (which may come as a surprise if you have never happened to study this before). In a way this is comforting because it means we four different eyewitness accounts of what happened that day (as opposed to one account that is just repeated four times). However, it does make for an interesting challenge if you want to put everything together and get a complete picture of what happened on the day the Lord Jesus Christ rose from the dead.

What follows is my understanding of the resurrection of Jesus and His appearances after He rose from the dead (with some added commentary to explain why I have assembled the pieces in this order). If you would like to check my work, you can read the accounts for yourself in Matthew 28, Mark 16, Luke 24, and John 21.

The stone is rolled away

The first thing that happened on the resurrection morning was this:

Matthew 28: “2 And, behold, there was a great earthquake: for the angel of the Lord descended from heaven, and came and rolled back the stone from the door, and sat upon it.

3 His countenance was like lightning, and his raiment white as snow:

4 And for fear of him the keepers did shake, and became as dead men.”

Before dawn on resurrection Sunday an angel descended from Heaven and rolled away the stone. The angel did *not* raise Jesus from the dead, nor did he let Jesus out of the tomb. Instead he rolled away the stone so that everyone could see that it was already empty!

The appearance of the angel terrified the men who were guarding the tomb, and they collapsed onto the ground as if they were dead. These men fled from the tomb and went to tell the chief priests what had happened.

Interestingly, as far as we know the only people who saw the angel roll away the stone were the guards. By the time the other visitors arrived the guards were already gone and the stone had already been rolled away. (Matthew does list this first in his account, but that is to give the backstory concerning why the stone was already rolled away when the women arrived.)

The women visit the tomb

Early that Sunday morning, while it was still dark, a group of women traveled from Bethany to

the tomb of Jesus (a distance of about two miles). By the time they reached the tomb it had begun to dawn. To their surprise they discovered that stone had already been rolled away and the guards were gone:

Matthew 28: “1 In the end of the sabbath, as it began to dawn toward the first day of the week, came Mary Magdalene and the other Mary to see the sepulchre.”

John 20: “1 The first day of the week cometh Mary Magdalene early, when it was yet dark, unto the sepulchre, and seeth the stone taken away from the sepulchre.

Mark 16: “1 And when the sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome, had bought sweet spices, that they might come and anoint him.

2 And very early in the morning the first day of the week, they came unto the sepulchre at the rising of the sun.

3 And they said among themselves, Who shall roll us away the stone from the door of the sepulchre?

4 And when they looked, they saw that the stone was rolled away: for it was very great.”

Luke 24: “1 Now upon the first day of the week, very early in the morning, they came unto the sepulchre, bringing the spices which they had prepared, and certain others with them.

2 And they found the stone rolled away from the sepulchre.”

John tells us that they began their trip while it was still dark; the other gospels tell us that they arrived when it had just begun to dawn. Given that they had to walk a couple miles to reach the tomb, this makes sense. Mark gives us a list of which women made the trip: there was Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome. Luke 24:10 tells us that Joanna was there as well.

As you can see, while the women were making the journey to the tomb they wondered who would roll the stone away for them, but when they arrived the stone was already rolled away. This means they must not have actually witnessed the stone being moved, which means they weren't there to witness the angel moving it! There is also no mention of encountering any guards, which is more evidence that the stone was rolled away before they arrived. Luke is very clear that they “found the stone rolled away”.

Mary Magdalane runs to tell Peter

At this point (and this is very important!) the party splits into two groups. When Mary Magdalane sees that the stone has been rolled away she immediately jumps to the conclusion that someone has stolen the body of Christ. She immediately leaves the other women behind and runs to where Peter and John are staying and tells them what happened:

John 20: “2 Then she runneth, and cometh to Simon Peter, and to the other disciple,

whom Jesus loved, and saith unto them, They have taken away the Lord out of the sepulchre, and we know not where they have laid him.”

While Mary Magdalene is making the trip to find Peter and John and bring them the news, the other women are still at the tomb – and they encounter some visitors.

The angels bring news

Back at the tomb, an angel appears and tells the remaining women that Jesus has risen from the dead. The women are told to go to the disciples and tell them what happened:

Matthew 28: “5 And the angel answered and said unto the women, Fear not ye: for I know that ye seek Jesus, which was crucified.

6 He is not here: for he is risen, as he said. Come, see the place where the Lord lay.

7 And go quickly, and tell his disciples that he is risen from the dead; and, behold, he goeth before you into Galilee; there shall ye see him: lo, I have told you.”

After the angel tells the women the good news they then enter into the tomb (which is exactly what the angel commanded them to do - “Come, see the place where the Lord lay”). Inside they find two men who give them the same news:

Mark 16: “5 And entering into the sepulchre, they saw a young man sitting on the right side, clothed in a long white garment; and they were affrighted.

6 And he saith unto them, Be not affrighted: Ye seek Jesus of Nazareth, which was crucified: he is risen; he is not here: behold the place where they laid him.

7 But go your way, tell his disciples and Peter that he goeth before you into Galilee: there shall ye see him, as he said unto you.”

Luke 24: “3 And they entered in, and found not the body of the Lord Jesus.

4 And it came to pass, as they were much perplexed thereabout, behold, two men stood by them in shining garments:

5 And as they were afraid, and bowed down their faces to the earth, they said unto them, Why seek ye the living among the dead?

6 He is not here, but is risen: remember how he spake unto you when he was yet in Galilee,

7 Saying, The Son of man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, and be crucified, and the third day rise again.”

Mark and Luke are talking about the same event. There were two men present, but only one of them actually spoke and that is what Mark records. (It seems that the two men were originally standing, but one of them sat down at some point.) Given that the Bible tells us these two beings are *men* and not angels, it is possible that they are the same two people who appeared with Jesus on the mount of Transfiguration (Moses and Elijah). However, they are not identified by name so we cannot say for sure.

Some of the women received this news with joy, and some of them were terrified. The ones who were terrified fled from the tomb and didn't tell anyone:

Mark 16:8: “And they went out quickly, and fled from the sepulchre; for they trembled and were amazed: neither said they any thing to any man; for they were afraid.”

However, not all of the women were frightened. Some of them went and told the disciples, but we will get to that in a minute.

Mary Magdalene, Peter, and John

While the other women are talking to an angel at the tomb, Mary Magdalene has brought the news to Peter and John. The women at the tomb then leave the area and are gone by the time Peter and John arrive to see what is going on. The two disciples arrive to find an empty tomb with no women and no angels present:

John 20: “3 Peter therefore went forth, and that other disciple, and came to the sepulchre.

4 So they ran both together: and the other disciple did outrun Peter, and came first to the sepulchre.

5 And he stooping down, and looking in, saw the linen clothes lying; yet went he not in.

6 Then cometh Simon Peter following him, and went into the sepulchre, and seeth the linen clothes lie,

7 And the napkin, that was about his head, not lying with the linen clothes, but wrapped together in a place by itself.

8 Then went in also that other disciple, which came first to the sepulchre, and he saw, and believed.

9 For as yet they knew not the scripture, that he must rise again from the dead.

10 Then the disciples went away again unto their own home.”

Luke 24: “12 Then arose Peter, and ran unto the sepulchre; and stooping down, he beheld the linen clothes laid by themselves, and departed, wondering in himself at that which was come to pass.”

At this point no one has seen Jesus risen from the dead. Mary Magdalene was not there when the angels told the other women the news of what happened, so she still doesn't know what is going on. All Mary knew was that the body was gone. Peter has no idea what happened. John did believe, but *no one went to tell the other disciples what they saw*. Instead Peter and John returned home and Mary Magdalene remained behind at the tomb. That was when she looked inside and saw something that the two disciples did not see. After Peter and John left it seems that two angels appeared in the tomb:

John 20: “11 But Mary stood without at the sepulchre weeping: and as she wept,

she stooped down, and looked into the sepulchre,

12 And seeth two angels in white sitting, the one at the head, and the other at the feet, where the body of Jesus had lain.

13 And they say unto her, Woman, why weepest thou? She saith unto them, Because they have taken away my Lord, and I know not where they have laid him.”

These angels do not tell Mary what is going on. Instead she turns around and becomes the first person to see the resurrected Jesus:

John 20: “14 And when she had thus said, she turned herself back, and saw Jesus standing, and knew not that it was Jesus.

15 Jesus saith unto her, Woman, why weepest thou? whom seekest thou? She, supposing him to be the gardener, saith unto him, Sir, if thou have borne him hence, tell me where thou hast laid him, and I will take him away.

16 Jesus saith unto her, Mary. She turned herself, and saith unto him, Rabboni; which is to say, Master.

17 Jesus saith unto her, Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to my Father: but go to my brethren, and say unto them, I ascend unto my Father, and your Father; and to my God, and your God.

18 Mary Magdalene came and told the disciples that she had seen the Lord, and that he had spoken these things unto her.”

Mary was still looking for the body of Jesus. She didn't recognize Jesus until He called her by name – and then she knew who He was.

Jesus says something intriguing in verse 17: He commands Mary to not touch Him because He had not yet ascended to God. However, when He meets Thomas later He tells Thomas to touch His hands and His side. That makes me wonder if perhaps Jesus made a trip to Heaven during His final 40 days before the ascension. The Bible tells us that He only made a few appearances during those 40 days, which opens the question concerning where Jesus was the rest of the time.

After Mary saw her risen Lord, she went to tell the other disciples what she had seen.

The women tell the disciples

While Peter, John, and Mary Magdalene were on their way to the tomb to see what was going on, the women who were not terrified by the angels ran and told the remaining disciples (who were apparently staying at a different place from Peter and John) what the angel told them. On their way there they become the second people to meet the risen Lord:

Matthew 28: “8 And they departed quickly from the sepulchre with fear and great joy; and did run to bring his disciples word.

9 And as they went to tell his disciples, behold, Jesus met them, saying, All hail. And they came and held him by the feet, and worshipped him.

10 Then said Jesus unto them, Be not afraid: go tell my brethren that they go into Galilee, and there shall they see me.”

Not only have the women been told by an angel that Jesus had risen from the dead, but they had seen the risen Lord as well! Interestingly, this is the second time that the women were specifically told that the disciples should go to Galilee because they would see Jesus there (the other time was Mark 16:7). They brought this news to the other disciples (except Peter and John, who were at home at the time and not with the others) but no one believed them:

Luke 24: “8 And they remembered his words,
9 And returned from the sepulchre, and told all these things unto the eleven, and to all the rest.
10 It was Mary Magdalene and Joanna, and Mary the mother of James, and other women that were with them, which told these things unto the apostles.
11 And their words seemed to them as idle tales, and they believed them not.”

One important fact to keep in mind is that the group of disciples were known as “the eleven” even when everyone was not present. (We will see this later on when Jesus appears to “the eleven” even though Thomas is not present.) Mary Magdalene also came and told them what she had seen, but they did not believe her either:

Mark 16: “9 Now when Jesus was risen early the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom he had cast seven devils.
10 And she went and told them that had been with him, as they mourned and wept.
11 And they, when they had heard that he was alive, and had been seen of her, believed not.”

The disciples have now been told by two different groups of women that the Lord Jesus had arisen from the dead and they had seen Him alive, but the disciples did not believe the account. The disciples were told they should go to Galilee because they would see the risen Lord there, but it seems they did not believe and did not obey. (Jesus is going to rebuke them for this later.)

The guards

While all of this was going on, the guards went to the chief priests and told them what happened:

Matthew 28: “11 Now when they were going, behold, some of the watch came into the city, and shewed unto the chief priests all the things that were done.
12 And when they were assembled with the elders, and had taken counsel, they gave large money unto the soldiers,
13 Saying, Say ye, His disciples came by night, and stole him away while we slept.
14 And if this come to the governor's ears, we will persuade him, and secure you.
15 So they took the money, and did as they were taught: and this saying is commonly reported among the Jews until this day.”

The priests were told exactly what happened, but instead of believing they chose to bribe the guards to spread a lie. The lie they were told to spread was quite preposterous: they expected people to believe that all of the guards fell asleep on watch at the same time, and while they were asleep eleven men came to the tomb, moved a giant heavy stone without waking anyone up, took a dead body out of the tomb, and then ran away – all in the dead of night. The guards knew it wasn't true, but they wanted the money so they accepted the bribe. The priests knew it wasn't true, but it was apparently the only lie they could think up on such short notice. It is a sad thing that the priests were given the truth and yet still chose to reject it. They chose to believe a lie that they liked instead of a truth that they hated.

The road to Emmaus

The next appearance of Jesus was to two men who were walking along the road to Emmaus:

Mark 16: “12 After that he appeared in another form unto two of them, as they walked, and went into the country.

13 And they went and told it unto the residue: neither believed they them.”

Mark only has a very brief account of this encounter. The main point he brings out is that yet another group of people saw the risen Lord and told the disciples, and the disciples refused to believe them as well. Luke goes into much greater detail:

Luke 24: “13 And, behold, two of them went that same day to a village called Emmaus, which was from Jerusalem about threescore furlongs.

14 And they talked together of all these things which had happened.

15 And it came to pass, that, while they communed together and reasoned, Jesus himself drew near, and went with them.

16 But their eyes were holden that they should not know him.

17 And he said unto them, What manner of communications are these that ye have one to another, as ye walk, and are sad?

18 And the one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answering said unto him, Art thou only a stranger in Jerusalem, and hast not known the things which are come to pass there in these days?

19 And he said unto them, What things? And they said unto him, Concerning Jesus of Nazareth, which was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people:

20 And how the chief priests and our rulers delivered him to be condemned to death, and have crucified him.

21 But we trusted that it had been he which should have redeemed Israel: and beside all this, to day is the third day since these things were done.

22 Yea, and certain women also of our company made us astonished, which were early at the sepulchre;

23 And when they found not his body, they came, saying, that they had also seen a vision of angels, which said that he was alive.

24 And certain of them which were with us went to the sepulchre, and found it even

so as the women had said: but him they saw not.

25 Then he said unto them, O fools, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken:

26 Ought not Christ to have suffered these things, and to enter into his glory?

27 And beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself.

28 And they drew nigh unto the village, whither they went: and he made as though he would have gone further.

29 But they constrained him, saying, Abide with us: for it is toward evening, and the day is far spent. And he went in to tarry with them.

30 And it came to pass, as he sat at meat with them, he took bread, and blessed it, and brake, and gave to them.

31 And their eyes were opened, and they knew him; and he vanished out of their sight.

32 And they said one to another, Did not our heart burn within us, while he talked with us by the way, and while he opened to us the scriptures?

33 And they rose up the same hour, and returned to Jerusalem, and found the eleven gathered together, and them that were with them,

34 Saying, The Lord is risen indeed, and hath appeared to Simon.

35 And they told what things were done in the way, and how he was known of them in breaking of bread.”

It seems that Cleopas and another unnamed man were told that Jesus had risen from the dead and knew about the empty tomb, but they still did not believe. It wasn't until they saw the risen Lord for themselves that they finally believed. They then rushed back to Jerusalem to tell the disciples what they had seen, but Mark tells us that people still did not believe their account.

One consistent fact we see in these accounts is that the disciples were extremely unwilling to believe that Jesus had rose from the dead. Even when person after person came forward with eyewitness sightings of the risen Lord (by people they knew and trusted), they *still* refused to believe. The disciples simply would not believe until they saw Him for themselves. (It was not just Thomas who doubted and refused to believe.)

Interestingly, verse 34 tells us that at some point in that day Jesus appeared to Peter. (My guess is this happened after He appeared to the women but before He spent the afternoon with Cleopas on the road to Emmaus.) However, even with all of that testimony the disciples were still not convinced that Jesus had risen from the dead.

Jesus appears to the eleven

While Cleopas was giving his account of meeting Jesus, the Lord appeared in their midst and rebuked them for their unbelief:

Mark 16: “14 Afterward he appeared unto the eleven as they sat at meat, and upbraided them with their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they believed not them which had seen him after he was risen.”

Notice that Jesus was said to have appeared to “the eleven”, even though Thomas was not present! This is what I was getting at earlier – the group was known as “the eleven” even if a few members were missing at the time. (If this seems strange, think of it like a sports team – people still refer to a football team by its given name even if a few of the players were absent or out sick that day. The fact that not everyone is there doesn't change the name of the team)

Luke and John go into much more detail about this appearance. At first the disciples believed that they were seeing a ghost, but Jesus proved to them that He physically rose from the dead:

Luke 24: “36 And as they thus spake, Jesus himself stood in the midst of them, and saith unto them, Peace be unto you.

37 But they were terrified and affrighted, and supposed that they had seen a spirit.

38 And he said unto them, Why are ye troubled? and why do thoughts arise in your hearts?

39 Behold my hands and my feet, that it is I myself: handle me, and see; for a spirit hath not flesh and bones, as ye see me have.

40 And when he had thus spoken, he shewed them his hands and his feet.

41 And while they yet believed not for joy, and wondered, he said unto them, Have ye here any meat?

42 And they gave him a piece of a broiled fish, and of an honeycomb.

43 And he took it, and did eat before them.

44 And he said unto them, These are the words which I spake unto you, while I was yet with you, that all things must be fulfilled, which were written in the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the psalms, concerning me.

45 Then opened he their understanding, that they might understand the scriptures,

46 And said unto them, Thus it is written, and thus it behooved Christ to suffer, and to rise from the dead the third day:

47 And that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.

48 And ye are witnesses of these things.

49 And, behold, I send the promise of my Father upon you: but tarry ye in the city of Jerusalem, until ye be endued with power from on high.”

John 20: “19 Then the same day at evening, being the first day of the week, when the doors were shut where the disciples were assembled for fear of the Jews, came Jesus and stood in the midst, and saith unto them, Peace be unto you.

20 And when he had so said, he shewed unto them his hands and his side. Then were the disciples glad, when they saw the Lord.

21 Then said Jesus to them again, Peace be unto you: as my Father hath sent me, even so send I you.”

Jesus makes it very clear to His disciples that it is really Him, that He is not a ghost or a spirit, and that He did rise bodily from the dead. He even eats food in their presence (which is something that disembodied spirits are not capable of doing). Only after seeing the Lord in person and watching Him eat did the disciples finally begin to believe that Jesus really *had* risen from the dead.

Appearance to Thomas

Thomas, however, was not present. Just like the rest of the disciples, he refused to believe that Jesus had arisen from the dead until Jesus appeared to him in person:

John 20: “24 But Thomas, one of the twelve, called Didymus, was not with them when Jesus came.

25 The other disciples therefore said unto him, We have seen the Lord. But he said unto them, Except I shall see in his hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and thrust my hand into his side, I will not believe.

26 And after eight days again his disciples were within, and Thomas with them: then came Jesus, the doors being shut, and stood in the midst, and said, Peace be unto you.

27 Then saith he to Thomas, Reach hither thy finger, and behold my hands; and reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into my side: and be not faithless, but believing.

28 And Thomas answered and said unto him, My Lord and my God.

29 Jesus saith unto him, Thomas, because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed: blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed.”

Once Jesus appeared to Thomas, he believed as well – but it took an actual appearance by the risen Lord in order to get him to believe.

The Fishing Trip

The next time Jesus appeared to His disciples was when a group of them went fishing. We can find the account in John:

John 21: “1 After these things Jesus shewed himself again to the disciples at the sea of Tiberias; and on this wise shewed he himself.

2 There were together Simon Peter, and Thomas called Didymus, and Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, and the sons of Zebedee, and two other of his disciples.

3 Simon Peter saith unto them, I go a fishing. They say unto him, We also go with thee. They went forth, and entered into a ship immediately; and that night they caught nothing.

4 But when the morning was now come, Jesus stood on the shore: but the disciples knew not that it was Jesus.

5 Then Jesus saith unto them, Children, have ye any meat? They answered him, No.

6 And he said unto them, Cast the net on the right side of the ship, and ye shall find. They cast therefore, and now they were not able to draw it for the multitude of fishes.

7 Therefore that disciple whom Jesus loved saith unto Peter, It is the Lord. Now

when Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he girt his fisher's coat unto him, (for he was naked,) and did cast himself into the sea.

8 And the other disciples came in a little ship; (for they were not far from land, but as it were two hundred cubits,) dragging the net with fishes.

9 As soon then as they were come to land, they saw a fire of coals there, and fish laid thereon, and bread.

10 Jesus saith unto them, Bring of the fish which ye have now caught.

11 Simon Peter went up, and drew the net to land full of great fishes, an hundred and fifty and three: and for all there were so many, yet was not the net broken.

12 Jesus saith unto them, Come and dine. And none of the disciples durst ask him, Who art thou? knowing that it was the Lord.

13 Jesus then cometh, and taketh bread, and giveth them, and fish likewise.

14 This is now the third time that Jesus shewed himself to his disciples, after that he was risen from the dead."

Verse 14 tells us that this was the third time Jesus showed Himself to His disciples. The first time was on the evening of the resurrection day, when He made His first appearance to the group and rebuked them for their unbelief. The second time was when He showed Himself a second time to the group when Thomas was present. This is the third appearance.

Appearing to the 500

The apostle Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians that Jesus appeared to a group of more than 500 people at once:

1 Corinthians 15: "3 For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures;

4 And that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures:

5 And that he was seen of Cephas, then of the twelve:

6 After that, he was seen of above five hundred brethren at once; of whom the greater part remain unto this present, but some are fallen asleep.

7 After that, he was seen of James; then of all the apostles.

8 And last of all he was seen of me also, as of one born out of due time."

Paul gives us a nice outline of the appearance of Christ, although it is not complete. He doesn't mention the fact that Mary Magdalene saw Him first, or that He was then seen by a different group of women. Paul also doesn't mention the sighting on the road to Emmaus. He mentions the fact that the disciples saw Jesus, but in fact the disciples saw Jesus three times, not just once.

There is some new information here, though. At some point after Jesus' appearance to the disciples but before His ascension He was seen by more than 500 people at once. We don't have any additional information on this, but it means that there were actually quite a lot of people who saw the risen Lord!

After that appearance He was seen by James. I suspect this is the man who wrote the book of

James, who was the half-brother of Christ. Perhaps this is when James started believing in Jesus; before then the Bible tells us that Christ's family opposed His ministry and thought He was crazy (see Mark 3:21, 31-32).

Once Jesus appeared to James, we are told that He appeared to the apostles. It is not clear how appearing to the apostles is different from appearing to the disciples, yet it is listed separately. The final appearance was made to Paul, and it did not happen until after the ascension (which is possibly why Paul says that he was born “out of due time”).

Ascension

The final appearance of Jesus (with the exception of His later appearance to the apostle Paul) was at His ascension:

Luke 24: “50 And he led them out as far as to Bethany, and he lifted up his hands, and blessed them.

51 And it came to pass, while he blessed them, he was parted from them, and carried up into heaven.”

Acts 1: “4 And, being assembled together with them, commanded them that they should not depart from Jerusalem, but wait for the promise of the Father, which, saith he, ye have heard of me.

5 For John truly baptized with water; but ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost not many days hence.

6 When they therefore were come together, they asked of him, saying, Lord, wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?

7 And he said unto them, It is not for you to know the times or the seasons, which the Father hath put in his own power.

8 But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.

9 And when he had spoken these things, while they beheld, he was taken up; and a cloud received him out of their sight.

10 And while they looked stedfastly toward heaven as he went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel;

11 Which also said, Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven? this same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven.”

The ascension of Jesus took place at Bethany. Jesus blessed His disciples and commanded them to be witnesses to the gospel throughout the world, and then He slowly ascended up into Heaven. Apparently the disciples thought that Jesus was going to come back down, because two men were sent to tell the disciples to disperse. The Bible does not tell us who these two men were, but it is quite likely they are the same two men that the women encountered inside the empty tomb.

The risen Jesus ascended to Heaven – but we were given the promise that one day He would

return in the same way He departed. That day has not yet come, but it is drawing ever closer. We know it will happen because God always keeps His promises.

THE DEMISE OF PREACHING

Sometimes when we're reading the Bible we come across passages that ought to startle us. The Bible says some pretty amazing things, if we'll just take the time to stop and think about what it is saying. All too often we simply read right over a passage without bothering to give it the thought it deserves.

For example, after Nehemiah finished rebuilding the wall around Jerusalem he did something else of great importance: he teamed up with Ezra to read the entire Mosaic Law to the people. Just stop and think about that for a moment. Imagine reading the *entire* Mosaic Law at once. That's quite a task!

The reason he did that was because the people of Jerusalem weren't very familiar with it. The Israelites had been committing all kinds of terrible sins, and were living lives that did not please God. To solve that problem Nehemiah and Ezra taught the people what God's commandments actually were:

Nehemiah 8:2: “And Ezra the priest brought the law before the congregation both of men and women, and all that could hear with understanding, upon the first day of the seventh month.

3 And he read therein before the street that was before the water gate from the morning until midday, before the men and the women, and those that could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive unto the book of the law.

4 And Ezra the scribe stood upon a pulpit of wood, which they had made for the purpose; ...

5 And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people; (for he was above all the people;) and when he opened it, all the people stood up:

6 And Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God. And all the people answered, Amen, Amen, with lifting up their hands: and they bowed their heads, and worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground.

7 ... and the Levites, caused the people to understand the law: and the people stood in their place.

8 So they read in the book in the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading.”

The Levites put a lot of effort into this. They read the entire law of God and left nothing out. They read it distinctly so it could be understood. They also expounded upon the law so that people could understand what it actually meant. The Levites wanted to make sure that everyone had heard the Mosaic Law and understood what it required.

Now, this was no small task. The Mosaic Law is much longer than just the 10 commandments; it contains a great many other rules as well. Anyone who has tried to read through Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy has some idea of just how many commandments there actually are! While it's true that much of Leviticus deals primarily with priestly matters and regulations regarding sacrifices, there are *still* a lot of commandments in those four books.

The process of reading the Law would obviously have taken more than just a few minutes. We can see in Nehemiah 8:3 that Ezra read “from morning to midday”. In other words, this process took *hours*. This was not a 30-minute sermon! I'd also like to point out that this was *not* light reading material: after all, it was an exposition on the Mosaic Law. It did not have funny stories and it was *not*

entertaining. If you have ever read those four books of the Bible you know exactly what I'm talking about. That material is difficult, hard to read, and at times hard to understand.

Yet how did the people respond? Well, we're told in Nehemiah 8:3 that even though this process took hours, all of the people listened attentively. In fact, they paid so much attention that they became convicted of their sins and began to weep:

Nehemiah 8:9: "And Nehemiah, which is the Tirshatha, and Ezra the priest the scribe, and the Levites that taught the people, said unto all the people, This day is holy unto the Lord your God; mourn not, nor weep. For all the people wept, when they heard the words of the law."

Not only did these people pay attention for *hours* as the Levites expounded the *entire* Mosaic Law, but they also applied it to their lives and realized that they fell short! The people were so overcome by the magnitude of their sin that they began to weep. That is how much of an impact this sermon had on them.

Do you know what would happen if someone tried this today? Imagine for a moment a pastor telling his congregation that he is going to spend the next 4 hours preaching a sermon on the entire Mosaic Law. If anyone was foolish enough to try something like that he would probably find himself out of a job. The deacons would bounce him right out of the pulpit and out to the parking lot, and his days at that church would be over. There would be a riot.

The reason the congregation would riot is because modern Christians have incredibly short attention spans when it comes to spiritual issues. Yes, the congregation will sit there while their pastor preaches a 30-minute sermon, but the odds are good they're not really going to pay that much attention to what he's saying. Instead of taking notes you'll find people balancing their checkbooks or just sleeping through the message. There are some who pay close attention, but those are by far the exceptions. Once the service is over, quite a few people will have already forgotten most of the sermon by the time they get out to the parking lot. If their preacher dares to go over 30 minutes then people will start to complain. A seven-minute overrun is the kind of thing that will make waves – it simply won't be tolerated. (I speak from experience.) However, if the pastor's sermon runs short – say, he only talks for 20 minutes – there will be rejoicing. People love short sermons and hate long ones.

Why is this? The answer is obvious: people don't really care very much for preaching. Interestingly, I've never heard anyone complain that a service had too much singing. I've seen people sit through hour-long musical presentations at church without a single complaint – but if the pastor had preached for an hour there would have been rioting. People like to listen to music and they don't like to listen to preaching.

Now, I don't think it's *just* a problem of attention spans. After all, the same people who complain if a sermon goes five minutes over are willing to stay up until two in the morning if the baseball game they're watching goes into nine extra innings. They'll gladly watch a three-hour-long movie, or spend six solid hours watching reruns of television shows. When it comes to something *they actually care about*, time is no object. People who would riot at the thought of a four-hour sermon would gladly spend four hours watching a football game or a race! It's easy to understand why: they believe that football is fun and exciting, and they believe that sermons are boring and terrible. They want to dramatically limit their intake of sermons but would never dream of dramatically limiting their intake of football.

I understand that there are some terrible preachers out there. I have heard people preach for an entire hour when they actually had nothing to say, and it was a painful thing to experience. If your point

can be made in just 10 minutes then make your point and sit down; don't stretch it out to an hour just to hear yourself talk. Some people just like to rattle on.

However, keep in mind that when the Levites read the law to the people, all they were doing was reading them the Law and explaining what it meant. This was *not* a fun, light-hearted, entertaining sermon with a lot of cute pictures and funny stories – and yet people listened *attentively*. They cared so much about what the Bible had to say that *they didn't need to be entertained*.

The problem that I see is *not* a dislike of bad sermons, but a dislike of sermons altogether. Many people who go to church have very little interest in hearing the Word of God preached. This is in stark contrast to the people we see in the Bible, who *did* care and who *did* pay attention. They didn't want someone to entertain them; they were looking for someone to tell them what the Bible said. *That alone was enough to secure their attention for hours on end*.

As we can see in the example of Nehemiah, the people stood there for *hours* and listened. They cared about what was being said so much that they were overcome by conviction. They took the message to heart. King Josiah had the same reaction when the Mosaic Law was read to him:

2 Kings 22:8: “And Hilkiah the high priest said unto Shaphan the scribe, I have found the book of the law in the house of the Lord. And Hilkiah gave the book to Shaphan, and he read it. . .

10 And Shaphan the scribe shewed the king, saying, Hilkiah the priest hath delivered me a book. And Shaphan read it before the king.

11 And it came to pass, when the king had heard the words of the book of the law, that he rent his clothes.

12 And the king commanded Hilkiah the priest, and Ahikam the son of Shaphan, and Achbor the son of Michaiah, and Shaphan the scribe, and Asahiah a servant of the king's, saying,

13 Go ye, enquire of the Lord for me, and for the people, and for all Judah, concerning the words of this book that is found: for great is the wrath of the Lord that is kindled against us, because our fathers have not hearkened unto the words of this book, to do according unto all that which is written concerning us.”

Here we have another instance where someone actually read the entire law aloud. In this case the law was read to King Josiah. What was the king's reaction? The Bible says he was so overcome that he rent his clothes. Not only did he pay attention, but he understood what the law meant! He knew that the nation had been disobedient and was in danger of facing the wrath of God. Conviction had set in and he knew his people were in a lot of trouble.

I realize that these were exceptional cases. The Israelites did not have the entire Law read to them on a regular basis – but when it was read, they listened. Have you ever tried to read the entire Mosaic Law in one sitting? I can't imagine any congregation allowing their pastor to read the whole thing to them aloud; they would revolt. It simply wouldn't be tolerated. By modern standards that would be condemned as a *terrible* sermon: dry, boring, and lacking amusing anecdotes. But when Shaphan the scribe read it to King Josiah, it had such a huge impact on him that it changed the course of the nation.

Do you know why? It's because Josiah cared deeply about honoring God with his life, whereas we care deeply about being entertained. That is why Josiah eagerly listened to an hours-long recitation of hundreds of commands. His goal in life was *not* the pursuit of entertainment, but the pursuit of God. That is what he was passionate about.

We're very different: we mainly want to be entertained. If a sermon is fun then we'll listen to it, but otherwise it had better be short or we'll lose interest. Many modern Christians are focused on the pursuit of pleasure, not the pursuit of God. Because of this we have no patience for long messages, and even look down on what Shaphan and Ezra did. We have *lots* of attention for things that we care about, but when it comes to God, well, He had better keep His messages short and fun.

Did you know that Joshua also read the entire Mosaic Law to the people? In fact, when he read the Law there were even children present:

Joshua 8:34: “And afterward he read all the words of the law, the blessings and cursings, according to all that is written in the book of the law.

35 There was not a word of all that Moses commanded, which Joshua read not before all the congregation of Israel, with the women, and the little ones, and the strangers that were conversant among them.”

Just imagine: even the children had to listen to it! They weren't sent off to children's church to get a more entertaining and age-appropriate message. No, they had to behave and listen while Joshua spent *hours* reading the Law to them.

This was not just an Old Testament thing. The apostle Paul also preached rather long sermons:

Acts 20:7: “And upon the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul preached unto them, ready to depart on the morrow; and continued his speech until midnight.”

Incidentally, his sermon didn't stop at midnight. He actually kept preaching until the following morning:

Acts 20:11: “When he therefore was come up again, and had broken bread, and eaten, and talked a long while, even till break of day, so he departed.”

Can you imagine what would happen if the apostle Paul came to one of our modern churches and tried to preach a sermon that lasted *until the morning of the next day*? Needless to say, the congregation's reaction would *not* be pretty! Now, if a baseball game went into extra innings and didn't finish until after midnight then people would stay up for that, because hey – it's baseball! But a sermon lasting that long is completely out of the question. Why, that's abuse! Did Paul not care about those poor people in the audience?

I'm not saying that all of Paul's sermons were this long, nor am I suggesting that short sermons are evil. There is nothing wrong with preaching short messages. My point is that some of the sermons that we find in the Bible were actually *incredibly long*, and even though they powerfully impacted the people of that time they would never have been tolerated in the church today. Something has changed, and it's not the Word of God.

Do you know why Paul could preach to that group for so long? It's because they had a genuine heart for God and cared about what the apostle was saying. People used to care deeply about the things of God. For example, a 13th century Catholic Inquisitor by the name of Reinerius said this about the Waldensians:

“They can repeat by heart, in the vulgar tongue, the whole text of the New

Testament and great part of the Old: and, adhering to the text alone, they reject decretals and decrees with the sayings and expositions of the Saints” (Faber, p. 492).

These days most Christians haven't managed to *read* the entire Bible. Yet these 13th century Christians cared so much about the Word that they actually memorized *virtually the entire Book* – and this was during a time when owning a single page of the Bible could get you burned at the stake! Their passion for Bible study endangered their lives, and many of them were killed for it – and yet they were not deterred. Even though owning a Bible was a crime punishable by death, they still owned them, studied them, and memorized them. *That* is how much they cared.

Can you imagine these 13th century Christians trying to limit sermons to 30 minutes long, and complaining if they went five minutes over? Can you imagine them becoming irritated if their pastor spent a few too many minutes expounding on what the Word of God had to say? Of course not – it would be unthinkable! Things sure are different today, aren't they?

There is a preacher online who I enjoy listening to who preaches sermons that are an hour and 45 minutes long. Since he has so much time he is able to go into incredible detail. What people don't realize is that if you only have 30 minutes to cover an entire passage, you're really not going to be able to say very much about it. Imagine taking a 2-hour movie and cutting it down to half an hour. You're going to lose a lot when you do that! However, if you have more time then you can accomplish much more.

Think of it this way: if you have to cover all 12 chapters of the book of Ecclesiastes in four 30-minute sessions then you are going to be very limited in how much you can bring out. More time would make a big difference. According to Nielsen, the average American watches *34 hours* of television a week. Why is sacrificing ten of those minutes to give the preacher more time out of the question? (In fact, I suspect that many churchgoers spend more time on Sunday watching television than they do listening to preaching!)

The real problem is that many people do not care very much about the Word of God. We have lots of time for things that we find entertaining, but somehow we can't be bothered to read our Bibles, or study them, or tolerate a sermon that's longer than a half-hour TV sitcom. We have passions, all right, but they're not for God. We may praise God with our lips but our hearts are far from Him. After all, it's easy to see where our heart really lies: just look at where we spend our time!

If only we cared as much about the Word as our forefathers did. How different things would be! Maybe then people wouldn't go around thinking that the Sermon on the Mount was preached by Billy Graham.

WHAT ABOUT GLUTTONY?

In this rather dark period in church history, there is a determined effort to ignore things that are serious sins and instead focus on other matters. For example, if you try to point out that adultery is repeatedly condemned in the Bible, people will say “Oh yeah? Well, what about overeating? That's a sin, you know! Why aren't you condemning all the fat people in the world?”

Do you see how this game is played? People try to change the subject. They want to ignore the very plain words of Scripture and instead focus on something else – anything else. This is something that we should not tolerate. We should not allow ourselves to be led off-topic so easily. Instead, we should call people out on what they're doing and refocus ourselves.

But since the church is so determined to ignore sins like divorce, adultery, and fornication, and instead condemn people for being fat, let's take a moment and see what the Bible actually has to say about gluttony. Is it really a sin to be overweight?

It may surprise you to find out that the word “glutton” only appears four times in the KJV Bible. (It does appear one more time in other versions, but that is a translation error on their part.) Let's take a look at these four occurrences and see what they say.

First of all, it turns out that gluttony, overeating, and being fat is not mentioned *one time* in the entire Mosaic Law. Even though there are hundreds of commandments, “eating too much” doesn't make the list. Keep in mind that this is the same Mosaic Law that strictly forbids things like eating blood:

Leviticus 7:27: “Whatsoever soul it be that eateth any manner of blood, even that soul shall be cut off from his people.”

It also goes into great detail about what to do if you find mold in your house:

Leviticus 14:35: “And he that owneth the house shall come and tell the priest, saying, It seemeth to me there is as it were a plague in the house:

36 Then the priest shall command that they empty the house, before the priest go into it to see the plague, that all that is in the house be not made unclean: and afterward the priest shall go in to see the house:

37 And he shall look on the plague, and, behold, if the plague be in the walls of the house with hollow strakes, greenish or reddish, which in sight are lower than the wall;

38 Then the priest shall go out of the house to the door of the house, and shut up the house seven days:

39 And the priest shall come again the seventh day, and shall look: and, behold, if the plague be spread in the walls of the house;

40 Then the priest shall command that they take away the stones in which the plague is, and they shall cast them into an unclean place without the city:...”

There is a lot more about mold in this chapter, but you get the idea. The Mosaic Law has more than *six hundred* commandments that address what to eat, what to wear, when to bathe, and so forth. Not a single one of them has anything to say about overeating! The closest we find is this:

Deuteronomy 21:18: “If a man have a stubborn and rebellious son, which will not obey the voice of his father, or the voice of his mother, and that, when they have chastened him, will not hearken unto them:

19 Then shall his father and his mother lay hold on him, and bring him out unto the elders of his city, and unto the gate of his place;

20 And they shall say unto the elders of his city, This our son is stubborn and rebellious, he will not obey our voice; he is a glutton, and a drunkard.

21 And all the men of his city shall stone him with stones, that he die: so shalt thou put evil away from among you; and all Israel shall hear, and fear.”

Is this passage recommending the death penalty for people who go back for seconds at the buffet line? Is it saying we should stone to death people who eat dessert? Of course not! This passage is saying that if parents have an incredibly rebellious child who refuses all correction and who will not listen to anyone, they are to bring him to the elders of the city so that he can be put to death. Since this person refuses all correction and will not obey anyone's rules, he is a danger to society and should be executed before he can start harming other people. (Of course, in our day we've developed a different way to handle this situation: we do nothing and allow these hoodlums to murder, rape, and assault people. Then we give them reduced prison sentences because “they had a bad childhood” and set them free so that they can murder, rape, and assault even more people. The idea of executing these dangerous people *before* they leave a trail of bodies in their wake is unthinkable to us. We care about the murderer far more than we care about his victims.)

This passage is *not* saying “He didn't order a salad, so kill him.” It is saying “Find these dangerous, rebellious maniacs and kill them before they have a chance to start killing others.” It is dealing with *rebellion*, not overeating. That should be very clear from the very first verse in the passage.

That is the only mention of gluttony in the entire Mosaic Law. The next time it gets mentioned is in the book of Proverbs. This is what we find:

Proverbs 23:20: “Be not among winebibbers; among riotous eaters of flesh:

21 For the drunkard and the glutton shall come to poverty: and drowsiness shall clothe a man with rags.”

This passage says that if you spend your time going to drinking parties, where people get drunk and engage in debauched behavior, you will come to poverty. The word “glutton” here is Strongs #2151. This is what it means:

“to shake (as in the wind), figuratively to be loose morally, worthless, or prodigal; flow down, vile, glutton, riotous eaters, riotous”

Yes, it is true that the word “glutton” is included in that definition. However, the basic idea behind the word is *not* “a man who eats too much”. It instead refers to a morally loose person who is riotous and out of control, and who will not listen to anyone.

You have to understand that if the Bible wanted to condemn eating too much, it would have been incredibly easy to do that. All the Bible would have to do is say “Eating too much is a sin” or “Being overweight is a sin” or “If you don't eat a healthy amount then you are an evil person.” If the

Bible has the time to talk about what to do if you find mold growing in your house, then it surely has the time to talk about being fat. But that's not what we find, is it?

There are two more mentions of gluttony in the Bible, and they are both in the New Testament. Here they are:

Matthew 11:19: “The Son of man came eating and drinking, and they say, Behold a man gluttonous, and a winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners. But wisdom is justified of her children.”

Luke 7:34: “The Son of man is come eating and drinking; and ye say, Behold a gluttonous man, and a winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners!”

That's right! Half of the uses of the word “gluttonous” in the Bible are used *in connection to Jesus Christ*. If you examine the context of these two verses you will see that the Pharisees condemned John the Baptist because he drank no wine and ate only locusts and wild honey. Since he had a strict diet they accused him of being possessed. Jesus, on the other hand, enjoyed a wide variety of food and drank wine, so they accused Him of being gluttonous and a winebibber.

Incidentally, have you noticed that in the Bible you *never* see the word “glutton” used by itself? It's always used in conjunction with drinking wine. The two are always connected: gluttony is something that is done at wild drinking parties, where people get drunk and do debauched things. Every use of that word appears in that context, and I do not believe that is an accident.

Now, at this point some people like to bring up Proverbs 23:2 and claim that it condemns overeating. But if you read the entire passage I think you'll see that it doesn't make that case at all:

Proverbs 23: “When thou sittest to eat with a ruler, consider diligently what is before thee:

2 And put a knife to thy throat, if thou be a man given to appetite.

3 Be not desirous of his dainties: for they are deceitful meat.

4 Labour not to be rich: cease from thine own wisdom.

5 Wilt thou set thine eyes upon that which is not? for riches certainly make themselves wings; they fly away as an eagle toward heaven.

6 Eat thou not the bread of him that hath an evil eye, neither desire thou his dainty meats:

7 For as he thinketh in his heart, so is he: Eat and drink, saith he to thee; but his heart is not with thee.

8 The morsel which thou hast eaten shalt thou vomit up, and lose thy sweet words.”

Is this passage saying “Having an appetite is bad because it makes you fat, and being fat is sinful?” Definitely not! This passage is talking about what to do if you are invited to eat at a ruler's house. In that situation you should be very careful because the riches that you see in front of you are deceitful and even dangerous. You should not desire his wealth and you should not eat the food of the wicked. The whole point of this passage is *don't desire the wealth of the wicked* (you do see verses 4 and 5, right?). It does *not* say “going back for seconds is a sin”. Anyone who takes verse 2 out of context and uses it all by itself is doing a grave injustice to the point of this passage.

Believe it or not, that's everything the Bible has to say about overeating. Every single time that the Bible talks about gluttony it does so in the context of drinking parties and general debauchery. Even

the word that is translated as “glutton” refers to someone who is immoral and rebellious; it is *not* a synonym for “being fat”.

This makes it rather hard to claim that eating too much is a sin. There simply aren't any Scriptures that clearly say that. Yes, going to drinking parties and engaging in sexually immoral behavior is clearly a sin, but when people talk about being gluttonous that is *not at all* what they have in mind. No, most people define gluttony as eating too much fat and not enough salads. If a person goes back for seconds or eats dessert then they are living in sin. If a person is fat then they're *clearly* living in sin. The justification for all this is that since our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit we ought to take care of them. If we're being overweight then we're not taking care of our bodies, and so we must be living in sin.

It's true that the Bible does say our bodies are temples of the Spirit, but even that isn't a reference to gluttony – but I'll get to that in a minute. Let's pause for a moment and think about the argument that is being made. If being overweight really is a sin then that has some very serious implications. Have you really thought this through?

For example, if being overweight is a sin then how, exactly, do you define “overweight”? After all, the Bible certainly never puts any kind of limits on a person's weight! When people talk about eating “too much”, what does that mean? Since God never gave us a definition do we just go by whatever the government says? Do we use some sort of body mass index? Is there an acceptable calorie count? If we don't eat very much but are still gaining weight anyway, does that mean we need to exercise regularly to burn off those extra pounds, or else we're living in sin?

How do we know at what point we've become “fat”? Different societies throughout time have had different ideas of what is and isn't an acceptable body weight. Even today the science is far from settled. Are we supposed to accept whatever the current cultural standard is and use that? Past societies tended to be more accepting of heavier people, whereas today we frown upon that. Were these past societies living in sin because their definition of fat differed from ours? Who draws the line, and where is it drawn? Do we need to perform scientific studies to determine the exact point where fatness starts?

What about societies that don't have an advanced understanding of biology? It may not be immediately obvious that being, say, 30 pounds overweight is a health problem. People 500 years ago might have had no idea that what they were doing had any health risks at all – especially since the Bible never explicitly says that being overweight is a sin, and never offers any definitions of what being overweight even is. Does that mean that it wasn't a sin back then, but has become one since we have a better understanding of biology? Or was God angry with them their entire lives for committing a sin that the Bible never warned them about?

Remember now, the wages of sin is *death*. Sin is a grievous offense to a holy God; it is an extremely serious matter. In fact, it is so serious that God expects us to choose *torture and death* over sin. All other sins have an extremely clear and well-defined line: it is easy to tell if you have lied, or murdered someone, or stolen something, or committed adultery. But at what point does it become a sin to eat that slice of bacon? Is there a point in each meal where if we eat one more bite we're sinning against God and deserve to be sent to Hell? Is there a point where if we don't start exercising we are sinning against God, and ought to be struck dead where we stand for our rebellion? Since God never gave us any definitions for “being fat” how can we possibly know where that line is?

Sure, it's easy to look at someone who weights 500 pounds and say “What on earth is wrong with that person?” But most people don't fall into that category, do they? A lot of people are overweight (by the government's definition) by maybe 30 or 40 pounds. Some are more than that, certainly. Is being overweight by 30 pounds a terrible sin against God? Since the Bible never draws the line (or even hints about where the line might be), then what standard do we go by? For that matter, why would God make it a sin to not have a health body weight, and then not give us any standard for what a

healthy body weight even was? For all you know God's idea might be completely different from ours! You think I'm kidding here, but if the difference between sin and obedience is 5 pounds then *we need to know that*. But we don't know that, do we?

Let's suppose that doing unhealthy things is a sin. Well, not exercising isn't very healthy. If you are physically weak does God require you to exercise, since being out of shape isn't healthy? Is "not exercising" also a serious sin against a holy God? What exercises (and how much) does God require? Are certain exercise routines more holy than others? If we do the wrong exercises are we in sin? Likewise, some people sit down a lot at work. Sitting down isn't terribly health either. If we don't stand up more at our job are we sinning against God? If we don't start walking around are we living in sin?

Now Christians have a whole bunch of things to worry about, don't they? At what point have they exercised enough to not be sinning against God? How much walking is enough to avoid His wrath? How much do they need to stand up in order to avoid profaning His holiness? At what point in each meal does it cross from being an enjoyable meal to being a sin against the Father?

There's really no way to tell *because the Bible never mentions any of this*. We've made it all up. We've become like modern Pharisees: we've invented an entirely new sin where it's all but impossible to know if we're actually honoring God or not. Yet the sins in the Bible are all extremely clear, black and white things: don't worship idols, don't murder people, don't commit adultery, don't lie, and so forth. Yes, the Bible does say we should take care of our bodies because they are the temple of the Lord, but it doesn't say that in the context of overeating. Instead it actually says that in the context of *prostitution*:

I Corinthians 6:15: "Know ye not that your bodies are the members of Christ? shall I then take the members of Christ, and make them the members of an harlot? God forbid.

16 What? know ye not that he which is joined to an harlot is one body? for two, saith he, shall be one flesh.

17 But he that is joined unto the Lord is one spirit.

18 Flee fornication. Every sin that a man doeth is without the body; but he that committeth fornication sinneth against his own body.

19 What? know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own?

20 For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's."

Is this passage talking about overeating and not exercising? Absolutely not! It is talking about *sexual sin*. Verse 18 says that every single sin a person does is outside of his body. There is only one sin that a person does against his own body, and *it is not overeating*. It is fornication – sexual immorality.

It's really easy to tell if we've been engaged in *that* sin. Fornication has very clear boundaries! But what we've done is invent an entirely new sin – being overweight – and put it on par with having sex with a prostitute. We've added the idea that not exercising is *just as bad*, even though it's never mentioned anywhere in the Bible.

Yes, it's true that we are to exercise self-control. That is indeed one of the fruits of the Spirit. We should not let our desires control us; instead we should control our desires. But what we've done with the modern interpretation of gluttony has gone very far beyond that. The church may not have much to say about divorce, or sexual immorality, or the fact that a couple has been living together for 9 years and has three children and has never bothered to get married. But Bob over there is overweight, and

that is *clearly* a grievous sin against God.

You would think that if being overweight was such a terrible sin against our bodies then God would have mentioned it at least once in the *31,000* verses that are in the Bible. Since sins are worthy of eternal damnation in Hell you would think that God would have posted clear limits on how much each person can weigh. At the very least He should have said *something!* When God talked about sins against our bodies in 1 Corinthians 6:15-20 He could have said there were *two* sins against our bodies – fornication and overeating. But He didn't, did He?

Am I the only person who has grave doubts about this entire matter? Does no one else see how ridiculous this all is? I fear that we are straining at gnats and swallowing camels. Yes, you should avoid living on a diet that consists solely of twinkies and bacon. But we have gone much too far in an area where the Bible has extremely little to say. We even condemn people for not exercising – a practice that God never even *suggests* His followers should be doing! In fact, the one mention of exercise in the entire Bible has this to say about it:

1 Timothy 4:8: “For bodily exercise profiteth little: but godliness is profitable unto all things, having promise of the life that now is, and of that which is to come.”

That's hardly a strong endorsement of exercise, is it? Yet we condemn people for being overweight, but don't condemn them for failing to study their Bibles – even though God *repeatedly* commands us to meditate upon His Word. We seem to have little interest in whether our fellow Christians are seeking godliness, but we care a great deal about how much they weigh and how much exercise they are getting – which is a *reversal* of what 1 Timothy 4:8 has to say. I fear that we have lost sight of what is important, and instead have focused on things that have very little spiritual importance.

WHAT ABOUT THOSE WHO NEVER HEARD THE GOSPEL?

One of the common questions that people ask is this: what happens to people who never heard the gospel? There is a common belief that God only holds people responsible for their sins if they have heard the gospel and understood it. If someone has never heard the gospel then God would never judge them. But is that actually what the Bible says?

First of all, it's important to realize that there is only one way to be saved. No one can be saved apart from Jesus Christ:

John 14:6: "Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me."

John 10:9: "I am the door: by me if any man enter in, he shall be saved, and shall go in and out, and find pasture."

Jesus is the *only* way to be saved. There are not multiple paths to God! There is only one, and His name is Jesus. All other paths and all other religions lead straight to Hell. You cannot be saved apart from Jesus Christ.

The reason for this is because Jesus is the only acceptable payment for our sins. You see, God cannot forgive us until our sins have been paid. Since God is just, He cannot simply brush our sins under the rug and pretend that they never happened. Our sins *must* be paid for; someone must pay the debt that we owe. That is why Jesus came to Earth, became a man, and died on the cross. Since He was sinless, He had no sins of His own to pay for and therefore He could die in our place. His death – and His death alone – is sufficient payment for our sins. Our good works can never pay for them. The only payment for our sins is the blood of Jesus Christ.

In order to be made right with God our sins must be paid for. In order to enter Heaven our sins must be paid for. In order to escape Hell our sins must be paid for. No other religion can pay for our sins; only the blood of Jesus can do that. Jesus is the only way to God and the only way to forgiveness. There simply is no other way.

So what about those who never heard the gospel? Does God just overlook their sins just because they don't know the truth? The Bible says that the answer is *no*:

Romans 2:12: "For as many as have sinned without law shall also perish without law: and as many as have sinned in the law shall be judged by the law;"

God does not say "Well, I'm only going to judge those who knew the truth. Everyone else is off the hook." Instead God says something very different: *all those who sinned will be judged*. If they never knew the truth then they will perish without it; if they did know the truth then they will be judged by it.

The reason God has something against us is because *we have sinned against Him*. When you are in a court of law you cannot tell the judge "You should let me go because I didn't know what I was doing was illegal". Ignorance is no defense! In the Old Testament there was actually a special sacrifice that people had to offer if they sinned in ignorance:

Leviticus 5:15: “If a soul commit a trespass, and sin through ignorance, in the holy things of the Lord; then he shall bring for his trespass unto the Lord a ram without blemish out of the flocks, with thy estimation by shekels of silver, after the shekel of the sanctuary, for a trespass offering.”

Notice that God did not say “Well, since you sinned in ignorance your sin doesn't count.” Even though the person sinned in ignorance *God still required a sacrifice as payment*. Our sins are no different! God still requires a payment for our sins *regardless* of how much we know about the truth. If we knew about God's law then we will be judged by it, and if we didn't then we will perish without it. But either way we will still be held accountable.

That is why Jesus commanded His disciples to spread the gospel to every creature:

Mark 16:15: “And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature.

16 He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned.”

If God ignores the sins of those who don't know any better, then the best thing we could ever do for mankind would be to burn every copy of the gospel and make sure that no one ever heard it. That way everyone in the world would be ignorant, so God would have to let all of mankind off the hook! Instead of sending out missionaries we should track down and burn all Bibles, silence all preachers, and close all Bible collages. After all, those things are putting men's souls in eternal peril by telling them the truth of God's Word!

Do you see how utterly ridiculous that is? It means that God could have saved all of mankind *if He had just never told anyone the gospel*. That is madness! No, the reason God told us the gospel is because *we cannot be saved without it*. The reason God commanded His people to preach the gospel to every creature is because *if they never hear the gospel then they cannot be saved*.

You may say “But it's not fair for God to judge those who didn't know any better!” Tell me: is that line of reasoning going to persuade a judge to let you go? Is there any court that will say “Well, as long as you didn't know that what you did was wrong then it doesn't really matter. You're free to go.” Of course not!

This is why it is so important to send out missionaries. We should *all* feel a burden for reaching the lost with the gospel, and we should do whatever we can to spread the Word far and wide. There is simply no other way to be saved.

WHEN MEN ACCUSE GOD

In the Old Testament the Bible tells us about a man named Job. This man was incredibly righteous and upright. He loved the Lord and served God faithfully. Job led an exemplary life – caring for the poor, looking after widows and orphans, and doing everything he could to help those around him. In fact, he was such an upright man that God Himself said Job was literally the most godly person in the *entire world*:

Job 1:8: “And the LORD said unto Satan, Hast thou considered my servant Job, that there is none like him in the earth, a perfect and an upright man, one that feareth God, and escheweth evil?”

Job was not wicked or corrupt. He pursued righteousness with all of his heart and spent his days doing what was right. But one day Job's life fell apart. In a single day all ten of Job's children were killed in the same freak accident. Losing one child is heartbreaking enough, but Job lost *all* of his children. Then, on that same day, thieves came and stole all of his wealth and left him penniless. A short time later he lost his health and came down with multiple terrible diseases. In a brief span of time this upright, godly man lost *everything*.

To Job it seemed incredibly unfair. After all, Job had spent his life doing what was right! He helped the poor, he obeyed the Lord, and he loved righteousness. He did all the right things – and yet God took *everything* away from him. God did not leave him with a single child. In an instant Job became the poorest person in the land. Even Job's health was gone! It was an absolutely crushing blow, and Job did not understand how God could possibly do this to him.

How could God allow this to happen? Hadn't Job been perfect and upright? Hadn't Job done all the right things? Job hadn't been going around robbing the poor or killing innocent people. He was one of the good guys! How could God possibly do this to him? Why would God destroy his life? Job hadn't done anything to deserve it.

In fact, Job was so sure that he didn't deserve this treatment that he said God had made a mistake:

Job 10:2: “I will say unto God, Do not condemn me; shew me wherefore thou contendest with me.

10:3 Is it good unto thee that thou shouldest oppress, that thou shouldest despise the work of thine hands, and shine upon the counsel of the wicked?

4 Hast thou eyes of flesh? or seest thou as man seeth?

5 Are thy days as the days of man? are thy years as man's days,

6 That thou enquirest after mine iniquity, and searchest after my sin?

7 Thou knowest that I am not wicked; and there is none that can deliver out of thine hand.”

Job demanded an explanation from God and told Him that He was doing something wrong. It was *wrong* for God to oppress Job. It was *wrong* for God to despise him. After all, Job was a righteous man. The Lord was clearly out of touch and had no idea what was going on – and so Job wanted to talk to God and set Him straight:

Job 13:3: “Surely I would speak to the Almighty, and I desire to reason with God.”

Job wanted to reason with God *in order to show the Lord that He was wrong*. Job really wanted to correct God and bring Him back in line. He thought that it was terribly unfair there was no way to bring a complaint against God and force Him to respond:

Job 16:21: “O that one might plead for a man with God, as a man pleadeth for his neighbour!”

Job kept insisting that what God was doing was wrong:

Job 19:6: “Know now that God hath overthrown me, and hath compassed me with his net.

7 Behold, I cry out of wrong, but I am not heard: I cry aloud, but there is no judgment.”

Job firmly believed that since he was righteous, it was therefore wrong for God to kill all of his children, take away all of his wealth, and ruin his health. God was treating him as if he had committed some great sin, but Job was innocent. Therefore God had to be wrong and in need of correction. God had perverted justice and was out of touch. Job desperately wanted to confront God and force Him to apologize.

This is not an uncommon attitude. The world is filled with people who believe as Job did. There are many who have lost jobs, lost wealth, and lost loved ones. They trusted God to bless them and give them what they wanted, but instead their cherished family members died. They looked for healing but no healing came. God did *not* give them what they desired. Instead of peace and goodness they were given pain and suffering – and so they lash out against God. Some abandon the faith entirely and accuse God of being evil and demented. Others angrily proclaim that God sinned against them and deserved to be punished for what He has done. They rail against God and say that if He was truly a *good* God then He would do the things that they demand He do. No good God would ever allow disaster to come into a person's life. No good God would allow family members to die. Therefore God must be evil.

The underlying theme to all of these complaints is that God is only good if He does what we want Him to do, and God has no right to allow any pain or suffering to enter our life. Men believe that God is their servant and only exists to grant us wishes. If He stops doing that then He deserves to be fired.

Yet the Bible tells us that Jesus was a man of great suffering and pain:

Isaiah 53:3: “He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not.”

If Jesus suffered then why do we expect *not* to suffer? If Jesus experienced great pain then why do we believe that we have a right to live a life free from pain? Do we think that we're greater than God? Just in case we weren't sure how to answer that question, Jesus answered it for us:

John 15:20: “Remember the word that I said unto you, The servant is not greater than his lord. If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you; if they have kept my saying, they will keep yours also.”

Since Jesus suffered we must not object if we suffer as well, because we are *not* greater than God. It is folly to think that we have a right to a better life than Jesus did when He walked on this Earth. Yet there are many people who *do* believe this. So what does God think when men accuse Him of wrongdoing?

Job firmly believed that God had no right to do what He did – that God was wrong. So how did God respond to him? Well, there are a variety of ways He *could* have responded. We might expect God to come to Job in a still, small voice and explain what was really going on. God could have encouraged Job, told him that this was all part of a greater plan, and say that it would all be over soon and Job would be even richer than he was before. That is what we would naturally expect to happen – but that is *not* what took place. Instead God did this:

Job 38:1: “Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind, and said,
2 Who is this that darkeneth counsel by words without knowledge?
3 Gird up now thy loins like a man; for I will demand of thee, and answer thou me.”

God did not come to Job in a dream, or a vision, or a still small voice; instead God came to Job in a whirlwind. God didn't wait until Job was feeling better or in a good mood; instead God came when Job was already broken and depressed and longing for death – and God did *not* come to encourage Job or improve his mood. God did not answer any of Job's questions or tell Job what was going on. God didn't have one encouraging thing to say to Job! Instead God condemned Job for the foolish things he said, and demanded that Job answer *His* questions.

The Lord then asked Job a series of questions that were designed to show Job just how small, powerless, and ignorant he really was. Job thought that he knew everything – after all, he condemned God and said that God couldn't possibly have been justified in what He did. Since Job was full of pride, God humbled him:

Job 38:4: “Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth? declare, if thou hast understanding.”

Where was Job when God created the universe? Oh, that's right – he didn't exist. Did Job create the world? Did he fashion the sun, moon, and stars? Of course not! God was forcefully reminding Job that he was a *creature*, not the Creator. Job wasn't involved in the formation of the universe, and yet he thought he had a right to tell God that He was doing a bad job of running it.

Job also had no control over death:

Job 38:17: “Have the gates of death been opened unto thee? or hast thou seen the doors of the shadow of death?”

God could open the gates of death and bring men back to life – but Job couldn't. Job had no power over death but yet he thought he had a right to command the God who *did* have that power. In fact, the difference between Job's power and God's power was enormous:

Job 38:31: “Canst thou bind the sweet influences of Pleiades, or loose the bands of Orion?”

32 Canst thou bring forth Mazzaroth in his season? or canst thou guide Arcturus with his sons?

33 Knowest thou the ordinances of heaven? canst thou set the dominion thereof in the earth?”

Job had no control over the stars or the constellations, and yet he thought he had a right to command the God who *did* have that power. Who did Job think he was? Job was most definitely *not* an all-powerful, all-knowing God, and yet he still thought God should be held accountable to him! What gave him the right to accuse God?

God demanded that Job answer him – but Job had nothing to say:

Job 40:1: “Moreover the Lord answered Job, and said,
2 Shall he that contendeth with the Almighty instruct him? he that reproveth God, let him answer it.

3 Then Job answered the Lord, and said,

4 Behold, I am vile; what shall I answer thee? I will lay mine hand upon my mouth.

5 Once have I spoken; but I will not answer: yea, twice; but I will proceed no further.”

In chapter 42 Job will finally repent and confess his sin, but here Job doesn't do that. So God doesn't stop. The Lord continued asking Job questions that were specifically designed to teach Job that he had no right to condemn God's decisions:

Job 40:6: “Then answered the Lord unto Job out of the whirlwind, and said,
7 Gird up thy loins now like a man: I will demand of thee, and declare thou unto me.
8 Wilt thou also disannul my judgment? wilt thou condemn me, that thou mayest be righteous?”

This is the whole problem. God was not going to back down and answer Job's questions and act like Job had a right to condemn the Lord. God did not answer to Job, nor was God the servant of Job. Job was condemning God in order to justify himself. As you can see, *this is a serious sin*. God was not going to give an inch. He has all power and knows all things, and He is justified in all that He does:

Psalm 19:9: “The fear of the Lord is clean, enduring for ever: the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.”

God was teaching Job that in spite of what he thought, Job was not all-knowing or all-powerful. Job was convinced that God was wrong to bring so much pain and suffering into his life, but he didn't know everything. He wasn't aware of the full situation. Job wasn't God – and yet Job was acting as if he were *greater* than God. Instead of trusting in God and submitting himself to His will, Job condemned God and demanded an apology.

Instead of apologizing, though, God demanded that Job prove he had the power of a god:

Job 40:9: “Hast thou an arm like God? or canst thou thunder with a voice like him?”

10 Deck thyself now with majesty and excellency; and array thyself with glory and beauty.

11 Cast abroad the rage of thy wrath: and behold every one that is proud, and abase him.

12 Look on every one that is proud, and bring him low; and tread down the wicked in their place.

13 Hide them in the dust together; and bind their faces in secret.

14 Then will I also confess unto thee that thine own right hand can save thee.”

Job had condemned God and claimed that God should be accountable to Job, so where was Job's godlike power? Where was his divine majesty? God told Job to *prove it* by acting like a god – but of course Job couldn't do any of the things that God listed! Job had lost all of his possessions and was in tremendous pain. He couldn't even heal himself, let alone deck himself with majesty. Job couldn't humble any proud people or defeat even the smallest wicked person. Job was utterly helpless – and God reminded him of that. God was teaching Job that *Job was not God*.

One of the great problems we have today is that many people believe they are God. They think they have a right to condemn God, ignore God's commands, and even threaten God. They seem to think that God is a small child who can easily be bullied and ignored. *But that is not who God is*. When God came to Job He gave Job a glimpse of His divine wisdom and power – and only a fool would ignore that lesson.

God will not be mocked. The God who created the stars will one day destroy them. The God who created this world once destroyed it in a flood, and the day is coming when He will destroy it a second time with fire. Those who condemn God instead of worshiping Him will find themselves condemned. It is absolute folly to think that a person can rebuke God and force Him to change when they can't even rebuke the sun, moon, or stars. It is insanity to think that a created being is more wise and just than the infinite God who created all things.

In the end Job understood this. He repented of what he had done:

Job 42:1: “Then Job answered the Lord, and said,

2 I know that thou canst do every thing, and that no thought can be withholden from thee.

3 Who is he that hideth counsel without knowledge? therefore have I uttered that I understood not; things too wonderful for me, which I knew not.

4 Hear, I beseech thee, and I will speak: I will demand of thee, and declare thou unto me.

5 I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear: but now mine eye seeth thee.

6 Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes.”

Job acknowledged that God had the right to do whatever He pleased. He confessed that he was wrong to rebuke God and he abhorred himself and repented. He was sorry for what he had done.

There is a clear lesson here in this book, if we are willing to hear it. When trouble comes into our life, are we going to trust God or condemn Him? When God tells us things that we do not want to hear and commands us to do things that we do not like, are we going to submit to the Lord who is right and just in all He does, or will we instead rebel against the Lord and try to overthrow Him?

Those who humble themselves and repent will find mercy, grace, and forgiveness. God will be with them during the hard times in life and will see them through it, and one day God will lift them up

and give them everlasting joy. But those who choose to rebel against God and fight against Him will only find sorrow and darkness. In the end they will be cast into everlasting destruction with the rest of those who tried to overthrow the Lord.

Do not fight against God – for that is a fight you cannot win.

WHERE ARE ALL THE POLITICAL SERMONS?

The other day I was reading the account of John the Baptist. As you probably know, Herod beheaded him while he was in prison. But do you know why he was in prison in the first place? It was because he told Herod that it was wrong for Herod to be sleeping with his brother's wife:

Matthew 14:3: “For Herod had laid hold on John, and bound him, and put him in prison for Herodias' sake, his brother Philip's wife.

4 For John said unto him, It is not lawful for thee to have her.”

That's rather interesting, isn't it? This can only mean that John had been preaching against the sins of Herod. Instead of limiting his preaching to the topics of righteousness, Jesus, and the gospel, John took some time to address the sins of the nation's political leaders.

This is not unusual; in fact, it was quite common in the Old Testament. For example, Nathan confronted King David after he murdered Bathsheba's husband:

2 Samuel 12:7: “And Nathan said to David, Thou art the man. Thus saith the Lord God of Israel, I anointed thee king over Israel, and I delivered thee out of the hand of Saul;

8 And I gave thee thy master's house, and thy master's wives into thy bosom, and gave thee the house of Israel and of Judah; and if that had been too little, I would moreover have given unto thee such and such things.

9 Wherefore hast thou despised the commandment of the Lord, to do evil in his sight? thou hast killed Uriah the Hittite with the sword, and hast taken his wife to be thy wife, and hast slain him with the sword of the children of Ammon.”

But Nathan wasn't the first person to preach against the sins of the king. The prophet Elijah confronted King Ahab after he had Naboth killed and stole his vineyard:

1 Kings 21:20: “And Ahab said to Elijah, Hast thou found me, O mine enemy? And he answered, I have found thee: because thou hast sold thyself to work evil in the sight of the Lord.”

Likewise, Jehu rebuked Jehoshaphat when he formed an alliance with the wicked king Ahab:

2 Chronicles 19:2: “And Jehu the son of Hanani the seer went out to meet him, and said to king Jehoshaphat, Shouldest thou help the ungodly, and love them that hate the Lord? therefore is wrath upon thee from before the Lord.”

I could give many more examples, but I think you get the point. All throughout the Bible we see men of God standing up to the political leaders of the day and rebuking them for their sins. They did not ignore the problem; instead they confronted it. They didn't let it slide under the rug while they focused on other issues; instead they refused to tolerate it and called kings out for what they had done. Yes, that's right: they *called kings out for their sins!*

When was the last time you heard a sermon addressing the sins of our political leaders? How long has it been since your preacher rebuked the government for passing an immoral law? For many people, the answer is *not once in your whole life*. The closest most pastors ever get is maybe preaching a sermon against abortion – but that's as far as they are willing to go. No pastor is going to rebuke their state senator for committing adultery, or discuss the bills that are being considered by the state legislature and condemn them for Biblical reasons. It's just not going to happen.

The reason churches don't do that anymore is because they have made a deal with the government. The government has agreed to give churches tax-exempt status as long as churches never discuss politics, politicians, or political matters. Since churches seem to crave money above all else, they agreed to the deal. They willingly sold themselves out for money and agreed not to preach about certain topics in exchange for more money.

But it didn't used to be that way. You may be surprised to learn that when America was founded, churches had no qualms whatsoever about preaching political sermons. There is a series of books entitled “Political Sermons of the American Founding Era”, which record a whole series of political sermons that were preached in the 18th century. Here are just a few of the sermon titles, to give you an idea of the sort of things that preachers used to talk about:

THE ESSENTIAL RIGHTS AND LIBERTIES OF PROTESTANTS
BRITAIN’S MERCIES, AND BRITAIN’S DUTIES
CIVIL MAGISTRATES MUST BE JUST, RULING IN THE FEAR OF GOD
A CALM ADDRESS TO OUR AMERICAN COLONIES
A SERMON ON THE DAY OF THE COMMENCEMENT OF THE CONSTITUTION
DEFENSIVE ARMS VINDICATED
THE REPUBLIC OF THE ISRAELITES AN EXAMPLE TO THE AMERICAN STATES

Here is a quote from one sermon, written in 1775. This part of the sermon was addressing the idea of taxation without representation:

But an American can have no possible influence in the choice of an English senator; and an English senator, when he taxes an American, cannot tax himself also, because he has no property in America to be taxed: yet self-taxation is the sole pledge of the taxer, for security of the taxed. He, who does not tax himself, taxes others without feeling: he may, therefore, tax without propriety, and without measure; may take, not only a fifth, or a fourth, but the half, or even the whole of property; and make the wealthy subject an impoverished slave. The wisest forms of government, adverting to the imperfection of human nature, have, as much as possible, avoided leaving one man at the mercy of another; they have ever contrived some rational restraint on action, some bond of reciprocal safety.

The point of this passage was that it was immoral for someone to pass a tax that did not also apply to themselves. If people had the power to do that then they could act “without feeling”. Since it cost them nothing to take money from others, they could take as much as they pleased and not feel any consequences.

Could you imagine a pastor preaching a sermon on that subject today? Churches avoid politics as much as possible. But note that the point of these sermons was *not* to support one party over the other. What these sermons were doing was looking at the political actions that were taking place in

society and placing them in a Biblical context. What did the Bible have to say about taxation without representation? Was there Biblical support for the American Revolution, or was it a sin against God? How did the laws being considered conform to the Word of God? What did God think about our Constitution?

You see, the laws of a nation are a serious matter and the Church used to care if the laws were just or unjust. Pastors wanted their congregations to know how to apply the Word of God to their governments. They wanted people to understand how to look at a law (or a politician) and tell if it was right or wrong, Biblical or unbiblical. So they preached about politics – just as the prophets in the Bible did.

Is it a sin to preach a sermon on a law, and evaluate that law against the Word of God? Of course not! God surely cares about whether our laws are just or unjust, and God *definitely* wants His people to have discernment and wisdom. Are pastors today teaching people how to evaluate their governments (and politicians) from a Biblical perspective, and compare their actions and laws to the Word of God? No, they most certainly are not.

Why? Because it would endanger their tax-exempt status. If churches started preaching against ungodly politicians and ungodly laws – which churches *did not hesitate* to do in the 18th century, when this nation was founded – then the government might take away their tax-exempt status. That would cost churches money. From what I can tell, churches will compromise on preaching the Word if the government pays them to do so.

Here is a question for you: could you imagine Elijah or John the Baptist agreeing to not talk about the actions of their kings in exchange for tax-exempt status? It's unthinkable, isn't it? John the Baptist was willing to go to prison *and death* in order to “speak truth to power” (to borrow a modern phrase). He preached the whole counsel of God, and he excluded no one and nothing – no matter what it cost him. Do you think that Elijah would *ever* have made a deal to be silent about certain issues in exchange for money from the king?

But *that is exactly the deal that modern churches have made*. We have sold out our responsibilities to preach the whole counsel of God in exchange for money, and I assure you that God does not smile on that. What God wants us to do is *preach the truth*, not minimize our tax liabilities. He wants us to be *faithful*, not rich.

This is how Jesus put it:

Matthew 6:24: “No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon.”

Did you see that? You *cannot* serve God and mammon. It can't be done. If you choose to serve God then you must be willing to sacrifice everything – including money. However, if you sell out God in exchange for money then you are no longer serving God. At that point you have become God's enemy, for you have chosen to disobey God in exchange for cash. You have accepted a bribe and perverted the Word of God, and you *will* be held accountable for that.

Paul was able to say that he preached the *whole* counsel of God:

Acts 20:27: “For I have not shunned to declare unto you all the counsel of God.”

Paul didn't hide anything or avoid any topics; he preached *all* of it. The modern church can't say that, can they? The church avoids all sorts of topics because it knows that if they preach *that* passage,

or address *that* issue, there will be problems. Paul was willing to preach the whole counsel of God even though he knew it might cost him his life (and it eventually did). It's impossible to imagine Paul compromising his message in exchange for a bribe from the government.

You see, Paul had a very different approach. He understood that we are to preach the Word “in season”, when people will hear it, and “out of season”, when people will reject it:

2 Timothy 4:2: “Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all long suffering and doctrine.”

Do you see Paul saying “Preach the parts of the word that won't increase your tax liabilities?” Definitely not! The Bible commands us to preach the truth – *all* of the truth, *all* of the time. The churches of this country have not done that for a very long time, and that is a heavy strike against them. God *will* hold pastors accountable who refused to preach the Word, and who sold out in exchange for money. We are to preach *everything* – because *that is what God requires*.

If you are willing to sell out God in exchange for money, then what does that say about you and your commitment? When you stand before Christ and are judged for your life, do you think Jesus will tell you “I'm so glad you avoided preaching parts of My Word in exchange for money”?