

VICTORY



Supplemental Material

by Stan Cox

The following articles are based on the material in the Victory in Jesus class outlines, and originally appeared in my local teaching bulletin, *Reflections*. To maximize efficiency, each article is formatted to be contained on a single page.

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1 - The Path to Joy

The wise man of Ecclesiastes had it right in despairing of a contemplated life without God's presence. *"Vanity of vanities," says the Preacher; 'Vanity of vanities, all is vanity'"* (Ecclesiastes 1:2). Life only has meaning if God is in the picture. Otherwise, it is without any lasting value or purpose. Men everywhere live out their short existence on earth without hope beyond the grave. Such an existence is truly vain. *"One generation passes away, and another generation comes; but the earth abides forever"* (1:4).

Many of the problems we have with sorrow and despair come from this flawed perspective on life. Above all other things, we must recognize our purpose on earth is to serve God. If we do, we can with that realization have a happy and productive life, and after, a sure hope of eternal bliss. As the wise man concluded in his contemplation of life, *"Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: fear God and keep His commandments, for this is man's all. For God will bring every work into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil"* (12:13-14).

This truth is validated by the Lord Himself. Mark 12 records a conversation between Jesus and a scribe (lawyer) who asked, *"Which is the first commandment of all?"* (28). Jesus answered, *"And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength"* (30). It is this premise, that above all we are called to serve God, that is the foundation of every faithful Christian's walk.

This is why it is disturbing that so many who profess faith in God are in no way seeking to know His will or to obey it! If one accepts the premise that a life of value for him is a life lived in obedience to his Maker, why would he then minimize the importance of knowing God's will? Or spend so much effort casting aspersion upon the revelation of that will to man (the Bible)? And yet, that is precisely the practice of the majority of religious people in our society. Only a few have the audacity to claim that the Bible contains God's inspired will, and must be obeyed. For this they are branded as extreme, superstitious and ignorant.

In truth, God has revealed His will to man. As did the apostles, it is right for us to proclaim to the world, *"We ought to obey God rather than men"* (Acts 5:29). This obedience must be complete and voluntary. As we acknowledge the Lordship of God's Son, we willingly submit to Him *in toto*. *"I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me"* (Galatians 2:20).

In exchange, God promises favor and joy for us as we serve Him. *"But let all those rejoice who put their trust in You; let them ever shout for joy, because You defend them; let those also who love Your name be joyful in You. For You, O Lord, will bless the righteous; with favor You will surround him as with a shield"* (Psalm 5:11-12).

Some may misunderstand the nature of this promise, as it is in no way dependent upon the actual conditions of our existence on earth. In other words, Christians can be joyous **despite** the troubles we experience, rather than having our joy be dependent upon the present circumstances of our lives. This is because the favor of God is finally and ultimately realized in eternity. Because of this, even in times of distress or privation, service brings joy. Paul understood this truth, and wrote while in prison, *"But I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at last your care for me has flourished again; though you surely did care, but you lacked opportunity. Not that I speak in regard to need, for I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content: I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me"* (Philippians 4:10-13).

When I am distracted by the difficulties of life, the favor of God allows me to refocus on my service to Him, and the hope that is the byproduct of that service. His favor motivates me to alter my life and habits so that I can fully realize my potential as His child. And, His favor provokes a dedication that is characterized by steadfastness. I do not falter in my service to the Master, because I know endurance brings reward. As the Lord told his servant John, *"I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. I will give of the fountain of the water of life freely to him who thirsts. He who overcomes shall inherit all things, and I will be his God and he shall be My son"* (Revelation 21:6-7).

God has never promised an easy life to His people. Israel did not have an easy existence, and Christians today suffer as well. Not only do we have the rain which falls *"on the just and on the unjust"* alike (cf. Matthew 5:45); but also the injustices of an antagonistic world that are ours to bear, *"Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution"* (2 Timothy 3:12).

Despite it all, we know that it is a righteous thing with God, *"to give you who are troubled rest with us when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels"* (2 Thessalonians 1:7). With that assurance firmly in mind we press on with equanimity. And even beyond mere acceptance, we with Paul *"rejoice, yes, and will rejoice"* (Philippians 1:18)!

2 - A Committed Faith

Abraham is a wonderful example of a man who had a total commitment of faith toward God. *“By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to the place which he would receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he dwelt in the land of promise as in a foreign country, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise; for he waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God”* (Hebrews 11:8-10).

The obstacles he encountered during his pilgrimage were formidable. His response of faith necessitated his remaining life be spent as a nomad in a land that was not his own. He suffered through famine, and danger because He believed the threefold promise God had made to him. God had promised that land where he dwelt in tents would be given to his descendants. He had promised that those descendants, (from Isaac, the son of promise), would become a great nation (Israel). Finally, God promised that through Abraham’s seed a Savior of all nations would come (cf. Genesis 12:1-3).

Abraham’s faith was tested. *First*, with the unnatural promise that a son would be born to him and Sarah. The two were past the time of child bearing. *Second*, after the son Isaac was given to him, God required Abraham offer the child as a sacrifice. At the moment of sacrifice, God stayed his hand. The text of Genesis 22:12 reveals the words God said to him at that time, *“Do not lay your hand on the lad, or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me.”* Truly Abraham stands as a wonderful example of total commitment in service to God.

God certainly blessed Abraham. Genesis 13 reveals that he was *“very rich in livestock, in silver, and in gold”* (2). In fact, his possessions were so great that he had to separate from his nephew Lot because the land could not sustain the herds and servants of the two men. However, the promises that God gave to Abraham in Genesis 12 were not realized during his lifetime. As with so many other patriarchs of which we read in the Old Testament, Abraham, *“did not receive the promise, God having provided something better for us, that they should not be made perfect apart from us”* (Hebrews 11:39-40). As is always the case, a careful study of Abraham’s life shows that the most important and valuable considerations are spiritual and eternal. Not temporal and temporary!

Just as God’s promises to Abraham were fulfilled, we can trust that He will keep the promises He makes to those who belong to Christ. Jesus said, *“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. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also”* (John 14:2-3). Because He promised it, we know it to be true.

So, what should our response be to that promise? Paul states it clearly, *“For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself His own special people, zealous for good works”* (Titus 2:11-14). Our response to the promises of the Lord must be loyal obedience to His will. He demands a sober, righteous and disciplined life. Those who diligently walk the walk of faith will receive a crown of life.

That doesn’t mean that our lives here on earth will be lived in ease. Just as Abraham suffered because of his decision to follow the Lord, we may as well. We may suffer privation, the loss of relationships, even persecution at the hands of ungodly men! *“Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution”* (2 Timothy 3:12). But, as we embrace the testing of our faith, like Abraham, we look to the eternal, heavenly reward.

Since the Bible clearly teaches an eternal reward for the faithful, we should diligently strive to live a righteous life. This means we should strive to avoid any trap the devil supplies. We should not become too comfortable on this earth, as the *“love of the world”* can make us an enemy of God (cf. 1 John 2:15; James 4:4). Instead, we should immerse ourselves in the things of God. Study His word, and meditate on it daily. Be diligent to pray, with thanksgiving. Assemble with saints for worship and fellowship. Be hospitable and benevolent, expressing love for our brethren, strangers, and even our enemies. Keep ourselves unspotted from sinful pursuits and pleasures. These are the things that will lead the Lord to say to us in that final day, *“Well done, good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord.”* (Matthew 5:21).

The life of Abraham demonstrates God’s faithfulness in keeping His promises to us. Knowing of our established hope for an eternal reward allows us to maintain our faith despite the challenges of our lives. If we look with the eyes of faith to eternity, we will maintain true joy here on earth.

3 - Superconquerors!

The most potent weapon Christians have in combating life's difficulties and the despair that accompanies them is the realization that our ultimate victory has already been secured through the work of our Lord. Paul acknowledged this reality in 1 Corinthians 15 as he wrote of the significance of Christ's resurrection.

If Christ has not been raised from the dead after dying for our sins, Paul noted, *"your faith is futile; you are still in your sins! Then also those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished"* (17-18). But, because Christ has gained victory over death, the reality is far different! *"But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep"* (19). Our confidence lies in the fact of Christ's accomplishment. Because Christ was raised from the dead, we know that the faithful will be as well, as He promised! Paul wrote, *"But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ"* (57).

While the ultimate victory is guaranteed, we face the reality of our present distress. This life is filled with trials and difficulties, and this truth is especially so because of our affiliation with Christ. To one extent or another, our lives mirror the plight of the Christians in Smyrna, as revealed in Revelation 2. In verse 10 of the text, the Lord told those Christians, *"Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life."* As the faithful of Smyrna, we are promised the crown of life. Paul wrote that it is the prize of *"all who have loved His appearing"* (2 Timothy 4:8).

That ultimate prize was a common theme of Paul's epistles. Nowhere is the concept more eloquently stated than in the text of Romans 8. Consider these words:

"What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?" (31-32).

The most powerful and wise Being that exists is on our side. No other force, (in fact, no multitude of forces, no matter the amount or number), can withstand the Almighty God of heaven. Recognizing both His might, and His willingness to sacrifice all for our well being, we can have confidence as we place our trust in Him.

To illustrate the superiority of our God above all the opposition forces that afflict us, Paul listed the evil things that may beset us:

"Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?" (35).

This list is short, but comprehensive. It details physical violence, privation, and economic want. The question, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?" is a rhetorical one, as Paul clearly declares the power of God to prevail over any opposition.

We can include physical ailments and frailties among those things that are incapable of separating us from the love of God. Though they come upon us as a matter of course rather than being the product of willful malice, they nevertheless can cause discouragement. But, they can not overcome us. Regardless of what befalls us, our trust remains anchored in the accomplishments of the Lord.

The most direct and inspiring sentiment of Paul's essay is this, *"Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us"* (37). The phrase in the NKJV, "more than conquerors" is a translation of a single Greek word, *hupernikao*, found only in this passage. It is a combination of two Greek terms: *nikao*, meaning "to overcome, to conquer"; and *huper*, a superlative meaning "over or more." As Vine states in his dictionary, it means, "to be more than conqueror, to gain a surpassing victory. lit. 'we are hyper-conquerors'."

In today's parlance, we are "superconquerors," similar to the comic representations of superheroes. It is one thing to be a hero, another entirely to be a hero with courage, strength and special abilities that are "over or more" than other men. Remember the old description of Superman's powers? "Faster than a speeding bullet! More powerful than a locomotive! Able to leap tall buildings in a single bound!"

Think in the same way of the victory we have in Jesus. Consider the continuing thought of our text:

"For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (38-39).

Our confidence in our salvation is not born of arrogance. It is a byproduct of our confidence in Jesus, *"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me"* (Philippians 4:13). The devil throws so much at us! He hopes we will lose our confidence, and ultimately our faith. The best way to combat such despair is to remember Paul's words, *"And our hope for you is steadfast, because we know that as you are partakers of the sufferings, so also you will partake of the consolation"* (2 Corinthians 1:7).\

4 - Making Good Choices

Our lives consist of a series of choices. The choices we make determine the path that our life will take. Wrong turns can have tragic consequences, but good choices can make for a joyous and fulfilling tenure here on earth. Of course, our choices can also impact our eternal standing with God. The mansion prepared for us by the Lord (cf. John 14:1-2) hangs in the balance, dependent upon the decisions we make.

The life of Moses serves as a wonderful example in this regard. His life was first influenced by the decision made by his mother. *"So the woman conceived and bore a son. And when she saw that he was a beautiful child, she hid him three months"* (Exodus 2:2). When she could hide him no longer, her desperate act to save her son resulted in Moses being raised by the daughter of Pharaoh.

Later, Moses determined his life's ultimate path by submitting to His God. After years of exile in Midian, God sent him back to Egypt to lead his people out of bondage (cf. Exodus 6:13). In submitting to God's plan for him, Moses became the leader of the Jewish people. God's law for Israel, and the covenant relationship they enjoyed, came through Moses, the lawgiver. With God's help, he led them out of Egypt, and through 40 years of wandering in the desert, to the banks of the promised land (cf. Numbers 27:12-13). Because of his faithful service, scripture refers to him as *"the man of God"* (Deuteronomy 33:1).

The writer of Hebrews expressed it well, *"By faith Moses, when he became of age, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin, esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt; for he looked to the reward"* (Hebrews 11:24-26). Moses chose to reject the riches of Egypt to follow God. How many of us today are willing to make the same type of sacrifice?

There are a number of lessons to learn from the life of Moses. For example, as the choice of his mother impacted his life, our loved ones can greatly influence us as well! Consider the praise of Paul for the mother and grandmother of Timothy. He wrote of his thanks to God, *"when I call to remembrance the genuine faith that is in you, which dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice, and I am persuaded is in you also"* (2 Timothy 1:5). Those of us who have been raised by godly parents, or who have benefitted from the faith of others, should appreciate and give thanks for such encouragement and guidance.

The impact that obedience to God had upon Moses' life is instructive as well. God has revealed himself to man through the Scriptures. Those scriptures fully equip us to live in a way that pleases Him (cf. 2 Timothy 3:16-17). The Psalmist wrote, *"Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stands in the path of sinners, nor sits in the seat of the scornful; but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and in His law he meditates day and night"* (Psalm 1:1-2). If we learn what God's will is for us, and obey it, we will have a successful life in preparation for eternal bliss.

Consider the powerful enemy that Moses, with God's help, was able to overcome. God's power was demonstrated through the ten plagues He visited upon Egypt (Exodus 7-12), as well as the destruction of the Egyptian army in the Red Sea (Exodus 14). While it is true that those who are evil may provoke and oppress us, ultimately God will protect us. Jesus said, *"And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell"* (Matthew 10:28). God is on our side, and since this is so, *"If God is for us, who can be against us?"* (Romans 8:31).

Finally, consider the feast of the Passover. God instructed Moses and Israel to observe that feast as a means of remembering the mercy He showed His people. *"It is a night of solemn observance to the Lord for bringing them out of the land of Egypt. This is that night of the Lord, a solemn observance for all the children of Israel throughout their generations"* (Exodus 12:42). The victories that we receive through Jesus Christ should also be remembered. One such memorial is the Lord's Supper (cf. 1 Corinthians 11:23-26). We should always keep in our hearts the things God has done for us, and rejoice in our hope! As Paul wrote to the Colossians, *"Continue earnestly in prayer, being vigilant in it with thanksgiving"* (Colossians 4:2).

Our lives, like the life of Moses, can turn a different direction as a consequence of any choice we make. We wish to live successful lives that will lead to happiness here on earth, and to eternal joy after our life on earth comes to an end. Therefore, we need to be diligent, guarding our hearts, seeking wise counsel, and determining to submit ourselves wholly to the will of the Lord. The apostle Paul had the right idea, one we should emulate. *"I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me"* (Galatians 2:20).

Praise the Lord! We are His, and as such we have the hope of eternal life. We trust our Lord's promise of a mansion over the hilltop. May our choices reflect that trust.

5 - Wait On Your God

“So you, by the help of your God, return; observe mercy and justice, and wait on your God continually” (Hosea 12:6).

It is hard to be patient. This is especially so when you perceive injustice. While you are striving to be good and righteous, the ungodly prosper. The Psalmist knew this, and counseled:

“Rest in the Lord, and wait patiently for Him; Do not fret because of him who prospers in his way, because of the man who brings wicked schemes to pass. Cease from anger, and forsake wrath; do not fret — it only causes harm. For evildoers shall be cut off; but those who wait on the Lord, they shall inherit the earth” (Psalm 37:7-9).

Hosea prophesied for about 65 years, during the darkest days of depravity in Israel. It was a time of idolatry, as the nation reveled in her infidelity to God (cf. 2 Kings 17:9-10). Hosea’s personal life mirrored the sad state of the nation itself. *“When the Lord began to speak by Hosea, the Lord said to Hosea: ‘Go, take yourself a wife of harlotry and children of harlotry, for the land has committed great harlotry by departing from the Lord’”* (Hosea 1:2). Hosea’s marriage to Gomer, and the birth of their son Jezreel was a sign from God, who said He would, *“bring an end to the kingdom of the house of Israel”* for her sins (cf. 1:4).

In our text (12:6), Hosea called Israel to repentance, patience, and obedience as a response to God’s judgment. In the words of the prophet Micah, *“He has shown you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?”* (Micah 6:8).

The lesson is an important one for us to learn. In addition to the call for repentance from sin and obedience to God, patience is a great and needed virtue. Consider the following thoughts from the pen of James:

- **Patience is needed in the midst of chastisement.** *“My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing”* (James 1:2-4). If patience is the response to trials in our lives, it is an indication of our spiritual maturity. Our willingness to endure, when our faith passes through the crucible of tribulation, is a true reason for rejoicing.
- **Patience, (endurance), is needed in the midst of temptation.** *“Blessed is the man who endures temptation; for when he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him”* (James 1:12). Temptation is the realm of the devil. He is the one who entices us to sin. He seeks to wear us down with continual attacks. While we might say “no” again and again, he looks for the day when our defenses are down, and we say “yes” to his wiles. The man who can patiently and consistently refuse his advances is the man who proves himself to God. As such, the promised crown will be won.
- **Consider the work of the prophets, and learn from their example.** *“My brethren, take the prophets, who spoke in the name of the Lord, as an example of suffering and patience. Indeed we count them blessed who endure. You have heard of the perseverance of Job and seen the end intended by the Lord—that the Lord is very compassionate and merciful”* (James 5:10-11). As revealed in the Old Testament, the prophets of God were time and again rebuffed when declaring God’s will. Their teaching and motivation were maligned. Remember Ahab’s query to Elijah? *“Is that you, O troubler of Israel?”* (1 Kings 18:17). Stephen noted the Israelites’ treatment of the prophets while condemning his audience for their duplicity in killing Jesus. He said, *“You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who foretold the coming of the Just One, of whom you now have become the betrayers and murderers, who have received the law by the direction of angels and have not kept it”* (Acts 7:51-53). Yet, despite the persecution they suffered, the prophets were bold and brave in proclaiming the will of the Lord.

Yes, it may seem that the ungodly prosper while we, seeking to serve the Lord, suffer persecution and privation. However, our accounts are not settled on this earth nor in this time. If we could only see things as God sees them! While acknowledging God’s impending judgment and the eventuality of eternity, the apostle Peter wrote, *“Therefore, since all these things will be dissolved, what manner of persons ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be dissolved, being on fire, and the elements will melt with fervent heat?”* (2 Peter 3:11-12).

In the end, all of our suffering will end, and we will be received by God. Tears will be replaced with joy, darkness with light, mortality with immortality. *“For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory”* (2 Corinthians 4:17).

6 - "I Will Certainly Be With You"

In Exodus 3 we read of God's conversation with Moses, from the midst of the burning bush. Moses was understandably hesitant to take on the task of leading the Israelites out of Egypt. He asked *"Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and that I should bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?"* (11). In response, God did not seek to stroke the ego of Moses. Such was not needed. It was enough for God to say, *"I will certainly be with you"* (12). It didn't matter who Moses was, with God's help he would be successful in his task.

The single most important lesson to take from Israel's exodus from Egypt is that God was with them. This was demonstrated during their initial escape, after being trapped up against the Red Sea. Through God's providence, they passed through on dry land. The Egyptian army, however, was utterly destroyed in the waters of the sea. *"So the Lord saved Israel that day out of the hand of the Egyptians, and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore"* (Exodus 14:30). In the same way, during the most difficult moments of our life, the God we love and obey can protect and save us. The prophet Isaiah does a wonderful job of describing this truth. *"Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are fearful-hearted, 'Be strong, do not fear! Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God; He will come and save you'"* (Isaiah 35:3-4).

It is, of course, important to note the contextual limitation of these words. It is not accurate to state that the righteous will always be physically protected from harm, or will always be enriched materially through God's providence. In fact, the opposite is true. Lazarus, a godly man, nevertheless had a bereft and difficult existence on earth. In Paradise, Abraham said that Lazarus received, *"evil things"* while on earth, though after death he was *"comforted"* (cf. Luke 16:25). It is a "righteous thing with God" to settle accounts in eternity. God's children who are troubled will receive *"rest with us when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels."* In contrast, the ungodly will be *"punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power"* (2 Thessalonians 1:6-10).

While it is true that *"all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution"* (2 Timothy 3:12), it is likewise true that *"he who endures to the end will be saved"* (Matthew 10:22).

When the Israelites were in the wilderness, (a dry and barren place), God supplied provisions for them. Manna (Exodus 16), and water that flowed from a rock (Exodus 17). Christians are certainly promised the provision of physical necessities as we serve God. *"But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things [in the context, food, water and clothing] shall be added to you"* (Matthew 6:33). Jesus taught his disciples to pray, asking, *"Give us this day our daily bread"* (Matthew 6:11).

Again, though, the spiritual application is more important. Jesus contrasted the manna delivered from heaven with the sustenance He Himself would supply. *"Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and are dead. This is the bread which comes down from heaven, that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread which came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread that I shall give is My flesh, which I shall give for the life of the world."* (John 6:49-51).

The key to receiving such blessings from God is an obedient faith. While the Israelites were in the wilderness, they camped at Mt. Sinai. Moses ascended the mountain to receive God's commandments for Israel. It was at that time that God directed Moses to tell the people, *"Now therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people; for all the earth is Mine"* (Exodus 19:5). In response, the people promised, *"All that the Lord has spoken we will do"* (19:8).

The sad history of Israel shows the people did not keep that promise. In fact, it was her unfaithfulness to God that led to her rejection by God, her captivity, and the eventual dissolution of the nation to the point where only a small remnant remained.

A final time we note the important spiritual application to be made. Paul admonished the physical Jew in Antioch concerning his lack of faith in Jesus Christ. *"Then Paul and Barnabas grew bold and said, 'It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken to you first; but since you reject it, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, behold, we turn to the Gentiles'"* (Acts 13:46). Later, he wrote to the Gentiles in his Roman letter, *"Do not be haughty, but fear. For if God did not spare the natural branches, He may not spare you either. Therefore consider the goodness and severity of God: on those who fell, severity; but toward you, goodness, if you continue in His goodness. Otherwise you also will be cut off"* (Romans 11:20-22).

If we seek to serve God faithfully, we are assured His protection, providence and reward. But, as with Israel, such consideration is conditional! God is certainly merciful and gracious, but He is also just. **Obedience ensures His favor.**

7 - God Hears, And Answers!

People generally recognize the positive impact of prayer. What is not always understood is **why** prayer is such a positive thing. Our national leaders during tragic times call for and express thanks for prayers offered. Many of those same leaders do not believe in God, or have no faith that God intercedes in men's affairs. For many, prayer is simply a way of saying, "I'm thinking about you." It is an expression of sympathy, and is appreciated for that reason alone. Caregivers may go so far as to suggest that prayers offered can have a placebo effect; a bit like chicken soup, it can't hurt.

The Christian knows that prayer is much more. Prayer is the believer's means of obtaining God's providential assistance. Requests are made and granted. An example of this is seen in Peter's imprisonment in Acts 12. We are told while in prison that *"but constant prayer was offered to God for him by the church"* (5). We are also told of Peter's eventual release in response to those prayers. *"Now behold, an angel of the Lord stood by him, and a light shone in the prison; and he struck Peter on the side and raised him up, saying, 'Arise quickly!' And his chains fell off his hands"* (7). Regarding the experience, Peter said, *"Now I know for certain that the Lord has sent His angel, and has delivered me from the hand of Herod and from all the expectation of the Jewish people"* (11).

James, in his epistle, wrote of the importance and effectiveness of prayer. In James 5, he noted that prayer is appropriate for:

- When one is suffering (13).
- When one is sick (14-15).
- When one is penitent in acknowledging sin (15).

James also emphasized that such prayers are effective. *"Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much"* (16). When a righteous man prays for divine healing, such healing is possible.

A caveat — James stated that it is the effective prayer that is answered. At least one aspect of a prayer's effectiveness is answered in the question, "Is it God's will?" As an example, prayer to God does not always lead to healing because it is not God's intent that man should live forever. *"...it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment"* (Hebrews 9:27).

When a penitent man prays for forgiveness, God has promised he will **always** receive it. *"If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness"* (1 John 1:9).

Prayer is appropriate when a person is suffering because such an intimate conversation with God brings relief. When Israel cried out with a penitent heart in the midst of God's chastisement, He was swayed by their words. *"...He regarded their affliction, when He heard their cry; and for their sake He remembered His covenant, and relented according to the multitude of His mercies"* (Psalm 106:44-45).

Prayer to God often brings healing to the sick. Hezekiah was on his death bed, and in his misery turned to God for healing. Jehovah answered, *"Thus says the Lord, the God of David your father: 'I have heard your prayer, I have seen your tears; surely I will heal you'"* (2 Kings 20:5). Hezekiah recovered, and remained king for another 15 years.

Prayer is the means by which forgiveness is granted to the penitent child of God. John wrote, *"My little children, these things I write to you, so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous"* (1 John 2:1). When Simon sinned, Peter admonished him, *"Repent therefore of this your wickedness, and pray God if perhaps the thought of your heart may be forgiven you"* (Acts 8:22).

Sometimes, however, prayer does not work. Such failures must not be attributed to a lack of consideration by God, nor any impotence on His part. Instead, the petition made did not suit His purposes, or more likely there was fault in the petitioner. In James 5, Elijah (a righteous man) had his prayers answered by God. In Isaiah 59, however, Jehovah refused to answer prayers. Why? *"Behold, the Lord's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save; nor His ear heavy, that it cannot hear. But your iniquities have separated you from your God; and your sins have hidden His face from you, so that He will not hear"* (1-2). It is a presumptive man who expects an answer from the God to whom he refuses to submit.

Answered prayer, by its nature is anecdotal. While the skeptics will deny its power, the believer trusts in the promises of His God. After all He is the God who promised to send His Son as our Savior. He kept His promise. He is the God who promised eternal life, and showed His ability to keep that promise by raising Jesus from the dead. He promised to hear and answer the prayers of the faithful. Christians every day and everywhere long for His attention, and rejoice in the blessings He provides.

"I spread out my hands to You; my soul longs for You like a thirsty land. Answer me speedily, O Lord; my spirit fails! Do not hide Your face from me, lest I be like those who go down into the pit" (Psalm 143:6-7).

8 - An Anchor of the Soul

David, as the anointed King of Israel, had many enemies. Among them was Saul, who remained enthroned as King. Saul was jealous of David, and sought his life. However, scripture reveals that God providentially protected David. In 2 Samuel 22, David acknowledged that help:

“The Lord is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer; The God of my strength, in whom I will trust; my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold and my refuge; my Savior, You save me from violence” (2-3).

God rewards those who put their trust in Him. Paul affirmed this for the Christian in Ephesians 1:11-12:

“In Him also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestined according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will, that we who first trusted in Christ should be to the praise of His glory.”

In contrast, God has little patience for the man who does not trust Him. It is an insult to doubt God. Both His character and resourcefulness should remove any doubt regarding His ability and willingness to help those who trust in Him. And yet, some waver in their faith:

“If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind. For let not that man suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways” (James 1:5-8).

These principles are established clearly by God’s interaction with Israel as they rejected His plans for them to inhabit Canaan. When the twelve spies were sent in to the land, ten of the twelve reported back to Moses, *“We are not able to go up against the people, for they are stronger than we”* (Numbers 13:31). Only Joshua and Caleb dissented from that opinion. They spoke to the people, and said, *“If the Lord delights in us, then He will bring us into this land and give it to us, ‘a land which flows with milk and honey.’ Only do not rebel against the Lord, nor fear the people of the land, for they are our bread; their protection has departed from them, and the Lord is with us. Do not fear them”* (Numbers 14:8-10).

Unfortunately, the prevailing opinion was that of the ten, and the people refused to enter the land. This lack of trust in God’s protection led to their banishment into captivity. Of that entire generation, only Joshua and Caleb were granted entrance into the land of Promise. In Joshua 14, Caleb received his reward from the Lord. *“And Joshua blessed him, and gave Hebron to Caleb the son of Jephunneh as an inheritance. Hebron therefore became the inheritance of Caleb the son of Jephunneh the Kenizzite to this day, because he wholly followed the Lord God of Israel”* (13-14). The lesson is two fold: 1) God has promised reward to those who trust him, but punishment to the unfaithful; 2) God always keeps His promises.

Before we cast too much aspersion upon the Israelites, we need to quantify the extent of our own trust in God. As were they, we occasionally are beset with daunting obstacles in our lives. In one sense, we can relate to Paul’s description in 2 Corinthians 4, *“We are hard-pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed — always carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body”* (8-10). While the pressure, perplexity, persecution and punches are common to all, not all respond with the resiliency, resolution, and resourcefulness that comes from faith and trust in Jesus. *“For we who live are always delivered to death for Jesus’ sake, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh”* (11).

Admittedly, it is sometimes difficult to know from whence God’s help will come. This is why you must look through the eyes of faith! Peter referred to the fact that various trials test your faith *“by fire”* (cf. 1 Peter 1:6-7). By them, your faith is seen to either be counterfeit or genuine. If genuine, it is *“found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ”* (7), and ultimately you receive *“the end of your faith — the salvation of your souls”* (9).

That’s right! Our trust in God, (in the midst of the unfaithfulness of the world in general), brings us His promised blessings. At the end of his life, Paul wrote of the reward promised him by God, *“the crown of righteousness”* (2 Timothy 4:8). He noted that the promise was not only to him, but *“also to all who have loved his appearing.”*

God does not promise us escape from the trials and tribulations of life. Even the most righteous among us will suffer despite (and in some cases because of) our faith. What he does promise is that He will settle accounts in eternity. And, we can trust that He will keep that promise!

“This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast” (Hebrews 6:19).

9 - The Benefits of Assembling

When God created man, he made him to be a social being. Throughout history, men have typically gathered together in communities. In fact, the institution of marriage was established by God as He determined *“It is not good that man should be alone.”* So, God said, *“I will make him a helper comparable to him.”* (Genesis 2:28).

It is not surprising that God would create a means for men to commune together spiritually as well. For example, He called for the nation of Israel first to build a tabernacle, then a temple as a place to collectively worship Him. As Christians, the actual location is of little significance. Jesus told the Samaritan woman of this, in describing His coming kingdom. *“Woman, believe Me, the hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, worship the Father”* (John 4:21). In Christ, the location doesn't matter, it is the community that is important.

In Ephesians 4, Paul explained that the local church is the organization designed by God *“for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ”* (12). As we each do our part, we cause *“growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love”* (16).

It is important to be a member of a local church of Christ. Such brings opportunities to work together, worship together, and rejoice together. It brings one under the discipline of the group, and the oversight of men qualified to *“watch out for your souls, as those who must give account”* (Hebrews 13:17). As such, we follow Paul's example, *“And when Saul had come to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples”* (Acts 9:26). There are obligations to God, brethren and mankind that simply can not be accomplished without the joint cooperation of God's people.

The Hebrew writer wrote of the benefits of gathering together with the saints, in Hebrews 10:24-25:

“And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, ²⁵ not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching.”

His words are novel in that they approach the topic of communal worship on the basis of responsibility rather than personal benefit. In other words, I am to gather with the saints that I may help them, not that they may help me. Consider the wisdom in this.

The typical attitude can be summarized as a “what can you do for me” approach to church attendance. People will choose which church they are a part of based upon what that church offers them or their family. Churches become retailers of spiritual wares, and the individual shops at the institution that best fits. This is a take, take, take mentality, with the emphasis on getting what I can from “them.”

God's view is completely different. The way He looks at it, I am to gather with His people to find out what I can do for them! I choose which church I am a part of based upon the question, “Where can I do the most good for the Lord?” My view of the church is organic rather than institutional. The church doesn't exist to serve me. Rather, I, as a member of the church, exist to serve others. This is a give, give, give mentality, with the emphasis on serving my brethren in any way I can.

God's way works! A group of dedicated Christians, each one concerned only with how he can help others, results in great growth and edification. I supply the help I can, and in return I get the combined help of all my brothers and sisters in Christ. What wisdom is seen in God's plan!

When I come to worship with my brethren, I have the opportunity to:

- **Raise my voice with theirs in praise to Him.** As we sing, by our words we teach and admonish, *“one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs”* (Colossians 3:16).
- **Sit and hear God's word proclaimed.** These messages serve to equip me *“for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ”* (Ephesians 4:12).
- **Commune with them around the table of my Lord,** remembering His death, and proclaiming *“the Lord's death till He comes”* (1 Corinthians 11:26).
- **Lay by in store** (cf. 1 Corinthians 16:1-2), allowing me to support and participate materially in the important works of edification, evangelism and benevolence.
- **Pray together with my brethren.** We offer up supplications and petitions on behalf of one another, and communicate our common needs and desires to the Father in heaven (cf. James 5:14-18; Revelation 5:8).

Christians come to worship together because we love God, and love each other. These assemblies serve to stir us up to *“love and good works”* as we exhort one another.

Assembling with the saints gains importance when we face difficult circumstances. Each of us have burdens to bear, and tribulations. Fortunately, we have one another to lean upon, and as we gather together we have opportunities to laugh together, weep together, and encourage one another in our walk with Christ. This is God's way!

10 - God' Provision

After leaving Egypt, the Israelites found themselves trapped on the shore of the Red Sea. With the sea at their backs, and Pharaoh's army rapidly approaching, the people complained to Moses, saying that it would have been better for them to remain slaves *"than that we should die in the wilderness"* (Exodus 14:12). Moses responded, *"Do not be afraid. Stand still, and see the salvation of the Lord, which He will accomplish for you today"* (13). Since God was with them, victory was assured. The Egyptians were wiped out.

In contrast, Joshua and the people were routed by the weak and small denizens of Ai, as recorded in Joshua 7. Why? Sin was in the camp, and God said to Joshua, *"Neither will I be with you anymore, unless you destroy the accursed from among you"* (12). Since God was against them, they were defeated.

One of the most wonderful examples of God's provision is recorded in Judges 7. There God sought to teach this very principle to the people. He wanted them to know how dependent they were upon His protection and deliverance. He instructed Gideon to limit his army to 300 men in fighting against a much larger Midianite force. While Gideon's tactical plan was ingenious, without God's provision victory would not be possible. The Midianites were defeated. As the text reveals, *"When the three hundred blew the trumpets, **the Lord set every man's sword against his companion throughout the whole camp; and the army fled...**"* (22). The victory was complete, with the Midianite army ultimately completely destroyed, and its Kings and Princes killed.

The three examples noted above are all examples of God's provision (or lack thereof) in military battle. But, the principle established has implications in every aspect of our own lives. God was concerned that Israel's campaign against the Midianites would lead the people to trust in themselves. He limited the army, *"...lest Israel claim glory for itself against Me, saying, 'My own hand has saved me.'"* (2). Jehovah's wording here is interesting. If Israel had claimed credit for the victory, God said it would have done so, *"for **itself against Me.**"* When credit is not given to God for our success, it is an act of rebellion against Him.

Instead, we must be aware of our own limitations and our dependence upon God. If we refuse to acknowledge His help, we, in essence, elevate ourselves. "I am the one responsible. I am the one in control." Such is foolish. The King of Tyre did that very thing, and God said to him, *"Yet you are a man, and not a god, though you set your heart as the heart of a god..."* (Ezekiel 28:2). James told those who foolishly thought they were in control of their lives and future, *"But now you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil"* (James 4:16).

Remember the rich man who sat back satisfied at all He had accomplished. He thought himself self-sufficient, but God said to Him, *"Fool! This night your soul will be required of you..."* (Luke 12:20). In concluding his message about the rich fool, Jesus said, *"So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God"* (21).

The most important application as we consider our dependence upon God's provision is seen in His words to the rich fool. *"This night your soul will be required of you."* Ultimately, it is God who determines who will be lost and who will be saved. We are dependent upon His provision (grace) to have our sins forgiven and the hope of heaven. While the rich man teaches us the vanity of pursuing earthly riches, the greater lesson is the vanity of living a life without God as the focus. Our eternal destiny is in His hands. He is the one who determines who will and will not be saved. As such, we must heed His will for us, submitting to what He requires of us to be saved. By doing His will we acknowledge His preeminence. *"But let him who glories glory in this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the Lord, exercising lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness in the earth. For in these I delight," says the Lord* (Jeremiah 9:24).

This is key. We do not sit idly by, and trust the Lord to grant us all we desire. We obey. Just as Gideon worked diligently to secure the victory over the Midianites, God desires our diligence in obtaining the victory available through His extended grace. Paul wrote, *"Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; ¹³ for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure"* (Philippians 2:12-13). "Work out your own salvation" indicates necessary obedience on our part, even as we acknowledge that our redemption depends upon God's part (cf. 13). This idea is also stated by Peter in Acts 2:40, *"Save yourselves from this untoward generation"* (KJV).

Most wonderful is the realization that victory is ultimately determined by where we will spend eternity. So, no matter what man may do to us (cf. Matthew 10:28), or what trials and tribulations we may suffer while here on earth (cf. 2 Timothy 3:12), with God's provision our victory is complete! *"Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, **knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord**"* (1 Corinthians 15:58).

11 - Depending Upon the Word of God

There are consequences to men who do not understand their place in relation to God. Too often men seek their own counsel, and pay no respect to the One who made them. *“Woe to those who seek deep to hide their counsel far from the Lord, and their works are in the dark; they say, ‘Who sees us?’ and, ‘Who knows us?’¹⁶ Surely you have things turned around! Shall the potter be esteemed as the clay; for shall the thing made say of him who made it, ‘He did not make me’? Or shall the thing formed say of him who formed it, ‘He has no understanding’?”* (Isaiah, 29:15-16).

We are, in fact, totally dependent upon God to reveal to us what is right, and most importantly, what pleases Him. Left to ourselves, we wallow in ignorance. *“There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death”* (Proverbs 16:25). Instead, with the prophet, we should declare, *“O Lord, I know the way of man is not in himself; it is not in man who walks to direct his own steps”* (Jeremiah 10:23).

We are fortunate that God chose to communicate His will to us. He did so through the scriptures. *“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 complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work”* (2 Timothy 3:16-17). If we desire God’s blessings, we must study and meditate upon His will for us.

“Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stands in the path of sinners, nor sits in the seat of the scornful;² But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and in His law he meditates day and night” (Psalm 1:1-2).

Two components are mentioned by the Psalmist that are important for knowing God’s will. The first is **study**. The blessed man delight’s in God’s law. He knows its value, and determines to familiarize himself with it. *“The law of the Lord is perfect, converting the soul; the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple;⁸ the statutes of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes;⁹ the fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever; the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether”* (Psalm 19:7-9).

The second is **meditation**, *“in His law he meditates day and night.”* The Hebrew term is rightly translated by ‘meditate’ or ‘ponder.’ The term does not equate to the eastern process of emptying the mind. Rather, it is properly defined as: “To think deeply or carefully about (something). To plan mentally; consider.” It is not enough to have a knowledge of God’s will for man. The principles that are learned must be deeply considered, **as they pertain to day to day circumstances in our lives**. Without developing discernment, learning God’s will remains a theological exercise rather than a life changing accomplishment. It is not surprising that the man of God is constantly planning to ensure his actions and words conform to the will of His creator.

Consider that the Psalmist does this rather than walking *“in the counsel of the ungodly.”* The views of men typically conflict with God’s word. James understood this, contrasting divine wisdom with the wisdom of man. While men bring envy, selfishness and confusion, divine wisdom is *“first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy”* (James 3:17). The man of God realizes the superiority of God’s ways, and limits himself by submitting to Him.

In contrast, consider the end of those who reject God’s counsel. *“The ungodly are not so, but are like the chaff which the wind drives away.⁵ Therefore the ungodly shall not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous.⁶ For the Lord knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the ungodly shall perish”* (Psalm 1:4-6). It is important to consider how insulting and rebellious it is to rebel against God. This is seen in His reaction to those who do. *“Therefore I will number you for the sword, and you shall all bow down to the slaughter; because, when I called, you did not answer; when I spoke, you did not hear, but did evil before My eyes, and chose that in which I do not delight”* (Isaiah 65:12). There is no more self-destructive behavior than ignoring or rejecting God’s will for you.

So, what steps can we take to ensure we are pleasing God? Study daily! Delight in God’s word, and seek to become familiar with it. Figure out the principles that enable us to always be *“rightly dividing the word of truth”* (cf. 2 Timothy 2:15). Internalize those principles, readying them for application through meditation!

How can we meditate? Find a quiet place, and then consider how past mistakes could have been avoided by applying what we have learned from God’s word. Then think about what is going on in our lives presently. How might what we have learned be applied to our benefit today? Lastly, think about future scenarios where the truths we have learned may be applied. That way when the possible becomes real, we will be prepared to handle ourselves in a righteous manner. If we do this with each new thing we learn, we certainly will not be disappointed!

We are dependent upon God’s word. Fortunately, it is well able to thoroughly furnish us for His service!

12 - God Is Our Protector

King David was not a perfect man. Some time after taking the throne of Israel as God's king, he sinned grievously against Him. Sins of adultery and murder are not trivial, and yet it is acknowledged that David was a man after God's "own heart, who will do all My will" (cf. Acts 13:22). The second book of Samuel notes of David's reign, "So David reigned over all Israel; and David administered judgment and justice to all his people" (8:15).

Despite the documented failings of David, he can rightly be described as a righteous man. As such, he enjoyed God's favor and protection, even as he was compassed about by his enemies. We are familiar with examples of the providential care shown Him by Jehovah.

- 1 Samuel 17 reveals David's defeat of the Philistine giant, Goliath. While that day many saw only a young shepherd boy with a sling, David saw God with him in the battle. He said to Goliath, "*This day the Lord will deliver you into my hand, and I will strike you and take your head from you*" (46).
- After David's military successes, King Saul became jealous of him. The hate in his heart provoked him to try to kill David. But, God again protected his anointed, warning David to escape Saul's wrath. (cf. 1 Samuel 23:10-15).
- David was well aware of the favor bestowed upon him by the Lord. Jehovah said to him, "*And I have been with you wherever you have gone, and have cut off all your enemies from before you, and have made you a great name, like the name of the great men who are on the earth*" (2 Samuel 7:9). And, he constantly acknowledged God's help. In fact, many of the Psalms found within that book contain such acknowledgment and praise of Jehovah. In 2 Samuel 22:2-3, David said, "*The Lord is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer; the God of my strength, in whom I will trust; my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold and my refuge...*"

Of course, the child of God today can depend upon the protection of God, just as David did! Our battle against the devil and his minions is a daunting one, but our victory is sure with the Almighty on our side! Paul declared that it is, "*a righteous thing with God to repay with tribulation those who trouble you, and to give you who are troubled rest with us when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels*" (2 Thessalonians 1:6-7).

This protection God affords allows us the victory, regardless of the foe. David killed Goliath, though men of greater strength (and lesser faith), "*...fled from him and were dreadfully afraid*" (1 Samuel 17:24). We too can gain courage as we realize, "*If God is for us, who can be against us?*" (Romans 8:31). Paul affirmed, "*For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord*" (Romans 8:38-39).

And, very much as God warned David of Saul's approach, He directs us for our protection. Consider the Lord's description of the wise and foolish builders in Matthew 7:24-27. The wise man built his house on the rock to withstand the storm, while the foolish man built upon the sand to his own ruin and destruction. Of course, the Lord was using the illustration to drive home the necessity of heeding His words. "*Therefore whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man... But everyone who hears these sayings of Mine, and does not do them, will be like a foolish man...*" (24,26). We are equipped by God's directions for us.

The key to receiving God's protection is to acknowledge our own dependence upon Him. By submitting to His will, we court His favor. "*But He gives more grace. Therefore He says: 'God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble.'*" (James 4:6). Pride is the enemy of redemption and favor. "*Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up*" (James 4:10).

We must also acknowledge the help He brings! The Psalmist declared his gratefulness: "*Enter into His gates with thanksgiving, and into His courts with praise. Be thankful to Him, and bless His name. For the Lord is good; His mercy is everlasting, and His truth endures to all generations*" (Psalm 100:4-5). Paul described the mind that we as God's children should have, "*Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you*" (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18).

The recipe for obtaining God's providential care for us is very simple. First, we submit humbly to Him. Second, we entreat Him for that protection, with the confidence that He will deliver what we need. In all things, we give thanks to Him. "*Who remembered us in our lowly state, for His mercy endures forever; and rescued us from our enemies, for His mercy endures forever; Who gives food to all flesh, for His mercy endures forever. Oh, give thanks to the God of heaven! For His mercy endures forever*" (Psalm 136:23-26).

13 - The Good Shepherd

In the gospel of John, Jesus identified himself as the “*good shepherd*” (John 10:11). The work of the shepherd in New Testament times was challenging. He would train the sheep or goats to obey his commands, feed and water them, and protect them from harm. The young David is an good example, as he saved his sheep from both a lion and a bear (cf. 1 Samuel 17:34). Obviously, if the sheep belonged to the shepherd himself, the investment was a precious one. This explains Jesus’ words, “*I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep*” (11). In contrast, “*The hireling flees [when he sees the wolf] because he is a hireling and does not care about the sheep*” (13). Jesus used this imagery to describe His sin sacrifice, “*As the Father knows Me, even so I know the Father; and I lay down My life for the sheep*” (15).

The 23rd Psalm is a beautiful passage that uses this metaphor to describe the care and protection given to us (the sheep) by the Lord (the shepherd). “*The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want*” (1).

As we noted, a shepherd supplied food and drink. In the text of Psalm 23, the psalmist, King David, revealed the Lord’s provision for him, “*I shall not want*” (1). “*He makes me to lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside the still waters*” (2). “*You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies*” (5).

The Lord also provided direction through His revealed will. “*He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name’s sake*” (3). Just as the sheep obeys the shepherd’s commands, David knew that the way of righteousness was found in the commandments of God.

This protection and direction was available to David always, even and especially when his path was a desperate one. The most encouraging aspect of this Psalm is the promise of protection in the midst of danger. “*Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me*” (4). David’s faith in God was evident, and expressed in this song with beautiful words. “*You anoint my head with oil; my cup runs over*” (5). “*Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever*” (6).

The same imagery can be used to describe what Jesus Christ does for His own. They are His sheep, He is their good Shepherd.

Jesus sustains us spiritually. He told a group that sought Him out so that He would give them physical bread, “*Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to everlasting life, which the Son of Man will give you, because God the Father has set His seal on Him*” (John 6:27). Later in that conversation He said of Himself, “*I am the bread of life. He who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst*” (6:35).

Jesus directs our paths to heaven. In fact, He **is** the path to heaven! He promised His disciples that He was going to prepare mansions for them, and would come again to get them. He said, “*And where I go you know, and the way you know*” (John 14:4). Notice the reaction of Thomas, and the Lord’s rejoinder, “*Thomas said to Him, ‘Lord, we do not know where You are going, and how can we know the way?’ Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.’*” (14:5-6). Of course, we must follow that way, believing in Him, and obeying His commands. “*He who rejects Me, and does not receive My words, has that which judges him—the word that I have spoken will judge him in the last day. For I have not spoken on My own authority; but the Father who sent Me gave Me a command, what I should say and what I should speak. And I know that His command is everlasting life. Therefore, whatever I speak, just as the Father has told Me, so I speak*” (John 12:48-50).

We are not guaranteed physical safety as we live for Jesus. “*Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution*” (2 Timothy 3:12). But, we are promised that if we continue in His will through the trials and difficulties of life, those Scriptures are able to “*make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus*” (3:15). This wonderful protection is supplied because of God’s love for His children, “*Are not two sparrows sold for a copper coin? And not one of them falls to the ground apart from your Father’s will. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Do not fear therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows*” (Matthew 25:29-31).

Jesus is our shepherd. He supplies us with every need we might have. If we believe in Him, we will never want. We will have the “*bread of life*” (John 6:35) – we will have the “*living water*” (John 4:10). As Paul wrote, “*And my God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus*” (Philippians 4:19).

Jesus is the good shepherd. He lays down His life for the sheep. He does this willingly (cf. John 10:18). It is because of this willingness to die for us that we have the remission of sins. It is because He has the power “*to take it [His life] again*” (ibid.), that we have the hope of life eternal. In the end, our victory is complete!

14 - Lessons from the Remnant

The book of Ezra records a remnant of Judah returning to the homeland after 70 years spent in Babylonian captivity. The reason they had been conquered by the Babylonians was their rejection of God. As Jeremiah put it, *“Can a virgin forget her ornaments, or a bride her attire? Yet My people have forgotten Me days without number”* (Jeremiah 2:32).

However, after 70 years (prophesied in Jeremiah 29:10), God stirred up the heart of King Cyrus to allow the Jews to return to their homeland (cf. Ezra 1:1). Not all were interested in leaving the place where they had lived for two generations. But, a remnant was moved by God (1:5), and returned to the land. Here the Jews reestablished their worship to God, and ultimately rebuilt the temple.

There are a number of important lessons that can be learned from the Jews during this period. For example, the consequences of sin against God! The nation had been called to repent time and again, but had refused the Lord. As a result, God’s judgment came upon them. In this case, the judgment was physical. They lost their land and their sovereignty.

Today there are also temporal repercussions when man sins against God. Many of God’s laws are also the laws of our land. Murder, theft, slander, etc. all violate civil law and are punished by imprisonment, or even death. More commonly, sins have social or physical consequences. Consider all the homes and bodies that have been destroyed by drunkenness. Gluttony, sexual immorality, covetousness — all these leave a mark on the life of the sinner, and upon the lives of his friends and family as well. As the wise man observed, *“Good understanding gains favor, but the way of the unfaithful is hard”* (Proverbs 13:15).

Just as the Jews who returned to the land were blessed by a renewed relationship with the Lord, we note that God blesses **all** who turn to Him! As Peter told Cornelius and his household, *“But in every nation whoever fears Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him”* (Acts 10:35). Part of that blessing from God is obtained in the act of worship itself. Our souls are truly refreshed and strengthened when we offer up the fruit of our lips in adoration to Him. It is difficult to imagine the joy found in Judah when the remnant stood in the ancient city of Jerusalem and again worshiped the Lord. The importance of that occasion is recorded in Ezra’s words, *“the people gathered together **as one man** to Jerusalem”*, as they made burnt offerings to the Lord (Ezra 3:1). The entire 63rd Psalm is a wonderful poem expressing the joy of the ardent worshipper of Jehovah. Consider these words, *“O God, You are my God; early will I seek You; my soul thirsts for You; My flesh longs for You in a dry and thirsty land where there is no water. ² So I have looked for You in the sanctuary, to see Your power and Your glory. ³ Because Your lovingkindness is better than life, my lips shall praise You”* (vs. 1-3).

An interesting aspect of the Jews return from captivity was the mixed response of the people to the laying of the temple’s foundation. Ezra 3 records the joy of the occasion, *“And they sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the Lord: ‘For He is good, for His mercy endures forever toward Israel.’ Then all the people shouted with a great shout, when they praised the Lord, because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid”* (vs. 11). However, the joy was not complete. Older Jews, who remembered the glory of Solomon’s temple, wept. *“But many of the priests and Levites and heads of the fathers’ houses, old men who had seen the first temple, wept with a loud voice when the foundation of this temple was laid before their eyes”* (vs. 12). They knew the new foundation fell far short of the glory of old. It is almost universally acknowledged that with age and experience there is inevitably reason for sadness and disappointment. In every life there is a time for death, loss, weeping and mourning.

This is why we keep our eye on the prize! The difficulties of this life are real, but they are momentary. Imagine the joy of a people, 70 years in exile, when the rebuilding of their temple was completed. *“Then the children of Israel, the priests and the Levites and the rest of the descendants of the captivity, celebrated the dedication of this house of God with joy”* (Ezra 6:16). Joy is the ultimate end of the redeemed of God. *“No weapon formed against you shall prosper, and every tongue which rises against you in judgment you shall condemn. This is the heritage of the servants of the Lord, and their righteousness is from Me,” says the Lord”* (Isaiah 54:17). Or, as Paul told the Thessalonian Christians, *“For what is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? Is it not even you in **the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at His coming?** ²⁰ For you are our glory and joy”* (2 Thessalonians 3:19-20).

So, if your sins have found you out (cf. Numbers 32:23), repent and return to God! If you have experienced trial and disappointment in your life, recognize that such is the lot of all men here on earth! If you desire a perspective that will help you to deal with the trials of this earth, keep your eyes on eternity! *“We are hard-pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; ⁹ persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed— ¹⁰ always carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, **that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body”*** (2 Corinthians 4:8-10).

15 – Refreshing the Spirits of the Brethren

One of the fundamental responsibilities of a Christian is to love his brethren. *“In this the children of God and the children of the devil are manifest: Whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is he who does not love his brother. ¹¹ For this is the message that you heard from the beginning, that we should love one another”* (1 John 3:10-11). It is an imperative, and as Christians we should be mindful of obeying it.

One of the most effective ways to show your love for the brethren is through the practice of hospitality. It is one of an impressive list of characteristics which indicate a faithful child of God. *“Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honor giving preference to one another; ¹¹ not lagging in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord; ¹² rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation, continuing steadfastly in prayer; ¹³ distributing to the needs of the saints, given to hospitality”* (Romans 12:10-13).

The word hospitality, as used in Romans 12, is a translation of the greek word *philoxenia*. The etymology indicates a fondness (*phil-*) for strangers or aliens (*-xenos* or *-xenia*). In fact, there is a call to express this fondness even to those we do not know. *“Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some have unwittingly entertained angels”* (Hebrews 13:2). This is in addition to the responsibility we have under consideration—to practice hospitality toward the brethren.

The recipient of hospitality is encouraged and strengthened by the effort. It is an indication of a love on the part of their brother or sister, and a show of thoughtfulness and caring. In 2 Corinthians 7:13 Paul wrote, *“Therefore we have been comforted in your comfort. And we rejoiced exceedingly more for the joy of Titus, because his spirit has been refreshed by you all.”* Consider the far reaching effects of the Corinthian’s hospitality. Titus had traveled to see them (verses 6-7), and had been *“refreshed by you all.”* But, the benefits also reached to Paul, when he heard from Titus about their faithfulness, and their good treatment of his protégé.

There are many opportunities to practice hospitality. We can show such care to brethren, preachers of the gospel, the poor, our neighbors, and the lost we come into contact with from time to time. Paul encourage the Galatians, *“Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith”* (Galatians 6:10). Some may question the importance of opening our home to others, or sharing with them in this way. But, the Lord made clear how He viewed the practice. *“Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? ³⁸ When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You? ³⁹ Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?’ ⁴⁰ And the King will answer and say to them, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me”* (Matthew 25:37-40).

Even those who have little in the way of material means can express their love for their brethren. The smallest of gestures can uplift the heart of a brother. It might be a batch of cookies distributed to the widows in a congregation. It might be a handwritten note to a faithful teenager, or a shared sandwich at the local burger shack. The important thing is not whether the effort is an extravagant one, but that it comes from a loving and mindful heart.

And, the heart is surely the key. The practice of hospitality is the genuine outgrowth of a true love for the brethren. Because of this, it is not acceptable that the practice should be grudgingly offered. Peter wrote, *“And above all things have fervent love for one another, for ‘love will cover a multitude of sins.’ ⁹ Be hospitable to one another without grumbling”* (1 Peter 4:8-9). It would also be inappropriate to offer hospitality for the purpose of personal gain. We are not striving to benefit from the work, but to benefit and encourage the one to whom we offer the gift. Remember the admonition of our Lord, *“When you give a dinner or a supper, do not ask your friends, your brothers, your relatives, nor rich neighbors, lest they also invite you back, and you be repaid. ¹³ But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind. ¹⁴ And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you; for you shall be repaid at the resurrection of the just”* (Luke 14:12-14).

Each of us should ask, “How can I offer hospitality to my brethren?” Or, more to the point, “How can I refresh the spirits of my spiritual family?” The practice is an indication of a spiritually mature and loving child of God. In fact, as both Titus 1:8 and 1 Timothy 3:2 state, it is a required attribute for one who would serve as an elder in the Lord’s church. A man who does not sufficiently show his fondness for his brethren is a man who has no business exercising oversight in the church.

Hospitality, in one form or another, is within the capability of every Christian. Rather than shirk the responsibility, actively seek to show your fondness toward your brethren. In doing so, you will refresh their spirits and please your God!

16 – Paul’s Bifurcated Life

The apostle Paul’s life had a striking bifurcation. The event which marked the change is narrated by Luke in Acts 9. On that occasion he left Jerusalem to go to Damascus. On the road he met the Lord.

Prior to that meeting Paul, whose Hebrew name was Saul, was a devoted Pharisee. He described himself in the following way. *“If anyone else thinks he may have confidence in the flesh, I more so: ⁵ circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; concerning the law, a Pharisee; ⁶ concerning zeal, persecuting the church; concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless”* (Philippians 3:4-6).

Note especially the phrase, *“concerning zeal, persecuting the church.”* Paul was aware of the disciples of Christ. He had witnessed the stoning of Stephen (Acts 7:58) and consented to his death. His zeal compelled him to do his part to eradicate what he considered a destructive sect, following a false messiah. Luke records, *“As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison”* (Acts 8:3).

Ironically, his efforts to destroy the Christian faith served as an impetus for its spread. Because of Paul’s zealous efforts to persecute Christians, we are told, *“Therefore those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word”* (Acts 8:4). Philip, for example, went to the city of Samaria and preached Christ. *“And the multitudes with one accord heeded the things spoken by Philip, hearing and seeing the miracles which he did”* (Acts 8:6).

Then Paul met the Lord. When confronted with the fact of Jesus’ resurrection, he became obedient to the gospel, and immediately began to preach the faith he once sought to destroy. God gave him a special work, to *“preach Him among the Gentiles”* (Galatians 1:15), and he spent the rest of his life zealously doing that work.

His early efforts to preach the gospel brought him a striking reputation among God’s people. Several years after his conversion he went to Judea. He wrote of that trip, *“And I was unknown by face to the churches of Judea which were in Christ. ²³ But they were hearing only, ‘He who formerly persecuted us now preaches the faith which he once tried to destroy.’ ²⁴ And they glorified God in me”* (Galatians 1:22-24).

His efforts also led to opposition and personal persecution. The single most zealous persecutor of Christians became one of the most zealously persecuted of God’s people. A lengthy list of his tribulations is given by the apostle in his second letter to the Corinthians (11:22-33). They included hunger, whippings, beatings, stonings, the perils of dangerous travel, efforts to destroy his ministry by false brethren, and imprisonment.

Paul wrote a letter to the Philippians during one such imprisonment — a two year incarceration in Rome. Despite his chains, he was remarkably upbeat. He considered his suffering as a Christian and an apostle to be a badge of honor. He told the Philippians, *“For to you **it has been granted** on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake, ³⁰ having the same conflict which you saw in me and now hear is in me”* (Philippians 1:29-30). Such an attitude recalls the words of our Lord, *“Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. ¹² Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you”* (Matthew 5:11-12).

Another reason he rejoiced is that his circumstances had given the Philippians an opportunity to help him. Through Epaphroditus they had sent him aid, and his letter to them was written in part to thank them for their support. *“I thank my God upon every remembrance of you, ⁴ always in every prayer of mine making request for you all with joy, ⁵ for your fellowship in the gospel from the first day until now”* (Philippians 1:3-5).

Our ministrations help our brethren when they are suffering. As a part of our fellowship as Christians, we are to *“Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep”* (Romans 12:15). Whenever we are there to hold a hand, share a meal, open our home, send a card, give a hug, we are doing the Lord’s work. It is the practice of pure religion, visiting the *“orphans and widows in their trouble”* (James 1:27).

When we personally suffer for Christ, we are comforted by the realization of our hope. *“Blessed is the man who endures temptation; for when he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him”* (James 1:12). And like Paul, we rejoice in the help others supply. *“Indeed I have all and abound. I am full, having received from Epaphroditus the things sent from you, a sweet-smelling aroma, an acceptable sacrifice, well pleasing to God”* (Philippians 4:18).

Consider that all who have named the name of Christ have the same bifurcation in our life. Where once we spent our lifetime doing the *“will of the Gentiles”* (1 Peter 4:3), now we are to no longer live for our own lusts, but *“for the will of God”* (1 Peter 4:2). Such a change will bring to us persecution (cf. 2 Timothy 3:12), but it also brings great joy. Remember, for Paul and all other children of God, *“to live is Christ, and to die is gain”* (Philippians 1:21).

17 – The Crown of Righteousness

When Paul wrote his second letter to Timothy, he knew that his life was nearing an end. His mind was on eternity, and he expressed his expectations in a wonderful way. *“For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure is at hand. ⁷ I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. ⁸ Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing”* (2 Timothy 4:6-8).

Paul spoke of his end as a *fait accompli*, and we can trust that his faithful service continued until the hour of his passing. The apostle had proven himself a faithful ambassador of the Lord. He had once proclaimed, *“Let a man so consider us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. ² Moreover it is required in stewards **that one be found faithful**”* (1 Corinthians 4:1-2).

His reward for his faithfulness was *“the crown of righteousness.”* This phrase is one description of the eternal reward in heaven with God. The crown is bestowed upon the righteous in eternity. Peter wrote of it as well, *“and when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that does not fade away”* (1 Peter 5:4). It is promised by the Lord, *“Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. **Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life**”* (Revelation 2:10). A crown of righteousness, glory and life—a wonderful gift offered by the Lord to the righteous man.

And, as Paul makes clear, **every single person** who lives righteously has the promise of that reward! *“and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing.”* Consider the faithfulness of God, and know that when He makes the promise, He will keep the promise. Paul knew it, and rejoiced in the reward he would surely receive.

It is important to note here that the reward comes to those who have *“finished the race...kept the faith.”* As stated by the Lord in Revelation 2:10, it will be given to those who are *“faithful until death.”* It is wrong to think that a Christian is unable to forfeit his standing with God. The “once saved, always saved” view does not jibe with God’s word. Paul noted individuals whose faith had been overthrown by the error of Hymenaeus and Philetus (cf. 2 Timothy 2:18). Peter warned of one who is again entangled in worldliness, and states, *“the latter end is worse for them than the beginning”* (2 Peter 2:20). However, this has nothing to do with God’s faithfulness regarding His promise. **It is man’s own unfaithfulness that will cause him to lose his reward.** *“But when a righteous man turns away from his righteousness and commits iniquity, and does according to all the abominations that the wicked man does, shall he live? All the righteousness which he has done shall not be remembered; because of the unfaithfulness of which he is guilty and the sin which he has committed, because of them he shall die”* (Ezekiel 18:24).

Our life here on earth is tenuous and short. James made that clear in James 4:13-14, *“Come now, you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, spend a year there, buy and sell, and make a profit’; ¹⁴ whereas you do not know what will happen tomorrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away.”* As we consider this physical state, which will end in our death, and the immolation of the physical universe, we would do well to cast our gaze upon that which has eternal value. *“For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul? ²⁷ For the Son of Man will come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and then He will reward each according to his works”* (Matthew 16:26-27).

Because of the offer of God’s Son on the cross, we can have confidence in our standing with God. Some mistakenly think that since it is possible to lose our standing with God, we can’t know how we stand in relation to Him at any time. That is not so! Our efforts to live right, and His promise of forgiveness upon our repentance when we do wrong, serve to give us a confident hope. *“But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin. ⁸ If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. ⁹ If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness”* (1 John 1:7-9).

God’s righteousness requires that He reward the faithful and punish the ungodly. He would not be true to His nature if He treated man in any other way. Paul knew this, *“Therefore we make it our aim, whether present or absent, to be well pleasing to Him. ¹⁰ For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad”* (2 Corinthians 5:9-10). He lived his life knowing it, and in the end he knew he would spend eternity with his God.

Do you trust in the promises of the Almighty? Are you living a life that will be rewarded with a glorious crown?

18 – Persecution through Proclamation

Persecution is the lot of all who name the name of Christ. Paul made that clear in 2 Timothy 3:12, “Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution.” Why would this be? It is because of Who we represent, Who we answer to. Jesus told His disciples, “If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you. ¹⁹ If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. ²⁰ Remember the word that I said to you, ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you” (John 15:18-20).

As Christians, we are required to declare the Lord before men, “Therefore whoever confesses Me before men, him I will also confess before My Father who is in heaven. ³³ But whoever denies Me before men, him I will also deny before My Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 10:32-33). However, that profession serves to anger some. Perhaps it is because, “there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account” (Hebrews 4:13).

Stephen serves as an object lesson to us on the subject of persecution. The narrative is revealed in Acts 7. His bold proclamation of the truth of God led to his death by stoning. Stephen was accused of blasphemy, and they brought him to the Sanhedrin to be questioned by the high priest. The charges were false, of course, but there were many false witnesses raised up against him. Rather than deny the passages, at the high priest’s question, “Are these things so?”, he began to preach. He used the history of Israel to establish Jesus as the promised Messiah, and to convict them of their own rebellious spirit. His address led them to “cast him out of the city”, and they stoned him to death. His faith cost him his life.

There are parallels between Stephen’s persecution to the point of death, and the persecution each of us are destined to suffer for Christ. Here are some lessons for us to learn...

First, Stephen’s address was not a personal attack, though it might seem to be so. The objection Stephen had to these unbelievers was the fact that they were disobedient to God. He referred to them as “Brethren and fathers”, and pled with them to “listen” to the truth. If not for his love for his brethren, Stephen may have lived. But, he was compelled to share the gospel message, regardless of the personal cost. Though it cost him his life, consider his final words of compassion toward his persecutors, “Lord, do not charge them with this sin” (Acts 7:60).

Our attempts to share the message should not be a personal attack against any man. The gospel of Christ is not an implement to bludgeon men. It is a sharp sword capable of, “piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart” (Hebrews 4:12). Discernment is needed in the attempt, “And on some have compassion, making a distinction; ²³ but others save with fear, pulling them out of the fire, hating even the garment defiled by the flesh” (Jude 22-23). But, we must never forget that it was God’s love that compelled him to send His Son to redeem us. It must be our love that compels us to share the gospel with others.

Second, as Stephen, when we preach that truth, we can expect to suffer personally. He spoke the truth boldly, convicting them of their sin. Note his words, “You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you. ⁵² Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who foretold the coming of the Just One, of whom you now have become the betrayers and murderers, ⁵³ who have received the law by the direction of angels and have not kept it.” In Thessalonica, Paul came face to face with that danger. Luke tells us, “But the Jews who were not persuaded, becoming envious, took some of the evil men from the marketplace, and gathering a mob, set all the city in an uproar and attacked the house of Jason, and sought to bring them out to the people” (Acts 17:5). Even though the extent of our suffering for Christ might not reach that of Stephen or Paul, those who are not persuaded will be angry.

Third, comfort is to be found as we trust in our Lord. This truth is beautifully illustrated in Stephen’s last moments. “But he, being full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God, ⁵⁶ and said, “Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!” (Acts 7:55-56).

We too receive strength through our relationship with the Lord. This fellowship can bring us comfort and strength to endure. Paul wrote, “I can do all things through Christ, who strengthens me” (Philippians 4:13). We need to screw up our courage “to the sticking place” and do what is needed in our service to the Master. “Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching” (2 Timothy 4:2).

How wonderful it is to suffer for the cause of Christ! There is no greater blessing under heaven. “Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. ¹² Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you” (Matthew 5:11-12).

19 – An Earnest and Urgent Pursuit of Heaven

The Christian is defined by his purpose in life. It is not to get wealthy, not to get famous, not to “go for the gusto”, it is to serve the Lord. Few people live for this purpose. “...*narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it*” (Matthew 7:14).

The Bible reveals clearly two truths. **First**, men ought to have service to the Lord as their primary purpose in life. “*Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: fear God and keep His commandments, for this is man's all. ¹⁴ For God will bring every work into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil*” (Ecclesiastes 12:13-14). **Second**, if a man lives his life without serving God, his life is ultimately empty of meaning. “*I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and indeed, all is vanity and grasping for the wind*” (Ecclesiastes 1:14). (**Note:** the phrase “*under the sun*” indicates works that are done without an acknowledgment of God’s existence). Stated simply, the only way to have a meaningful life is to put God first.

Some may object, saying their life has meaning without God. However, their perspective is skewed. Because their focus is only on earthly things, they have no concept of the greater value of eternity! They are profane like Esau, who sold his birthright for a bowl of stew. Consider our Lord’s words on the matter, “*For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?*” (Matthew 16:26).

In addition to purpose, the Christian’s perspective also leads to a sense of urgency. There are two reasons for this. **First, life is fragile.** While we fully expect to enjoy our fourscore years (or thereabouts) upon the earth, the reality is that anything from disease, to accident, to malice could bring our earthly existence to an end. James wrote, “*Come now, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, spend a year there, buy and sell, and make a profit”; ¹⁴ whereas you do not know what will happen tomorrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away*” (James 4:13-14). Since our eternal standing depends upon our serving the Lord during our lives on earth, we understand the importance of starting today, lest tomorrow be too late.

Second, judgment is coming. “*And as it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment*” (Hebrews 9:27). The day of judgment is inevitable. Jesus will come, and will judge every man “*according to what he has done, whether good or bad*” (2 Corinthians 5:10). The Christian knows judgment is coming, but he also knows that there is no way of predicting when it will happen. Our Lord said, “*Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour in which the Son of Man is coming*” (Matthew 25:13). Both Peter (2 Peter 3:10) and Paul (1 Thessalonians 5:2) describes the “*day of the Lord*” as coming as “*a thief in the night.*” Both our own mortality and the imminent judgment of all mankind elicit a sense of purpose and urgency in our service to our Master.

Paul’s words in 1 Thessalonians 5 are worth examining. Since we do not know when Christ will come to judge the world (vs. 2), it is important to be prepared. “*But you, brethren, are not in darkness, so that this Day should overtake you as a thief. ⁵ You are all sons of light and sons of the day. We are not of the night nor of darkness. ⁶ Therefore let us not sleep, as others do, but let us watch and be sober*” (vs. 4-6). However, the nature of the Christian’s preparation may not be what some think. Some have had the idea that preparation means seeking to determine the “*times and the seasons.*” This despite the fact that Paul made clear such efforts are fruitless. Again and again men have tried to predict when the Lord would come. Such predictions are always in vain, and instantly mark the predictor, regardless of his methods or math, as a false prophet.

Instead, preparation is found in living a sober, righteous life. This way, no matter the hour or the day, the Lord’s return will find His people in an acceptable state. Consider Paul’s exhortation in this context, “*But let us who are of the day be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet the hope of salvation*” (vs. 8). In living in this way, we not only ensure our standing with the Lord, we also “*comfort each other and edify one another*” (vs. 11).

In fact, the church was established by God for this purpose. By coming together to work and worship in a local congregation, we both fulfill our responsibilities to God and build up our fellow disciples. “*From whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love*” (Ephesians 4:16).

The only thing that precludes Christ’s coming is His longsuffering (cf. 2 Peter 8-9). No one knows when His patience will come to an end. Peter makes clear, “*But the day of the Lord **will come** as a thief in the night*” (vs. 10). Knowing this is the case, he asks the question, “*Therefore, since all these things will be dissolved, what manner of persons ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness*” (vs. 11).

The goal of every faithful Christian is to enjoy an eternal existence in the presence of God. This leads us to an earnest and urgent pursuit of service to Him. We wish to prepare ourselves and encourage others. It is the goal of every **faithful** Christian. Is it your goal?