

**Knowing God's Ways:
Key to Navigating Perplexity and Pain
When God Is Silent**

Victor Johnson

Knowing God’s Ways: Key to Navigating Perplexity and Pain When God Is Silent

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CONTENTS

Introduction 4

SECTION ONE

The DNA of Dominion

1. Haman, Amalek's Last Stand 8
2. King Saul: The Mistake that Cost Him Everything 21
3. The Hidden Danger of Success 34
4. Why God Chose David over Jonathan 51
5. Five Reasons David Was a Man after God's Heart 65
6. The God Factor: Regaining Our Lost Dominion 75

SECTION TWO

Hand to Hand Combat

7. My Jeremiah 29:13 Assault on Depression 89
8. Jeremiah 29:13 – Learning to Wait 101
9. Jeremiah 29:13 D-Day – Deliverance 115
10. Freedom: Dangerously Risky, but Priceless 127
11. Seven Things that Block Prayer 142

SECTION THREE

Navigating Heaven on Earth

12. Eat Your Way to Royalty 165
13. Why Reuben Lost His Inheritance 179
14. Lion of the Tribe of Who? 194
15. The Transformation of Elisha and Elijah 204
16. Use It or Lose It 218
17. How to Buy Real Estate in Heaven 231

INTRODUCTION

(More important than the rest of the book)

Knowing our purpose

An owl's hearing is so sensitive, it can detect a mouse moving in grass or under snow, and tell where it is with pinpoint accuracy, even in darkness, as it is guided in flight. Do a Web search for the details of God's amazing design in the offset structure of its ears that enables it to interpret direction and "the ways" of its prey.

But if God is that concerned for birds, how much more is he concerned that we learn to hear His voice, especially in darkness, in order to fulfill our purpose in subduing the earth for His Kingdom and glory? After all, our Lord Jesus Christ did everything legally in the spirit realm to conquer "the prince of the power of the air," "the rulers of the darkness of this age," and has since been *sitting* at His Father's right hand "waiting till His enemies are made His footstool" (Col 2:13-15; Eph 2:2; 6:12; Heb 1:13; 10:12-13).

He's waiting for us, "His Body, the Church," to take our legal document, His Word, and act on it, like lawyers engaged in a court battle over multiple cases of child custody. We "adult" believers are supposed to be mature enough to "speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves; ensure justice for those being crushed. Yes, speak up for the poor and helpless, and see that they get justice" (Prv 31:8-9 NLT).

"Rescue those who are unjustly sentenced to die; save them as they stagger to their death. Don't excuse yourself by saying, 'Look, we didn't know.' For God understands all hearts, and He sees you. He who guards your soul knows you knew. He will repay all people as their actions deserve" (Prv 24:11-12 NLT). Wow!

This is a heavy responsibility, but it's our purpose, based on our fellowship with God, to restore the rest of the planet to that same fellowship. But how can we do it when we don't even know how to fellowship with our own brothers and sisters and see them "in Christ," instead of seeing them by their faults? (Eph 1:10; 3:10; 2 Cor 5:16-21; Rv 12:10-11)

The root of the problem is our inadequate relationship with our Father; it's so easy to act as though our only reason for being saved is to get to heaven, rather than to "come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ," being "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” (Eph 4:13, 16).

History repeats itself!

Israel had the same mentality when God delivered them out of Egypt through the supernatural opening of the Red Sea, and landed them in the Sinai Desert on the way to “the Promise Land,” “flowing with milk and honey.” When they found themselves stranded in that desert with no water at times, and only the “manna” to eat, like corn bread or pancakes with no syrup, and that the way into their dream-land was blocked by huge giants, they panicked. They not only threatened to mutiny and return to Egypt, where they’d been brutally treated as slaves, but were about to stone Moses, Aaron, Joshua, and Caleb for daring to believe God would fight their battles and bring them into the Land victoriously.

At this point God had enough and threatened to wipe them all out, until Moses, who knew “God’s ways,” not merely “His acts,” intervened and told God to spare them for His mercy’s sake. God listened to Moses, but told the people they’d stay there in the desert until all the men twenty and older were dead.

The sad irony is that these men, ready for war, had all been numbered earlier in the first chapter of Numbers, totaling 603,550, giving the book its name and purpose: God’s army, ready for a period of training in the desert, in preparation for a mighty conquest of His enemies that would foreshadow our conquering the powers of darkness that have kept His creation under bondage since the Fall of man (Ps 103:7; Num 1:46; 14:1–24).

Fourteen hundred years later, their Hebrew descendants faced the same challenge, only now in the real world of “heavenly places,” the spirit realm (Eph 6:12). But horrors! They’re doing the same thing again – backing down because of the biggest giant of all – dullness of hearing and spiritual ignorance. Here’s what God told them, through the writer of Hebrews:

“Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says: ‘Today, if you will *hear His voice*, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, in the day of trial in the wilderness, where your fathers tested Me, tried me, and saw my works forty years.’ Therefore I was angry with that generation, and said, ‘They always go astray in their heart, and *they have not known My ways*.’ So I swore in My wrath, ‘They shall not enter My rest.’

“Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God; but exhort one another

daily, while it is called ‘Today,’ lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin. For we have become partakers of Christ if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast to the end” (Heb 3:6–14). (Endurance!)

I’ve been guilty of the same unbelief and hardness of heart – spiritual deafness, costing me many years in my own wildernesses, the first one, twenty years of suicidal depression, the worst of them while pastoring a church! The story of how God delivered me is told in the middle section of this book.

The rest of the book is what I learned once He opened my ears to understand His ways, which I’m still learning. I hope it helps you also. Because knowing His ways is comparable to the strategic placing of the owl’s ears in relation to each other, giving us a sense of direction and meaning. Because its ears are offset, the owl’s brain computes direction by 30 millionths of a second difference between them.¹ As I said, God is even more concerned about guiding us by His Spirit. We can do it through Him! (Jn 10:16, 17; Rom 8:14).

Most of these chapters are articles I originally wrote for jail and prison inmates, like the first batch of articles, now published under the title, *Jail and Prison: Devil’s Playground or God-Given Opportunity* (available on amazon.com).

But this book is geared more toward the maturing believer, which certainly includes many inmates, some of whom are probably more spiritually mature than I am. Which explains the scriptures at the end of each paragraph: some inmates will look up every one of them for their spiritual growth,

1. <http://www.worldofowls.com/owl-ears-and-hearing/>

SECTION ONE

The DNA of Dominion

The heaven, even the heavens, are the LORD'S; But the earth He has given to the children of men. Psalm 115:116

Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? . . . Do you not know that we shall judge angels? How much more, things that pertain to this life? 1 Corinthians 6:2-3

The following chapter is one of many in my attempt in the 1980s to write on the Tabernacle of Moses, as though I were teaching a class and traveling back in time to interview people in the Old Testament. The interviews are meant to bring to life its rich symbolism, for the Tabernacle is God's design for relationship with His people on earth, "that I may dwell among them." For He gave us the architectural blueprint of His own house here while we wait for our more permanent dwelling, whatever form it takes on into eternity. For He wants us to live with Him without being destroyed by the "consuming fire" of His glory (Ex 25:8; Heb 12:29).

Unless otherwise noted,
all *italics* are mine throughout the book,
except when quoting from the Amplified Bible.

CHAPTER 1

Haman: Amalek's Last Stand

Good morning, class. I can think of no better way to enjoy the gate's color scheme than to secretly slip into the home of Haman, around the year 465 B.C., for an enlightening conversation with one of the most dangerous criminals in the world. Don't judge, however; he may be lurking around *your* "house," and may yet again appear on the evening news as a world leader. Listen carefully now while I crash his party.

Haman! Haman!

Who? What? Quiet folks. It's late. I need to rest up for another banquet tomorrow with the king and . . . Queen Esther. Zeresh, I'm retiring to my room. I have just heard my name called twice. It must be one of the gods. Apparently they are pleased with my progress. I must get alone now. Goodnight.

Haman, come in where it's quiet. I have much to say to you. I am not one of the gods but am an ambassador of the God of gods.

O my, yes. What a privilege. First the king, then the queen, and now you. I give you my undivided attention.

So you want to be like the Most High, do you? [Is 14:14]

O no, er . . . the king is number one. I'm simply responding to his needs. He cannot bear the weight of governing the world without help. Even the queen senses my importance to the administration. But if you have any wisdom, I do intend to follow your guidance. Already the spirit of the gods has indicated by lot the most favorable month for eliminating the Jews. This will be of great benefit to the Kingdom of Persia and Media [Est. 3:7].

This is what I must speak to you about, Haman. Your approach is not quite right. You are coming from the wrong direction. I want to tell you a better way.

Oh . . . then tell me. Please!

What are the colors decorating the court of the garden of the king's palace and the colors of the royal robes? What do they mean? [Est 1:6; 8:15]

White, blue, purple, besides the silver, gold, fine linen, and colored marble. As for their meaning . . . I've never given much thought to it. Are you going to teach me some of the inner secrets of royalty? You've got a captivated audience!

Haman, you have offered to pay the king multiplied millions in silver to achieve your desire upon the Jews. And when they are destroyed your gain by their property and wealth will soon be exhausted. This is a backdoor approach. It is too short-sighted for a discerning administrator like you. I want to tell you a much

wiser plan, through the “front door” of this nation within your empire. You are entitled to infinitely more wealth if you can understand the proper access.

Oh, by all means! You mean even the king doesn't know what you're about to reveal?

No. Only you, Haman. Furthermore, I'm about to open up secrets of relationship with *all* of your subjects, from the lowliest slave to the very king and queen.

Thank you a thousand times for such a high honor. I assure you I'll be faithful until the entire world is one great sheepfold under my . . . ah . . . the king's dominion. If only I had drunk a little less wine. Please speak slowly and carefully. I want to retain everything.

I'm glad you are so teachable, dear Haman. These principles are sure to enhance and perfect your greatness . . . if you will follow them from your *heart*, for they concern the very entrance into the heart of men and women everywhere, not just the Jews. Once you establish this Way of Life, your subjects will love you with a submission and willingness you never dreamed possible. Those who refuse will come under the very judgment of the God of all gods. He will personally vindicate and authorize and empower your leadership.

Yes, Yes! Tell me this priceless secret. I shall follow it implicitly.

[The colors in God's Tabernacle, His Temple]

The secret was first revealed to Israel by Moses when they left Egypt to become the nation which would live by this truth.

Oh no . . .

As long as their kings obeyed, their dominion increased until one of them became the greatest king the world has even known, much, much greater than even King Ahasuerus, though it was a dominion higher than merely physical and geographic.

What happened to him?

He failed to observe the principles. Most all the kings which followed also failed until God turned them over to Babylon and now your kingdom.

So dominion rises or falls according to this special pathway into authority?

Yes. Moses was instructed to build a temple and courtyard where their God would dwell in peace with His people. Every bit of material from the gate to the throne contained in symbolic form the various elements of truth concerning His government among them. The gate was a tri-colored, fine linen hanging in

which the essentials of authority were portrayed. Every other symbol thereafter only enlarged on these four elements until they reached their summation in the throne of the inmost sanctuary.

What were the essentials? Wait, let me call my scribe. We must have it in writing. Tashlana, come here, quickly! Copy everything you hear. A messenger from the Highest God is telling me the secrets of dominion and relationship, a front-door access to the wealth of the Jews and dominion over them. I'll even share some of it with you, Tash. . . . Thank you for waiting, Ambassador ahh. . .

Kovesh.

Kovesh? Has to do with dominion, in Hebrew, from what little I know of it. Yes, you do represent the God of gods. I feel highly honored. Now what are the four elements?

They correspond with the four basic needs of human nature. That's why it's the gate, or proper entrance into relationship. To attempt any kind of relationship, be it friendship, marriage, parenting, or dominion, on any other basis is to encounter major problems in the form of personality defenses. This is what I call a backdoor relationship, because these defenses block the front door of honesty, openness, and realness. But too often the backdoor leads to force, rape, plunder, manipulation, and finally murder and treachery. Are you still listening?

Y . . . yes.

You have ten sons and you are proud of them, aren't you, Haman?

Very much so.

When they were babies, you expected them to cleave to you and Zeresh for love, nourishment, protection, and comfort. They acknowledged your parental authority because you met these needs. Now look at them – all handsome and brilliant products of their father and mother. They could rebel from you if they chose, but they love and respect you, don't they?

Why, of course. They know all I have is theirs, potentially.

Your wife, Zeresh: She cleaves to you in love and honor because, as her husband, you have met her needs, which are much more complex than the rudimentary needs of infants.

An understatement, of course. What a mystery a woman can be, at times! But mainly because they're emotional instead of logical, like most of us men.

They are more intuitive than men, Haman, which gives them a great advantage, because they sense things men don't grasp by logic. When a man respects this God-given attribute in his wife, he

also shares in this blessing. But men commonly feel too insecure to take their wives seriously.

However, Israel's God meets this need for inner strength through what is symbolized by the simple colors of the three Temple entrances. He wanted to prepare them for the kind of relationship that endures *permanently*.

[The blue of heaven]

There were three entrances, each with the same three colors?

Yes, corresponding with three levels of access to relationship, but all based on the same four color principles, which include the white linen. I'll begin with blue. The God who made the world and stars also made you and everyone. And He alone knows our deepest need – that of fellowship, love and acceptance. Haman, why do you feel so angry when Mordecai refuses to bow before you?

Oh, I . . . ah . . . well . . . wouldn't you say it's his rebellion?

If you took time to honestly inquire into his beliefs you would have a different opinion. The worship of God alone is what links Israel with heaven. It's their lifeline to an inner strength and well-being that goes beyond anything you can imagine. It is *your* problem, Haman. Potentially within, you have vast inner resources for dealing with the most complex issues of the kingdom. Your need to be adored and honored, actually worshiped, is evidence this inner wellspring of Life has never been tapped.

I assure you my motive is entirely . . .

Mordecai refuses to bow before you because, of all the Jews at Sushan, he especially has guarded his heart with all diligence [Prv 4:23] to assure continuous access to God. Not that he does not respect you. But he knows the origin of all Life. Your reaction to him is only a ripening of your inner problem: an unfulfilled need for acceptance, love, and relationship. This is partly the reason for a woman's "mysterious" behavior.

You're making me uncomfortable; yet I think you have a point. Often when I'm frustrated with my wife's irritability, a little affection and love calm her down like magic, but if I react in anger . . . wow!

It's the blue of heaven. The leaders of Israel on one occasion were given a glimpse into the very abode of God. "And they saw the God of Israel. And there was under his feet as it were a paved work of a sapphire stone, and it was like the very heavens in its clarity" [Ex 24:10].

But He is not only the God of Israel. He is the God of Persia and of Media and of you, my dear friend, if you will seek to know Him. In fact, the very Life of the Most High God can be yours as you learn to enter relationship with Him. He will destroy your enemies, give you the very desires of your heart, and even hand you the earth as your inheritance.

Inconceivable! A god who can do this is truly the God of all gods. Tell me more!

Listen to the words of the father of the great king I mentioned. It was originally because of this father's intimacy with God that his son valued and received from God the wisdom to build such a powerful kingdom: "Delight yourself also in the Lord, and He shall give you the desires of your heart. . . . Rest in the Lord, and wait patiently for Him; do not fret because of . . . the man who brings wicked schemes to pass. . . . For evildoers shall be cut off: but those who wait on the Lord, they shall inherit the earth" [1 Kgs 3:11-13; 2 Chr 1:11-12; Ps.37:4-9].

This God of whom you speak sounds like a person. I wonder, could it be our gods are too impersonal, too far removed from the intimate affairs of real living to understand and identify with our needs?

[The scarlet of sacrifice]

I have only *begun* to reveal His personal nature, Haman. The scarlet color unlocks a marvel of wisdom no other god has been able to duplicate. The pigment is extracted from a worm. Compared to the original glory of man at his creation, we are only worms. Man in his attempt to regain it has used the scarlet as an attempt to glorify and adorn himself, but God uses it to help us see the reality of our fallen condition. And in the process He has met our most basic and earthly needs.

I'm listening, intently!

Are you familiar with the sacrificial system of Israel's former Temple?

Only vaguely, and I'm not sure if I care to know more.

But it's vital to understanding the scarlet, Haman. And it's very simple. God and man met there, at the sacrificial altar.

Yes, I understand. Animal sacrifice is a world-wide phenomenon.

But those of Israel were very specialized. They point to the Son of God, who will become a human being like us [Heb 2:14-18; 5:1-9].

Yes, that too is not unknown in the annals of history and mythology.

But this Son will give his life in untiring service, meeting every conceivable need of mortal man, from paying taxes, to miraculously multiplying a tiny lunch for thousands of people to eat, instantly quieting a killer storm on the sea, driving an army of demons from an insane man, counseling and delivering morally degenerated social castaways, and healing the afflicted of every known disease, including leprosy, blindness, and paralysis. He will even raise people from the dead. They will try to make Him their king, but . . .

He deserves to be King of the world! I shall help Him, and together we shall rule!

No. They will destroy Him like the animal sacrifices.

No! Ignorant fools! Why?

Because they will not understand the scarlet. The lost glory of mankind can be restored only through humility and servanthood. Listen to what Israel's most godly king said of himself, but speaking prophetically of the coming Son of God: "But I am a worm, and no man; a reproach of men, and despised by the people" [Ps 22:6].

In the Hebrew language this word for worm is the same word for the scarlet used in their Temple. Isaiah, one of the Hebrew prophets, prophesied concerning a future time when the Son of this true God would come to earth in human form: "He was despised and rejected – a man of sorrows, acquainted with deepest grief. We turned our backs on Him and looked the other way. He was despised, and we did not care" [Is 53:3 NLT].

Yet through this rejection by His own people, the Jews, He will bear *our* griefs and carry *our* sorrows, and heal *our* bodies. Isaiah also contrasted the true God with false gods: "Bel and Nebo, the gods of Babylon, bow as they are lowered to the ground. They are being hauled away on ox carts. The poor beasts stagger under the weight. Both the idols and their owners are bowed down. The gods cannot protect the people, and the people cannot protect the gods. They go off into captivity together" [Is 46:1-2 NLT].

But Israel's God is not a burden to us, nor does He need to be borne on a cart; instead He carries us: "[You] have been upheld by Me from birth; [you] have been carried from the womb: even to your old age, I am He, and even to gray hairs I will carry you! I have made, and I will bear; even I will carry, and will deliver you" [Is. 46:3b-4].

I don't understand. He is *God*?

You will understand when we get to the purple. For the blue of heaven's fellowship and the scarlet glory of humility and blood meet in the purple of an eternal dominion.

[The royal purple: can Haman be trusted with it?]

As I continue, Haman, please remember that the highest authority arises out of the delicate balance between the blue and scarlet, which, as you may know, produce purple when blended. There is only one truly royal purple: that of the Temple of the God I represent.

In some palaces, such as that of the Grecian kings, against whom you are even now preparing war, purple is or will be the predominant color of royalty and dominion. Another powerful nation conquering almost all civilization after the Grecian Empire will also claim the imperial purple.

Do you mean our great empire will be overcome by others?

Yes. There is only one authority which is invincible. It is the dominion first made available to Israel, and "*it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand forever*" [Dan 2:44b].

Look at the Jews now. Ha! They are not kings but servants of our kingdom!

Only because they failed to maintain a true perspective concerning authority.

What is it? Please! I promise I shall observe it carefully! Trust me! Tashlana, don't miss anything.

Why does authority belong to kings and administrators, fathers and husbands, Haman?

Well. . . I suppose it's to guarantee and protect the rights of the subjects of the kingdom and one's family.

What are these rights?

Oh, personal security, basic physical needs. . . .

What about a leader who would guarantee not only that, but peace, prosperity, physical and mental health, and even the highest form of life after your physical body dies?

Incredible! Impossible!

Isn't that precisely what I included in the scarlet as the needs met by the Son of the One Eternal Omnipotent God?

Of course, but He is God, not man!

Haman, you're forgetting the blue. This is the Lifeline to the God of provision and inexhaustible supply.

If this God of whom you speak becomes a man. . . only then. . . unless. . . unless somehow we leaders could tap into that power. Aha, power! Yes, yes! Now, about this blue. . . and purple?

Listen carefully, Haman. There is an authority designed in eternity by which the very resources and wisdom of God become available at your command in order to guarantee and secure the supply of the needs of your subjects. And what people would, by

and large, refuse submission to a leader with that kind of authority?

I understand now why you say it is the only true royal purple, for the balance of blue and scarlet are precisely what composes it. You must sit where they sit [Ez 3:15] in order to understand their needs. Yet to meet those needs you must have full access to the gods. . . or to this God you speak of. In fact I would say it has more to do with the priesthood, perhaps like giving full authority to our temple priests.

Haman, you have wisely discerned the true essence of this dominion, for it is called *a royal priesthood* [1 Pet 2:9]. The blue, purple, scarlet and fine twined linen compose the clothing of the High Priest in God's Temple. It is the government of the world by men of compassion and power, love and wisdom, mercy and truth.

My, my, it rivals the wisdom of the famed Greek philosophers and even that of the Temanites, distant kinfolk. Are you sure King Ahasuerus knows nothing of this insight? [Job 2:11; Jer 49:7; Acts 17:28].

Nothing whatsoever. Only the queen knows.

The queen. . . Esther? Queen Esther? But she's only a woman! A little woman! T. . . t. . . tell me ca . . . carefully how I might achieve this wonderful and powerful connection between heaven and earth, that I may reign. . . that is, as the king's faithful and trusted administrator.

[The fine linen of righteousness]

Wait, didn't you say there were *four* elements by which we gain access to the hearts of men and kingdoms? You have given only three: the blue of heaven's glory, the scarlet of humble sacrifice and service, and the purple of royal dominion.

I'm glad to see you are so alert, Haman, despite the wine and the lateness of the hour. The fourth element is the finely twisted linen, which of course is white.

What could that possibly represent? You've covered everything. The perfect triangle of government. I think I could make it work, thanks to your wise insight, and now that of the queen.

It will not operate without this final essential, for it is the foundation for the colors, which are woven into the linen.

It must be extremely important, then. Tashlana, are you still awake? Don't miss this, please, my faithful scribe. You will be highly rewarded, I assure you.

The fine linen refers to righteous character, holy, pure, and spotless.

Oh, I'm so relieved! Is that all? It's too good to be true! Tashlana, did you hear? We're on our way!

Haman, I don't mean *your* righteousness; I'm referring to the infinitely pure and perfect holiness of God. There is no other but His. No other character will support the beauty and majesty and glory of the blue, purple, and scarlet. And even as white is actually the perfect blend of all the colors, so the blue, purple, and scarlet are but manifestations of God's fullness to meet our needs.

I . . . I'm confused. I'm Haman, son of Hammedatha the Agagite, descendant of the ancient Amalekites. We are a proud people, confident and strong. We are just the people for an ageless dominion, especially in view of the fact that Israel once vowed to destroy us until the very memory of us was blotted out [Dt 25:19].

Haman, the Amalek God wanted to "blot out" in Israel was the Amalek of Self-determinism. God was trying to bring Israel into a place of rest from their own willfulness and anxiety. He wanted to empty their self-will in the desert so they would learn that He alone is sovereign and faithful. And Amalek was *the first among the nations* to attack them as God weakened them through their adversities in preparation for a transfer of trust from self to Him [Num 24:20].

It's that age-old tendency in all of us to be independent of God, to ignore His plain and simple front-door approach through the gate He has provided. It is enemy number one, because knowing God's strength in place of our weakness is the very key to the heavenly dominion we're talking about.

It hurts; I can't help it. I feel you're attacking *me* – a man of integrity!

You feel insecure because you are holding on to the old root: *your* righteousness, *your* integrity. You have no *foundation* to receive the threefold provision of God's love. Because of your *own* goodness, you perpetually attempt to *earn* God's love. So you *limit* the Bountiful Giver of Life and Blessing to *your earnings*, which are hopelessly inadequate.

Thus you end up with a reactionary personality, relating to God and man through the back door, afraid to confront them openly, even as Amalek attacked the tired and weary Israelite stragglers from the rear [Dt 25:18]. Limited to your meager self-sufficiency, you end up inferior, defensive, abusive, aggressive, and destructive, trying to find relationship and satisfaction "unlawfully."

Even King David fell into this trap when for five years he refused to face his son Absalom when Absalom murdered his half brother, Amnon. That error resulted in David's greatest nightmare ever, when the embittered and insecure Absalom succeeded, for a short time, in taking the entire kingdom away from his father [2 Sam 15ff].

Whole nations become warped into this framework until they become brutal and rapacious aggressors, bringing terror and travail to humanity. Because they *fear not God*, they fear man, and become irrational and brutish. But they fight against God: *Amalek was first among the nations, but shall be last until he perishes*. That was prophesied by the famous prophet Balaam when King Balak hired him to curse Israel [Num 24:20].

[Will Haman listen?]

Haman, my heart bleeds for you. Your very insecurity can become the basis of transfer onto a whole new foundation. but you've got to recognize the difference between your dirty clothes and the spotless linen God wants to *freely give* you.

The Jews have always chided us, even hating us. It goes back to the time you mentioned, when we attacked them. They tell us that when Moses held up his arms, their God fought against us. When he let his arms down, we gained over them. Finally two men supported his arms until we lost the battle. At that time Moses built an altar to commemorate his victory over us [Ex 17:8-16].

Please, Haman. I'm flesh and blood as you are. I know your pain. But try to understand. To find anything worth building on in human nature *is* a losing battle. Moses called the name of the altar he built, "Yahweh-Nissi, which means the LORD is my Banner" [Ex 17:15].

God had given Israel one of the most important truths of relationship, taken out of eternity and placed there in time on top of the hill. In it he is telling us how *He* relates to us, how *He* dispenses blessing to us. It is so opposite the way we relate to God and one another in our warped backdoor approach. God says, *It is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy* [Rom 9:16].

Take heart, Haman! God responds on the basis of *His* goodness, not ours. Remember the lot you cast to find the most favorable month for the destruction of the Jews? [Est 3:7] Right there is the seed of a powerful revelation of how God responds to men. The wisest man in the world wrote: *The lot is cast into the lap, but the whole disposing thereof is of the Lord* [Prov. 16:33].

GOD disposes of our plans, Haman! What a relief to know it doesn't depend upon my aggression and iron fist. Everything begins and ends in *Him*, not us! But when we refuse to let Him be Lord, what begins in self-will often ends up in treachery and murder.

The implications are far-reaching, my friend. Far from degrading or minimizing you, it means every Amalekite and every Gentile has the same access – the Son of the only true and living God. We call it “grace,” undeserved favor and blessing. And it begins with “mercy,” undeserved pardon and cleansing from your old sinful self.

Believe me. . . believe this Mighty God; He is a Father and Lover. He pleads with you now, *for there is no distinction between Jew and Greek*, or Amalekite, *for the same Lord over all is rich to all who call upon Him* [Rom 10:12].

Look at me, Haman! Are you listening?

[The die (lot) is cast.]

The Jews tell me King Saul tried to exterminate us, but spared Agag. And for that reason he was punished. [1 Sam. 15]

The Agag Saul spared, Haman, was far more than your king. It was the reactionary and aggressive man in Saul *himself*. When he was little in his own eyes, God anointed him to be king because his attention was on *The Lord His Banner*. But when he became important to himself, he lost his way [1 Sam 15:17].

He lost the entrance to the hearts of the people, *using religious sacrifice as an outward form instead of a revelation of access to God's mercy and grace*. The people he ruled existed for his ego, insecurity, and consequently, his neurotic lust for power and glory. He became a backdoor king, a man of ulterior motives. And God had to choose another to take his place.

You mean David, our greatest enemy, worse than Saul! [1 Sam 27:8].

Haman, you must not take it personally. Try to understand: God was preparing a model king who would deal with people and nations *face to face* without fear, inferiority, and subtlety. A king we would all learn from.

In fact God had brought David into such a depth of relationship with the Himself, this slayer of Goliath was now free to respect and forgive the jealous king who was bent on destroying him, and that by treachery. You see what I mean about Saul failing to overcome the Agag in himself?

However, David was not quite ready. With such a personal achievement over self-vindication to his credit, God had to give

him one final lesson before his coronation. He must know beyond the shadow of a doubt that his ability and mastery did not come from himself, from his own righteous character, but from God's. His "colorful" reign would be woven into the finely twisted white linen. And guess whom God used to conquer this final root in David?

Amalek! Amalek! My ancestors! My people . . . insecure, inferior, jealous, reactionary, neurotic, aggressive, treacherous, violent . . .

Haman, please don't be bitter. Search out the meaning; use the wisdom your executive position demands. You too can be remembered as the man who altered the course of history for your people. Please, listen carefully.

As one might expect, Haman, the Amalekites attacked Ziklag, the city occupied by David and his 600 men and their families, except that the men were gone with David on a military excursion. The Amalekites burned Ziklag, taking all the women and children captive. When David returned to gaze in horror at the smoldering city, his grief stricken men were ready to stone him [1 Sam 30].

Stop! I've heard enough! Yes, I know, David tracked us down then slaughtered us. But . . .

God gave Him that victory, Haman, because at his weakest, most helpless moment, the last spark of self-trust in David finally evaporated with the smoke. Encouraging himself in the Lord his Banner, he was at last ready for the throne that would endure forever. *The lot was now truly in God's hands.* No wonder God called him a man after His own heart, calling His own Son, the Son of David, this God-man, of Whom I spoke earlier [1 Sam 13:14; Acts 13:22].

The same honor and dominion is available to you, Haman, if only you will turn away from your own goodness and glory and put on the fine linen robe of *God's* righteousness. On that basis alone you may build the kind of administration your people need, from the blue of heaven's grace and wisdom to the scarlet of service and sacrificial love. It's yours if you will receive it freely from the God who loves you as you are and . . .

I think you represent the god of the Jews only. Your whole approach sounds disgustingly Jewish, the more I listen to it. Let me get some rest, or I'll hang you on the gallows I prepared for Mordecai today.

Haman, you are making a fatal mistake. I have offered you a new and heavenly ancestry and you refuse to accept it. But your

inner Agag and Amalek have been used to prepare the people you hate for the dominion you cannot understand.

The eleven months' warning you have given them by God's lot has reduced them to utter dependence upon the God of all gods until He is again their Banner and precious Doorway to relationship. And the one Jew you loathe most is now fully prepared for the royalty you willfully ignore. He will take your place as prime minister [Est 8:1-2].

Not only that, but the complete reversal of your high-handed plans will come about through, yes, a weak woman, an orphan! – and she a Jewess who has been brought into complete submission to the will and “lot” of her God [Est 2:15, 20].

Because she rests secure in her Beloved. And He is about to show *you* the principle of the *lot*, that “the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to men of understanding, nor favor to men of skill; but *time* and *chance* happen to them all” [Eccl 9:11].

Get out! Now!

Moreover, Haman, concerning this *lot* you have trusted in for guidance: Your Persian word for lot, *pur*, is exactly the same as a Hebrew word meaning “break, bring to nothing,” and was used by King David himself in one of his Psalms. Listen to it: “The Lord brings the counsel of the nations to nothing; He makes the plans of the peoples of no effect” [Ps. 33:10].

I said *Leave at once, immediately!*

Even now, Haman, the “lot” or “fate” is turning against you, and your “enemy,” who has *humbled himself* at the king's gate, Mordecai, is by a strange circumstance from God suddenly coming into unusual favor with the king. Your hours are numbered, Haman. You will *certainly* be broken, and *Amalek*, not the people you have humbled at the gate of the God of hosts, will be destroyed with your ten sons . . . and you [Est 4:2; 6:1-6].

I'LL KILL YOU! I'LL KILL YOU!!

Haman. . . Haman . . . *your countenance is changing . . . NO! NO! IT CAN'T BE . . . HORRORS! ADOLF HITLER!*

For yet a little while, and the wicked shall be no more; Indeed, you will look carefully for his place, but it shall be no more. But the meek shall inherit the earth, and shall delight themselves in the abundance of peace (Ps 37:10-11).

CHAPTER 2

King Saul: the mistake that cost him everything

Therefore said I, The Philistines will come down now upon me to Gilgal, and I have not made supplication unto the LORD: I forced myself therefore, and offered a burnt offering. 1 Sam. 13:12 KJV

One of the most tragic stories in the Bible is of the man God chose to be Israel's first king – Saul. The anointing by God of this humble and highly qualified man is more dramatic than that of David. But God disqualified him for his disobedience, like Olympic athletes disqualified because they cheated or used strength-enhancing drugs. But Saul's disobedience was rooted in a seemingly minor problem – his failure to wait . . . long enough.

As I edit and update this article I wrote years ago, the Olympics are taking place in Tokyo (July 2021). The biggest news from the games is that the greatest gymnast in history, Simone Biles, has pulled out because she knew the mental stress caused by the pressure to succeed before the whole world was hindering her performance, making her vulnerable to physical injury, and depriving her of enjoying what she normally loves. While a few criticized her, her teammates and most others watching admired her difficult decision, even though the American gymnastics team, without our African-American hero, fell behind Russia, now in first place at this time.

The pressure to perform and win against overwhelming odds is what drove King Saul to make the greatest mistake of his life. Had he known that the end of his reign would be a repeat of the same pressure he'd experienced at the beginning of it, he might have taken Simone's, I mean Samuel's order to "wait seven days" more seriously (1 Sam 10:8).

When the prophet Samuel had anointed Saul to be king over Israel, he instructed him that at a future time when he would be at Gilgal to carry out his mission against the Philistines, for which he had been chosen, he was to wait seven days for Samuel's arrival. Samuel would offer burnt and peace offerings, signifying surrender to the will of God for His favor and wisdom (1 Sam 9:16; 10:7–8; Rom 12:1).

But how could anyone have predicted that the simple command to wait would take place as Saul's three thousand poorly

armed men faced a Philistine army of “3,000 chariots, 6,000 charioteers, and as many warriors as the grains of sand on the seashore”? What Saul failed to realize is that he’d been anointed to rule and war with *spiritual* weapons, not merely physical. And that waiting for God’s anointing and leading would be the key to it (1 Sam 13:5 NLT).

While Saul waited, his son Jonathan also waited. But while Saul no doubt worried about the huge, well-equipped Philistine army and saw his own few men escaping to hide “in caves, in thickets, in rocks, in holes, and in pits,” some fleeing to the other side of the Jordan and possibly even deserting to the enemy, *Jonathan kept his attention on God* (1 Sam 10:8; 13:6–7; 14:21).

Then soon after Saul caved in to the pressure and went ahead to offer a burnt offering himself instead of waiting for Samuel, Jonathan gained faith to face a company of the Philistines with only his armor bearer. The confused Philistines panicked and the earth shook as they began slaying one another. It’s an example of how God will fight our battles *supernaturally* when we trust Him completely – the purpose of the burnt offering. To say it another way, the burnt offering symbolizes the burning up of pride-driven motivation and ambition (1 Sam 14:15; Lev 1:3; 2 Cor 8:12; 9:7).

But it also reveals the opportunity Saul missed by looking at the wrong set of circumstances – natural instead of spiritual. We all do it. So did Peter, immediately after discerning that Jesus was “the Messiah, the Son of the living God,” receiving Jesus’ highest commendation of his spiritual insight, revealing the “keys” to the spirit-realm, “the Kingdom of Heaven.”

For in the next moment, he tried to talk Jesus out of going to the cross and dying. Jesus responded, “Get away from Me, Satan! You are a dangerous trap to Me. You are seeing things merely from a human point of view, not from God’s.” No wonder he ended up denying Jesus at His trial (Mt 16:16–23 NLT; 26:69–75).

Years later, David, long before he’d take the throne, would single-handedly face with a shepherd’s sling the Philistine army headed by Goliath, and send the entire horde fleeing for their lives. All because David, like Jonathan, understood the purpose and value of waiting for and on, of intertwining with, his God (Ps 25:3, 5, 21; 59:9; 62:5; 69:3, 6; 27:14; 37:7–9, 3–4; 40:1; 106:13; 123:2; 130).

Serving God out of duty or relationship?

The relationship between waiting and obedience gives us a picture of the men and women God used in the Bible. We wait,

and God waits “that He may be gracious.” If *grace* is the key to obedience, then *learning to wait for grace* must certainly be one of the most vital aspects of our walk with God (Is 30:18; Rom. 6:14).

For *grace* is not the same as *mercy*. As it is said, *mercy is God not giving us what we deserve – punishment, and grace is God giving us what we don’t deserve – His favor, blessing, and enabling power*. This is why when Saul could not wait for *grace* to replace his own effort, he ended up “forcing” himself to offer the burnt offering, doing “of himself” the works God wanted to do through him, as He did for others who learned to lean wholly on Him for His wisdom and strength (1 Sam 13:12 KJV; Jn 5:19; 15:5).

This simple English translation, “forced,” in the King James Bible, turned out to be the word that exposed the problem behind the twenty years of suicidal depression that almost drove me insane. While Saul’s failure to “wait” lay at the root of “forcing” or “compelling” (NKJB) himself to offer a religious sacrifice, when God showed me *how* to “wait” on and for Him, it led to my complete deliverance.

Because when God “hides Himself,” it does not mean we must “force” ourselves to do something “spiritual” to please Him or save face before those who expect us to be spiritual. *This one word is behind all the wars fought in the name of religion, as well as the many millions of people tortured and slaughtered for their freedom to worship without being forced by those whose only claim to God is forcing themselves into religious activity based on a sense of duty or obligation, or for that matter, political or economic advantage.*

It’s tempting to blame God or ourselves in periods of darkness when He seems to hide Himself, as though He’s ignoring us or we’ve done something wrong. True, sin will block access to God. But when you’ve confessed every sin and every relationship is made right, God may still remain silent, teaching us to walk by “faith that it might be according to grace, so that the promise might be sure to all the seed.” For “we walk by faith, not by sight” (Prv 25:2–3; Is 45:15; 50:10; Rom 4:16; 2 Cor 5:7).

“He resists the proud, but gives grade to the humble,” and it usually takes a period time to humble ourselves, and sometimes bite the dust. This phrase, by the way, is biblical, and it appears in my favorite *waiting* passage, which carried me through my lowest pits of depression before God delivered me in 1976:

“It is good that one should hope and wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD. It is good for a man to bear the yoke in his youth. Let him sit alone and keep silent, because God has laid it on

him; let him *put his mouth in the dust* – there may yet be hope” (Lam 3:27–29; cf. Is 59:2; 30:18; Jas 4:6).

Plants also need periods of darkness to grow properly. It’s called *photoperiodism*. Furthermore, it was found that the period of darkness is actually when “the plant’s various activities, from stem growth to flowering” take place. If you love science, read the details under “Photoperiodism” in *Wikipedia*.

And if you love God, look at darkness as a means to know God in greater intimacy. Then you’ll discover the joy of serving Him through love, not “forcing yourself” out of obligation. But even beyond love, for it is His power working in us for His glory (Rom 6:14; Gal 5:6, 13; Eph 1:19–20; Phil 2:13; 3:10; Col 1:29).

The Tree of the knowledge of good and evil

It’s always gratifying to learn from my children. Not long ago I listened to my daughter Faith, the one who wrote the forward to my prison book, talk about the Fall of Adam in the Garden of Eden. I knew the subject well, or thought I did, until she began to break down the phrase, “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil,” the “forbidden fruit,” which led to Adam and Eve’s disobedience (Gen 2:9, 16–17; 3:1ff).

I’d always emphasized the *knowledge* aspect, distinguishing it from spiritual knowledge, being led by God’s Spirit, rather than our intellect. While this is true and at the heart of the Fall of man, I had not stopped to ponder in depth the phrase, “of good and evil.”

But Faith searched this out and concluded that when we choose to live from our own initiative, making our own choices apart from God’s wisdom, we oversimplify things in terms of good and evil, right and wrong. It may sound “right,” but when left to ourselves, we see things from the same *earthy viewpoint* that enticed Adam and Eve to eat that fruit (Gen 3:5–6; cf 1 Jn 2:15–17).

The writer of Hebrews speaks of those who are “dull of hearing,” meaning *spiritual* perception. “For everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil” (Heb 5:12–14 ESV).

Notice how closely it corresponds to what Paul told the believers in Corinth: “But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh [carnal, NKJ], as infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not

ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready, for you are still of the flesh. For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way? For when one says, 'I follow Paul,' and another, 'I follow Apollos,' are you not being merely human?" (1 Cor 3:1-4 ESV).

What they lacked was *spiritual* vision, complete with God's love, *which sees past the external weaknesses of the flesh, into the heart*: "So we have stopped evaluating others from a human point of view. At one time we thought of Christ merely from a human point of view. How differently we know Him now! This means that anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun!" (2 Cor 5:16-17 NLT).

It takes "the wisdom that is from above" to *spiritually* assess relationships and deal with one another in love. For that wisdom "is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy" (Jas 3:17).

Even as I write, I'm aware of areas of childish immaturity in me when I judge other believers for what I consider are errors in doctrine or behavior, forgetting 1 Peter 4:8, "And above all things have fervent love for one another, for 'love will cover a multitude of sins.'"

Or 1 John 5:16, "If you see a Christian brother or sister sinning in a way that does not lead to death, you should pray, and God will give that person life. But there is a sin that leads to death, and I am not saying you should pray for those who commit it" (NLT).

It may take "the mind of the Spirit," "the mind of Christ," to rightly "discern" whether someone's "sin" is deliberate and willful (a sin unto death), or the weakness of the flesh, in which case that brother or sister-in-Christ needs, not my condemnation, but God's life and strength to overcome. And He will "give" it through my prayer (Rom 8:27; 1 Cor 2:16; Heb 10:26-27; Col 3:12-14).

This is by far our greatest challenge and the single area which tells us our level of spiritual maturity and how much we *know* God *intimately*. "Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. *He who does not love does not know God, for God is love*" (1 Jn 4:7-8).

And after the fire a still small voice (1 Kgs 19:12)

God's voice to Elijah in his deep discouragement was not in the tornado, the earthquake, or the fire, but in a "gentle whisper" (NLT). His secret was that he *waited* through all that drama until

he *heard* it; he knew “the real thing” (1 Kgs 19). I’ve dedicated an entire chapter (14) to this phenomenon regarding Elijah, and how God found only one young man, probably in the whole known world, who would qualify to be his successor, at a time when there were several schools, like Bible schools, just to train students for the prophetic ministry. And yet God could not find *one of them* who could submit to the grueling training and humbling required for such a ministry as Elijah had. If you’re wondering what I mean, read Lamentations 3:1–42 (2 Kgs 3:11; 2 Tim 2:12).

For instance, on the day God anointed Saul to be king, He gave him the gift of prophecy: “At that time the Spirit of the LORD will come powerfully upon you, and you will prophesy with them. You will be changed into a different person. . . . As Saul turned and started to leave, God gave him a new heart. . . . Then the Spirit of God came powerfully upon Saul, and he, too, began to prophesy. When those who knew Saul heard about it, they exclaimed, ‘What? Is even Saul a prophet? How did the son of Kish become a prophet?’” (1 Sam 10:6, 9–11 NLT).

So then, what was it about “not waiting long enough” that disqualified this new “prophet”? The purpose of the waiting test was to separate soul from spirit in him, that he might learn to walk by faith, obedient to God’s Spirit, not just prophecy by the Spirit occasionally (Rom 8:1; Gal 5:16, 25; Heb 4:12–13).

We’ve seen modern prophets with powerful ministries fall morally or through loss of integrity for the same reason. One of the principles I learned from Bob Mumford, one of my teachers at Elim Bible Institute (Lima, NY), is that one can have the “gifts of the Spirit” and still not *walk* in obedience to God. That’s what spiritual maturity is all about – “abiding” and “remaining” in Him and His love (Jn 15:1ff).

For the believers at Corinth had “every spiritual gift,” but were not walking in love for one another. Paul called them “babes,” “infants” spiritually, “still controlled by [their] sinful nature.” And Jesus said many would prophesy in His name, cast out demons, and do “many wonders in [His] Name.” But He will tell them, “I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!” (1 Cor 1:4ff; 3:1ff NLT; Mt 7:22–23).

God says “to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness” (Eph 2:22–24 ESV).

No doubt virtually every disagreement or controversy we have with anybody over anything is too often rooted in our earthly viewpoint of right or wrong. Somehow we often can't see that being led by His Spirit is what we lost in the Fall. And that ending an argument and healing a relationship may be as close as "waiting," even a few minutes, for the touch of God's Spirit and love to release His wisdom in our heart (Rom 8:14; Gal 5:16, 18).

"For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. . . . For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God" (Rom 8:5, 14).

Emotional nakedness

Faith talked about the first couple's feeling of shame for being naked. Like, what was so shameful about that, since God had already told them to "be fruitful and multiply," implying sexual intimacy. Plus they were the only two people on the planet. But it was their *inner* nakedness in light of their disobedience, that made them so emotionally sensitive and vulnerable (Gen 1:28).

Before their *self*-discovery, they saw themselves as God created them in His Image for His glory and purpose. But now they were on their own. The glory had departed, and having disobeyed the clear command of their Creator and Lord in order to "be like God," their earthly motives were laid bare. And the fig leaves they'd sewn were inadequate to hide their "fear of death" (Heb 2:14).

We've all seen pictures of Adam and Eve, trying to cover their naked bodies with green leaves, looking guilty as they attempt to hide from God among the trees. This moment as I write, for the first time I have a picture of what we look like to God when we're not real and genuinely "in Christ." though we may look good to those who see our outward appearance and actions. We're stripped of the most important and vital part of our being, that which makes us whole, complete, fulfilled and filled with purpose and destiny. Like a beautiful car with a blown engine.

For "the body without the spirit is dead" – spiritually "dead in trespasses and sins." Or like the church at Sardis, which had a reputation for being alive, but was dead, spiritually (Jas 2:26; Eph 2:1; Rev 3:1; cf Mt 8:22; Lk_15:24, 32; Eph_2:5; 5:14; Col 2:13).

So everything we do in this dysfunctional state is an endless attempt to look like something or someone we're not. If we could see ourselves in this state from a spiritual perspective, we'd "freak out," like seeing a chicken running around with no head,

still trying to act like the chicken it was before its head was axed. If you've never removed a chicken's head, you probably don't get the picture, nor the humor (forgive me).

But that's the picture I now have of how we look in the spirit realm without allowing God's Spirit to activate and fulfill our recreated spirit, birthed anew through faith in Christ, making us alive to God and sensitive to His Spirit as we grow through feeding on His Word (1 Pet 2:2).

Relating to others with understanding

This explains why relationships can be difficult and divorce is so common: we see one another "in the flesh," with human, "fallen" weaknesses exposed, and fail to seek God until our minds are renewed by the Spirit-breathed Word. *For that gives us a God-given basis for dealing with the sins and faults of others* (2 Cor 5:16–17; Eph 4:24; Heb 11:6).

It is without doubt the most important factor in my own marriage, making my dear wife the most exciting and awesome woman I can imagine. I mention in my prison book how it even affects my sexual libido, eliminating the need for Viagra or Cialis. God thought of everything related to "be fruitful and multiply." How's that for "amazing grace"? (Gen 1:22, 28; 1 Cor 7:1–5).

This "understanding," the way I've learned to perceive my wife, is my goal in learning to understand and perceive others, even sinners. However, Jesus, being anointed by the Spirit, was not as subtle as I'm trying to be, for He knew their hearts (Jn 2:24–25; read Matthew 23!).

Be that as it may, it is easy to judge famous people of the world according to our perception of them, without knowing their inner struggles. Recently (April, 2021) on BBC Web news (British Broadcasting Corporation) I noticed a headline about Khloe Kardashian, sister of the famous Kim Kardashian. Khloe said, "In truth, the pressure, constant ridicule and judgment my entire life to be perfect and to meet other's standards of how I should look has been too much to bear." I wanted to fall on my face and weep for the superficial way I've judged some, instead of seriously praying for the healing of their pain through Christ.

I thought of so many others – rich, famous, and good looking, who end up taking their lives because of that same emptiness inside, originally designed for fellowship with God and His love, joy, peace, and sheer glory (Jn 17:22–23; 2 Cor 3:18; Col 2:1–3, 9–10; 1 Jn 1:3).

Then I again thought of Adam and Eve, trying to hide their shame in vain, until God gave them skins from an innocent animal He'd obviously killed. It was the first of many more "animal sacrifices" that would act like a "show and tell," helping us understand the depth to which we all have "fallen" from His glory, and that we are "as good as dead" without the sacrifice of God's Son that restores the relationship through His atoning death and resurrection life (Gen 4:4; 8:20-21; Rom 4:19; Eph 2:1, 5; Col 2:13; Heb 11:12; 1 Jn 5:11-13).

From this viewpoint, it's easier to understand that Jesus was not being harsh in the following verse: "Hypocrite! First remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will *see clearly* to remove the speck from your brother's eye" (Rom 8:14; Mt 7:5).

He invites us to "see clearly" the *real* issues, beginning with our own hearts, in order to help others overcome their weaknesses and sins. We can do it as we learn to *wait* until we're "led by the Spirit" (Rom 8:14; Gal 5:25).

Saul failed his second test over religion.

When King Saul went ahead with the burnt offering without waiting for Samuel to do it in his capacity as God's representative, he did it as a religious duty, a ritual with no understanding of its spiritual meaning (Is 1:6; Jer 17:9; Rom 3:9-18; 7:18-24).

Therefore, since it had no effect on him spiritually, he would be left *on his own* to "cover" his fallen nature with everything those fig leaves represented. Jesus told the Pharisees, "You like to appear righteous in public, but God knows your hearts. *What this world honors is detestable in the sight of God*" (Lk 16:15 NLT).

How "detestable" this is can be seen in the next chapter, when Saul in his religious zeal placed his men under oath that they must not eat until they defeated the Philistines during a battle Jonathan initiated through one of the most amazing acts of faith in the Bible. But when Jonathan, not hearing about the oath, ate some honey while pursuing them, Saul, like every despot determined to maintain his authority and honor, combined with his religious legalism (law without relationship), ordered him to be killed when he learned of his disobedience (1 Sam 14; see chapter four of this book regarding Jonathan's response and its significance).

Over the years when I've read this, I always marveled at how bad and "insane" Saul was, yet failed to realize how many times I've failed to "own up" to my error in judgment and humbly admit I was wrong. Sometimes my pride is such that only by taking time alone with God and my conscience am I willing to "fess up," lay my

reputation “on the altar” (of sacrifice), let my accuser have the last word, and trust God with my reputation. But when I do, I find He gives it back in better shape than before. In place of fig leaves, He wants us to be “clothed with humility,” like sacrificial animal skins God clothed Adam and Eve with, for “God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble” (1 Pet 5:5; Gen 3:21; Prv 3:34; Jas 4:6).

Sometime later, God again tested Saul when He told him to carry out His sentence against the Amalekites, including all their animals. But Saul “spared the best of the sheep and the oxen, to sacrifice to the LORD. . . . But everything despised and worthless, that they utterly destroyed” (1 Sam 15:15, 9).

It’s doubtful that Saul intended to use those valuable domestic animals for religious sacrifice; it was the spoils of war. Like Judas, blind to the realities of the spirit world and thus upset when Mary poured the expensive fragrance on Jesus, Saul just couldn’t see them slaughtered for no reason. Because to the “natural mind,” there was no reason to slaughter them: what a waste! (Jn 12:4–5; cf Josh 7; Acts 5:1–11).

And we dare not judge him, for most of us probably feel the same way, spending too much time on earthy concerns to the neglect of our walk with God. The thought of Mary “wasting” that perfume lavishly on Jesus, worth a year’s wages, helps me understand the value of waiting on God, when it seems, to my natural or carnal mind, like a waste of time (Mt 6:33; Lk 8:14).

After his victory over God’s number one enemy, the Amalekites, the “terrorists” of his day, “Saul went to the town of Carmel to set up a monument to himself.” What an irony: while Saul is promoting his own glory (fig leaves), Samuel is looking for him to announce his second and final rejection by God for using religious ritual as a substitute for obedience (1 Sam 15:12).

It reminds me of Haman, the Amalekite, coming to the king to announce the gallows he’d just built to hang Mordecai, just as the king is getting ready to honor Mordecai, and will use Haman to do it. It also reminds me of the only other one in the Bible who built a monument to himself – Absalom. It’s recorded immediately after mention of the “heap of stones” (another “monument”) piled up over the pit where his body was thrown when Joab and his men slew him as he fled during his sedition and rebellion against his father, King David (Est 6:1–10; 2 Sam 18:17–18).

Incidentally, Joab is another study similar to Saul, for he did things he felt was right, and which *seemed* right, according to the politics of his day, but which in the end incurred God’s swift judgment. And that really scares me, because in some cases, I took

Joab's side (tree of the knowledge of right and wrong), instead of David's. Because to my "natural mind," Joab did seem justified in what he did.

And if you're "politically correct," you might agree. I'll leave that study up to you, although I plan to use my chapter "Joab and the Horns of Power," from my book on the Tabernacle, as the first chapter of a future book, if not the sequel to this one (2 Sam 3, 18, 20, 1 Kgs 1-2).

(However, Saul's monument raises a question about my own motives in writing: am I merely building a "monument" to myself? The possibility is cause to take my time to search my heart, and make sure that what I have to say is truly for the benefit of others and I'm only doing my part in tune with the Holy Spirit as a member of His body, the Church, according to Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12, Ephesians 4, and especially Philippians 3:12).

When Samuel found Saul after hearing about his monument, he told Saul, "Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams. For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the LORD, He also has rejected you from being king" (1 Sam 15:22-23).

Blame displacement

That's frightening, because it sheds light into our own hearts when we think we can function without God. It's the Fall of Man played out all over again, as Saul, with clear instructions from God, chose to do it *his way*. No wonder he ended up another Hitler (see 1 Sam 22).

When Samuel asked Saul why he had not killed all the animals, Saul two times shifted the blame to "the people," just as Adam blamed Eve, and Eve blamed the serpent. It's blame displacement or denial, often rooted in victim mentality, and it's growing more common than ever as our "cancel-culture" becomes more alienated from our Creator and "Father of lights" (1 Sam 15:14-15, 21; Jas 1:17).

How different was David's response to correction: "Let the godly strike me! It will be a kindness! If they correct me, it is soothing medicine. Don't let me refuse it" (Ps 141:5 NLT).

In Psalm seven, David literally invites God's judgment on himself if he has sinned, even against his enemy. "If I have repaid evil to him who was at peace with me, or have plundered my enemy without cause, let the enemy pursue me and overtake me;

Yes, let him trample my life to the earth, and lay my honor in the dust. Selah” (7:5).

When Saul finally admitted he had sinned, he should have humbled himself in deep repentance, as David did in Psalm 51, when he said, “For You do not desire sacrifice, or else I would give it; You do not delight in burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and a contrite heart – these, O God, You will not despise” (vv 16–17).

Instead, Saul did just the opposite, using “worship” as an appearance of obedience. “I have sinned,” he said; “yet honor me now [fig leaves], please, before the elders of my people and before Israel, and return with me, that I may worship the LORD your God” (v 30).

Saul used the term “your God” three times in 2 Samuel 15, obviously indicating he did not know Him personally, which is why *religion* became his only perceived connection to God. David, on the other hand, mentions “my God” about thirty six out of the fifty-five times it occurs in the Psalms, even when God seemed to have abandoned him (1 Sam 15:15, 21, 30; 2 Sam 22:7, 22, 30; Ps 3:7, etc).

‘My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me? Why are You so far from helping Me, and from the words of My groaning? O My God, I cry in the daytime, but You do not hear; and in the night season, and am not silent. . . . I was cast upon You from birth. From My mother’s womb You have been My God (Ps 22:1–2, 10).

No wonder David was a man after God’s own heart (1 Sam 13;14; Acts 13:22).

Saul, the terrorist

I heard on network news years ago that there are two kinds of terrorists: those who kill “unbelievers” through religious *zeal*, and “thugs” who use religion as an excuse to murder. Paul the apostle was the former, when his name was Saul of Tarsus. He wrote of himself, “[God] considered me trustworthy and appointed me to serve him even though I used to blaspheme the name of Christ. In my insolence, I persecuted his people. But God had mercy on me because I did it in ignorance and unbelief” (1 Tim 3:12b–13 NLT).

One might place King Saul as a religious zealot by reason of the following passage: “Now there was a famine in the days of David for three years, year after year; and David inquired of the LORD. And the LORD answered, ‘It is because of Saul and his bloodthirsty house, because he killed the Gibeonites.’ . . . Now the Gibeonites were not of the children of Israel, but of the remnant of

the Amorites; the children of Israel had sworn protection to them, but Saul had sought to kill them in his [religious] *zeal* for the children of Israel and Judah” (2 Sam 21:1–2).

However, another passage shows what was in his heart by reason of his insane jealousy of David. For in 1 Samuel 22, when Saul found the head priest had helped David with food, not knowing he (David) was fleeing from him (Saul), he ordered the slaughter of all eighty-five priests, with their wives, children, and even animals. Only Abiathar, the priest’s son, escaped to tell David about it (1 Sam 21–22).

What seemed like a minor problem – Saul’s failure to *wait* long enough to *be* the “living sacrifice” God looked for in him, turned out to be the pivot on which his life turned – away from the God who’d anointed him to be the king of Israel. At the end of his life, when again he faced a Philistine army, unable to hear from God, he consulted the witch at En Dor to find out what would happen in the battle on the morrow. The next day, wounded by a Philistine arrow, he took his own life (1 Sam 28, 31).

“So Saul died for his unfaithfulness which he had committed against the LORD, because he did not keep the word of the LORD, and also because he consulted a medium for guidance” (1 Chr 10:13).

While faith, prayer, the Word, obedience, humility, etc, are all vital factors in the Kingdom of God, without learning to *wait on Him* and develop sensitivity to the Holy Spirit, it’s too easy to do religious things in the strength of our soul rather than by our spirit in union with His Spirit. Most every man or woman God used in the Bible learned to live by this “operating system,” and usually the hard way, through the trial and testing of their faith (Rom 1:9; Phil 3:3; Jas 1:1–4).

Samson is the best example of learning the hard way, for it wasn’t until the Philistines had reduced him to a slave, working the grain mill like an ox, that he finally came to his senses – his spiritual senses, and regained the supernatural strength God had gifted him with. He’d finally taken the time to *wait* on God as he worked, because the source of his lustful passions – his eyesight – was gone (Judg 16).

But some never learned, even the hard way. Probably no other man in the Bible had so great an opportunity to walk with God and accomplish great things through His power but failed to follow through with it than King Saul. However, his story serves as an example, “written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages have come” (1 Cor 10:11).

CHAPTER 3

The Hidden Danger of Success

Humpty Dumpty syndrome

My neighbor in Greensboro, NC, in the early 1970s, told me how she lost her son. He was a North Carolina state trooper and had earned a reputation for bravery. One day he pulled over a car on a country road with five men in it. When he radioed his 10-20 (location), the dispatcher asked if he wanted backup. His last recorded words were, "No, I can handle it." They found his body in a corn field riddled with bullets.

Former president Richard Nixon's downfall – Watergate – began to "fall" into place soon after he returned from his trip to China during which he successfully negotiated his famous trade agreement with them. His popularity in America was at an all time high, and New York City organized a "ticker tape parade" in his honor in 1960. You can see him through Web pictures, riding in a limo with millions of paper pieces (from stock market ticker tape machines) floating down from offices above in his honor, while millions watch on TV. But his story and glory ended in 1974: he is the only U.S. president to resign in office.

Success of that magnitude is extremely difficult to handle, even for the most spiritual of God's people. In 1989 the two most well-known TV evangelists both "fell" through moral failure. Thankfully, God has forgiven and restored them, and they are back in ministry with deeper understanding of human weakness apart from God's grace.

But moral failure continues among those at "the top," and it's disheartening to read or hear news of another great spiritual leader who has been "asked to step down" and submit to counseling and restoration. Most recently, I was shocked and hurt by news that one of our greatest role models for biblical insight and spiritual integrity had also failed morally. It could happen to any of us, including you and me.

"Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall." "Dear brothers and sisters, if another believer is overcome by some sin, you who are godly should gently and humbly help that person back onto the right path. And be careful not to fall into the same temptation yourself" (1 Cor 10:12; Gal 6:1 NLT).

Saul's first military victory

Saul had hardly been crowned Israel's first king when the Ammonites threatened to take over the Israelite city of Jabesh Gilead and put out the right eyes of all the men there. When Saul was informed, he mustered an army of 330,000 Israelites within the week's deadline and through them completely destroyed the Ammonite army. "Those who survived were so scattered, so that no two of them were left together." Saul became an instant hero, Israel's new "icon" (1 Sam 11).

Let's take a closer look at Isaiah 30:18. "Therefore the LORD will wait, that He may be gracious to you; and therefore He will be exalted, that He may have mercy on you. For the LORD is a God of justice; blessed are all those who wait for Him."

God wants to be gracious, to show us favor, to work for us even when we don't deserve it. We all love that. But He won't until we're ready. And that second phrase tells us why we're not ready: we think we can handle it, we're still in charge; so we'll take the credit and the glory for our success.

"And therefore He will be exalted, that He may have mercy on you." To talk and sing about exalting Him is one thing, but God knows our hearts and when we really mean it.

Unfortunately for Jonathan, who was as humble and spiritual as David in contrast to his father Saul, his spiritual sensitivity and perception caused a major breach in his relationship with his father, for which I've dedicated the next chapter to explain. It's another example of the irony of success and spiritual giftedness that makes it difficult to understand and "bear with" those who are "dull of hearing," as Paul points out in Hebrews 5:11-14.

And why taking time to wait and allow God to deal with our hearts is so important.

Wakeup call!

In 1970 my wife and I attended a week's seminar where the speaker had the most accurate gift of "the word of knowledge" I'd ever witnessed. I'd been suffering with suicidal depression for years, even as I pastored a church and counseled others. So I decided to see if God had anything to say through him to me (Acts 11:28; 21:10-11; 1 Cor 12:8).

To my surprise, as soon as I stood before him, these words came out of his mouth: "I see you as a huge soul with a tiny spirit; you are running way ahead of God." Since he roomed across the hall from the room where my wife and I slept, he tried to stop me from going down stairs to the basement after the evening services

to pray and study, knowing it was part of my “running ahead of God.” But I thought it was dead wrong for anybody to keep from seeking God, and waited until he closed his door, then snuck down to the basement anyway.

But five years later when my depression had morphed into rage and I realized I was going insane, I knew it was time to seek God “with all my heart” according to Jeremiah 29:13. It took the first six months to finally get an answer from Him, and the answer was, “Stop Reading.”

All I’d been reading for the past ten years was the Bible and Spiritual books. So *God* confirmed what the minister had told me and unsuccessfully tried to get me to obey. And now that God had spoken so clearly and I was so desperate, I obeyed. As a result, I learned to wait on God, and through His leading, finally learned to read at His direction, not my “soulish” ambition to “be spiritual.”

So I know firsthand how easy it is to be busy and active doing things we think are “spiritual,” and succeeding at it *outwardly*, but dying inside, like the church at Sardis, in Revelation 3:1-2.

“And to the angel (the messenger) of the assembly (the church) in Sardis write: These are the words of Him who has the seven Spirits of God [that is, the sevenfold Holy Spirit] and the seven stars: I know your record and what you are doing; you are supposed to be alive, but [in reality] you are dead. Rouse yourselves *and* keep awake, and strengthen *and* invigorate what remains and is on the point of dying; for I have not found a thing that you have done – any work of yours – meeting the requirements of My God *or* perfect in His sight” (AMP).

When God’s blessing leads to His chastening

Most of the men God used mightily in the Old Testament made their most costly mistakes at the peak of their success – the result of God’s blessing on their obedience. The problem is that His blessing on our lives often lures us into carelessness and pride – the opposite of the hunger and humility that brings His blessing.

The difference between the following prophets and kings is that the prophets knew the secret of *waiting on God* to restore the damage, whereas the kings, with some notable exceptions, thankfully, failed in this area. “For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God” (Rom 8:14).

Just stating it as a fairly consistent fact in Bible history is not enough: it is hard to believe. So I took time to list every example with the circumstances surrounding each of them. It serves a dual purpose: First, it’s a graphic study in how obedience attracts the

blessing and favor of God like a magnet, and how disobedience places us directly in the path of our enemies without His protection.

And second, it shows this strange irony, that our prosperity through God's favor may rob us of our "first love" – knowing God intimately . . . unless we've learned how to wait before Him. So let's begin with the patriarchs.

Abraham. Abraham pioneered the faith that would become the standard for the New Testament. While God reduced him to complete dependence on Him, "He did not waver at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strengthened in faith, giving glory to God." This is the key to waiting: staying on God in the darkness (Rom 4:20' see Heb 12:2).

But **after** his lightning-strike victory over Chedorlaomer to rescue his nephew Lot and his family (Gen 14), and after God personally "cut covenant" with him (ch 15; more on that later), he made his biggest mistake by far. Instead of *waiting* to hear from God about the offspring God had promised him, he took his wife Sarah's advice and had his first son, Ishmael, through her Egyptian servant, Hagar, costing him another thirteen years of *waiting* for that "promise" – Isaac (ch 16–17).

Paul compares the two mothers and their sons as the difference between serving God through *faith* and the power of His Spirit, and serving Him through "bondage" to "the law" and self-motivation. Those motivated by legalism and self-effort end up "persecuting" (misjudging, criticizing) those whose motivation comes through their relationship with God by *faith* instead of works (Gal 4:22–31).

Why? Because living by faith means *waiting* for God's grace to enable us to "work." "For we through the Spirit eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness by faith. . . . faith working through love" (Gal 5:5–6; cf Rom 4:16).

Moses. Though "Moses was taught all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and he was powerful in both speech and action," God wasted him in the Sinai Desert forty years until he lost all confidence in himself and didn't even want to return to Egypt to deliver his own people. But that is when God knew he was finally ready (Acts 7:22; Ex 3).

The chapter telling of Korah's rebellion years later in the same Sinai desert where God led Israel through Moses (Numbers 16) also records God's swift and shocking judgment against Korah

and his company on behalf of Moses, followed by a plague that killed almost 14,700 more when the people came against him and his brother Aaron.

In the next three chapters (17–19) God, again through Moses, singles out Aaron, his brother, and their tribe, the tribe of Levi, before all Israel as His chosen tribe. Then He describes their responsibilities in ministry through the sacrifices and offerings at the tabernacle. It corresponds in its symbolism to precisely what Moses had already been doing spiritually as he interceded (prayed) for the people.

But in the next chapter (20), after nearly forty years of faithfully shepherding God’s people and God climaxing such a dramatic array of power to vindicate him, he suddenly “loses it” with a display of anger against the people that disqualifies him from entering the long-awaited “Promise Land.”

This was the purpose for which God had chosen him – to lead the people from Egypt to Canaan, and in one act of impatience, he’s out, even after pleading with God for a second chance! God answered, “Enough of that! Speak no more to Me of this matter.” Wow! (Dt 3:23–28).

But that’s not the end. The rest of the story shows up in the New Testament on “The Mount of Transfiguration,” where we see Moses and Elijah with Jesus in light-radiating bodies. It’s an example of how waiting in humble submission to the chastening of the Lord brings a reward “out of this world” (Mt 17:1–13; Mk 9:1–13; Lk 9:28–36).

Joshua. After the incredible miracle by which God brought down the walls of Jericho under Joshua’s command and through his obedience, Joshua hastily decided he only needed a small sample of his six hundred-thousand-man army to take the little city of Ai. It ended in shocking defeat, causing Joshua to tear his clothes and cry out to God that they should have never left the Sinai desert and crossed the Jordan into Canaan if God was only going to deliver them into the hands of their enemies, the Amorites (Josh 6–7).

But that he faced God in his failure opened the door for *grace* to learn from his mistake and go on to ultimate victory.

Gideon. Perhaps the most spectacular military victory in the Bible occurred through Gideon’s obedience to God’s request to whittle his thirty two thousand man army down to three hundred. With these three hundred, Gideon completely destroyed an army

of Midianites and Amalekites “as numerous as locusts; and their camels were without number, as the sand by the seashore in multitude.”

But when peace had thus come to Israel, Gideon made an ephod (a priestly vest for communicating with God) from the gold and jewels retrieved from the spoil. “And all Israel played the harlot with it there. It became a snare to Gideon and to his house.” It probably also paved the way for the disastrous rule of the son he had through his concubine – Abimelech, who began his reign after he murdered all but one of his seventy-one half-brothers, Gideon’s other sons (Judg 6–9).

David. One of the most tragic acts of disobedience and sin in the Bible is David’s adultery with his neighbor’s wife and having her husband Uriah – one of his highest-ranking officers – murdered on the front lines of battle while he, David, continued his adulterous affair with her (Bathsheba). And it didn’t seem to bother him until God sent the prophet Nathan to confront him some time after her illegitimate child by David was born (2 Sam 12).

How could this happen to David, one of the godliest men in the Bible, of whom God said was “a man after my own heart, who will do all my will”? (Acts 13:22; 1 Sam 13:14).

We find the answer in 2 Samuel 10, where coincidentally, it corresponds to Saul’s powerful victory over Nahash, king of the Ammonites in 1 Samuel 11 that made King Saul an instant hero. Now, a generation later, Hanun, the son of Nahash, waged war against King David of Israel and hired the Syrians to help him. David retaliated with such a complete slaughter of the Syrians, that they “were afraid to help the people of Ammon anymore” (vv. 18–19).

Verse one of the next chapter (11) begins the story of David’s fall into adultery and murder, and continues in chapter 12 with God’s severe judgment and chastisement of David through the prophet Nathan because of it. But verse 26 of chapter 12 continues with, “Meanwhile,” and records what apparently took place between David’s sin and nine months later when Nathan prophesied judgment on him.

The parallel account in 1 Chronicles 20 records the same events, beginning with the second verse, “Then David took their king’s crown from his head, and found it to weigh a talent of gold, and there were precious stones in it. And it was set on David’s head. Also he brought out the spoil of the city [Rabbah of Ammon]

in great abundance.” Then he made slaves of the Ammonites in all their cities (v. 3).

It is the ultimate crowning success of David’s career, blessed and anointed by God Himself. But God had warned His people through Moses that the material blessings which follow obedience can easily lure us into careless living.

“Then you say in your heart, ‘My power and the might of my hand have gained me this wealth’ . . . Then it shall be, if you by any means forget the LORD your God, and follow other gods, and serve them and worship them, I testify against you this day that you shall surely perish” (Dt 8:17, 19).

What David learned in response to God’s severe chastening the rest of his life is to “remain” in deep intimacy with Him, as his many psalms attest to. And much of it through *waiting on and for God* (Ps 25:5, 21; 27:14; 37:7, 9, 34; 39:7; 40:1; 52:9; 59:9; 62:5; 69:3, 6).

Solomon. However, this sad saga continued with virtually all the royal descendants of David, including Solomon. 1 Kings 10 records the success, fame, and wisdom of Solomon. When the Queen of Sheba, hearing of it, came to meet him in person, “there was no more spirit in her” because she was so in awe at what she beheld. Even Jesus compared His kingdom glory to that of Solomon (Mt 12:42; Lk 11:31).

Furthermore, Solomon wrote more than any biblical writer about the subtle and seductive danger of immoral women and even wealth. Yet, sadly, he allowed “many foreign women” to lead him away from God and refused to respond to God’s attempt to correct him, first speaking to him directly, then by raising up enemies against him. One enemy, Jeroboam, was anointed by the prophet Ahijah to be king over ten of the twelve tribes of Israel, which he would tear away from Israel because of Solomon’s disobedience (1 Kgs 11–12).

However, there is much more to Solomon’s story, told in chapter six in this book.

History repeats itself, again and again

The youthful arrogance of Rehoboam, Solomon’s son, caused a split between the ten northern tribes, led by Jeroboam, taking the name “Israel,” or later “Ephraim,” and Judah to the south, which included Benjamin, under Rehoboam. All the Levites left Israel to join the true worship at Jerusalem, the capital of Judah, where Solomon’s Temple stood (2 Chr 11:13–14).

Israel, to the north of Judah, lasted 210 years until 722 BC, when God sent the Assyrian army to destroy it. All her twenty kings, from Jeroboam to Hoshea, were wicked. Ahab, Israel's eighth king, was most notorious for his wickedness because of his Sidonian wife, Jezebel – Israel's "Bloody Mary," who brought Baal worship to Israel (1 Kgs 16:29–33; 18:4).

Judah continued for another 136 years until 586 BC, when God sent Nebuchadnezzar to destroy it. It also had twenty rulers, but only five or six were godly, and two or three others started out that way, but turned away from Him later. The others, with one exception (Jotham) made their biggest mistakes soon after they reached the pinnacle of their success, ironically, through God's blessing on their obedience! (Ecc 7:8).

1. Asa. The first good king, grandson of Solomon, experienced one of the greatest military victories in the Bible through his complete reliance on God. Through it we have one of our favorite and familiar verses: "For the eyes of the LORD run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to show Himself strong on behalf of those whose heart is loyal to Him." But very few know the rest of it: "In this you have done foolishly; therefore from now on you shall have wars" (2 Chr 16:9).

What he'd done was pay off the Syrians for protection when Baasha, King of Israel, invaded Judah. When "Hanani the seer" warned him of his disobedience, which included the above verse (2 Chronicles 16:9), Asa put him in prison and also "oppressed some of the people at that time." Then he "became diseased in his feet, and his malady was severe; yet in his disease he did not seek the LORD, but the physicians." Therefore it's difficult to know in which category to place him, whether good or bad in the end (2 Chr 16:7–12).

2. Jehoshaphat. Probably the most tragic and costly decision among these godly kings occurred through, this son of Asa, Judah's fourth king. When he called the nation to a day of fasting and prayer in the face of their impending destruction by a three-nation army, God answered by causing these three enemies to destroy each other, leaving Judah to take home the huge amount of booty. This spectacular story is probably the most preached chapter in 2 Chronicles (2 Chr 20).

However, against the prophetic warning of Jehu, Hanani's son, he unwisely allied himself with wicked Ahab and gave his son Jehoram in marriage to the daughter of Ahab (and Jezebel). This

marriage produced Athaliah, who made wicked Jezebel look like Mother Theresa. Jehoram and Athaliah are responsible, directly and indirectly, for the *almost complete annihilation of the next three generations of royal descendants of David* (2 Chr 18–22).

But the verse which records this disastrous marriage reveals what Jesus called, “the deceitfulness of riches.” It’s found in 2 Chronicles 18:1, “Jehoshaphat had riches and honor in abundance; and by marriage he allied himself with Ahab (Mt 13:22; Mk 4:19).

3. Joash. Judah’s eighth ruler and the only survivor of Athaliah’s bloodbath, was a godly young king until his protector and mentor, Jehoiada the priest, died. Then, taking advice from the wicked leaders of Judah, he turned to idolatry, refusing to listen to warnings from the prophets. And most tragically, he authorized the stoning to death of Jehoiada’s prophet-son, Zechariah (not the writer of the book of Zechariah three centuries later) (2 Chr 24).

4. Amaziah, son of Joash, was also a good king during the first years of his reign. But after God favored him with an overwhelming victory against the Edomites, he brought home their idols and “turned away from following the Lord” to worship them instead. When God sent a prophet to warn him of his apostasy, he threatened to kill him. In his arrogance and pride over the Edomite victory, he waged war against the king of Israel (Joash/Jehoash), who invaded and plundered Jerusalem and took Amaziah captive (2 Chr 25).

5. Uzziah, also called Azariah, eleventh ruler, of Judah, “sought God in the days of Zechariah [an unknown prophet], who had understanding in the visions of God; and as long as he sought the LORD, God made him prosper” (2 Chr 26:5).

During his fifty-two year reign he brought Judah to its greatest period of military strength and prosperity since the days of Solomon. “But when he was strong his heart was lifted up, to his destruction.” He attempted to take over the role of the priesthood by offering incense in the temple, and God smote him with leprosy when he angrily resisted the attempt of the priests to stop him (2 Chr 26:16–21).

6. Jotham reigned in his father Uzziah’s place when his leprosy removed him to an “isolated house,” Of these eight kings, Jotham is the only one who didn’t succumb to a foolhardy blunder in his

success, probably because of the sobering example God made of his father at the beginning of his (Jotham's) reign.

However his son failed to heed his example, for he, Ahaz, became the most wicked ruler of Judah (after Athaliah) until then (2 Chr 27:2, 6; 28:1-5).

7. Hezekiah, Judah's fourteenth ruler, was the son of Ahaz and the most godly king since David, for he was the most like him in his heart for God. When the Assyrian army encamped outside Jerusalem and threatened to destroy it, he humbled himself in sackcloth, and "went up to the house of the Lord," crying out to Him for deliverance, having sought counsel from his friend, Isaiah the prophet (2 Kgs 19; 2 Chr 32; Is 37).

"Then the angel of the LORD went out, and killed in the camp of the Assyrians one hundred and eighty-five thousand; and when people arose early in the morning, there were the corpses - all dead." This astounding miracle is recorded in three places: 2 Kings 19:32-35, 2 Chronicles 32:20-23, and Isaiah 37:36, confirming its authenticity against future Bible scholars of "higher criticism" who would attempt to disprove it, as they do the rest of the biblical miracles.

When Isaiah told him he was going to die, he again sought God desperately, and God gave Isaiah the remedy for his healing along with a "sign" by turning the shadow of the sundial back ten degrees. The astronomical sign got the attention of the Babylonians, who sent messengers to congratulate Hezekiah.

Hezekiah's resulting fame, however, combined with the material wealth and prosperity God had blessed him with *because of his obedience*, did to him what it had done to the others: "But Hezekiah did not respond appropriately to the kindness shown him, and he became proud. So the LORD's anger came against him and against Judah and Jerusalem" (2 Chr 32:25 NLT).

God postponed this judgment to the time of his great-great grandsons a century later, for "Hezekiah humbled himself for the pride of his heart . . . so that the wrath of the Lord did not come upon them" at that time (2 Chr 32:26). No wonder "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (Prv 9:10).

For in his pride he had shown the Babylonian messengers "all that was found among his treasures." This would be comparable to showing the president of Russia or China all of our technological secrets, many, if not most, of which China has already stolen. Isaiah thus prophesied that Babylon, which was not yet a superpower like Assyria and, in fact, Assyria's enemy, would

someday invade Judah and take away everything, including Hezekiah's own royal descendants (2 Kgs 12:20; Is 39:1–8).

8. Josiah was Judah's sixteenth ruler and the last of Judah's few godly kings, equal in sincerity to Hezekiah, whose son, Manasseh, Josiah's grandfather, born during his added fifteen years, was the most wicked of all the kings of Israel and Judah combined. Manasseh's son, Amon, continued his reign of wickedness, even though his father Manasseh had cried out in repentance from a Babylonian prison (under Assyrian rule), and God had restored him as king.

So Josiah, like great-grandfather Hezekiah, had the task of turning his people back to God. While the temple was being restored, the priest found "the book of the law," the Torah (Genesis through Deuteronomy). "When the king heard what was written in the Book of the Law, he tore his clothes in despair." Then he inquired of Huldah the prophetess, "for the LORD's great anger is burning against us because our ancestors have not obeyed the words in this scroll" (2 Kgs 22:11, 14).

Her message was that it was indeed too late, but would be postponed because, as she told Josiah, "You tore your clothing in despair and wept before Me in repentance." So Josiah underwent the most complete purging of idolatry from both Israel and Judah, destroying even the "vile" and "detestable" idol-shrines Solomon had built for the foreign women he had married. They had probably been restored by Manasseh and Amon (2 Kgs 22:19; 23:1–20).

He destroyed in Israel the false altar at Bethel, which Jeroboam had made. Then to defile it (render it spiritually polluted), he burned the bones of the idolatrous priests buried nearby who had worshiped there under Jeroboam, thus fulfilling a prophecy given more than three centuries earlier (2 Kgs 23:16).

The prophet who was killed by a lion for his disobedience.

That prophetic word had taken place when God sent an unnamed prophet to warn Jeroboam as he offered incense at the altar for the golden calf he'd made. He "cried out against the altar," saying, "Behold, a child, Josiah by name, shall be born to the house of David; and on you he shall sacrifice the priests of the high places who burn incense on you, and men's bones shall be burned on you" (1 Kgs 13:1–2).

God had told this prophet not to eat or drink, "nor return by the same way you came." But another "old prophet" stopped him

on his way and lied, telling him an angel had told him to invite him in to eat with him. While they were eating, the lying prophet suddenly prophesied that because he – the younger prophet – had disobeyed the Lord, he would die. So as he continued on his way, a lion killed him and stood by his corpse and his donkey without eating either, as a sign that it was of God (1 Kgs 13).

This strange account carries the same warning message this whole chapter is about: our greatest victories too easily become a distraction from humble dependence on God, who gave us the victory. For when the man of God cried out and prophesied against the altar, Jeroboam “stretched out his hand from the altar, saying, ‘Arrest him!’ . . . Suddenly his hand “withered, so that he could not pull it back to himself. The altar also was split apart, and the ashes poured out from the altar, according to the sign which the man of God had given by the word of the LORD.”

Jeroboam begged the man to pray for him, which he did, and his hand was restored. The grateful king then invited him to eat with him, which he refused because of God’s warning not to eat or drink on the way home.

Here is an unnamed “man of God” who suddenly appears out of nowhere to create one of the most miraculous and sensational stories in the Bible, on the level of the great prophets like Elijah and Elisha who came after him in Israel. If Elijah couldn’t handle his pinnacle of success without caving in (pun intended, see 1 Kings 19:9), how can any of us? (Prv 29:23).

Josiah’s untimely death.

After cleansing Israel and Judah of idolatry, Josiah celebrated the Passover. “Never since the time of the prophet Samuel had there been such a Passover. None of the kings of Israel had ever kept a Passover as Josiah did, involving all the priests and Levites, all the people of Jerusalem, and people from all over Judah and Israel” (2 Chr 35:18 NLT).

But his success apparently clouded his judgment, for as Pharaoh Necho marched his army through Judah’s territory at Migiddo on the way to do battle at Carchemish, Josiah went out with his army to intercept him. Necho sent word telling him to “refrain from meddling with God, who is with me, lest He destroy you.”

But Josiah “did not heed the words of Necho from the mouth of God. So he came to fight in the Valley of Megiddo,” where he was mortally wounded. It was a tragic and sad day; “Jeremiah also lamented [wept] for Josiah. And to this day all the singing men

and the singing women speak of Josiah in their lamentations” (2 Chr 35:20–25a).

Why? How could this godly king have missed God with such devastating consequences after leading such a spiritual turn-around in both Israel and Judah? For the same reason it happened to Elijah also.

Elijah. As I pondered this bent toward a careless lack of alertness in the wake of the success that follows obedience, I thought it could not possibly be true of those who live closest to God, like the prophets. But who lived closer to God than Moses? However, if you combine the following passages, you’ll see why Moses was not ready for his final test in Numbers 20: Lev 21:1–12; Num 18:5; Lev 10:17–19; Prv 9:1–9; Num 20:1, for which I have dedicated two chapters in a future book.

Then I remembered Elijah. He was one of only two people who so closely “walked with God,” he did not die. Enoch was the first. “And Enoch walked with God; and he was not, for God took him.” And lest those “higher critics” say it doesn’t mean what it sounds like, it’s explained more clearly in the New Testament. “By faith Enoch was taken away so that he did not see death, ‘and was not found, because God had taken him’; for before he was taken he had this testimony, that he pleased God” (Gen 5:24; Heb 11:5).

And as if that’s not enough to confirm this extremely rare phenomenon, we have an entire chapter that describes in detail the day and manner in which God took Elijah without dying. It is 2 Kings 2, and chapter 15 in this book shows how it applies to us.

So if anybody should have defied the “second law of thermodynamics” or “entropy,” and Murphy’s law, it should have been Enoch and Elijah. (Entropy is the thermodynamic law by which everything tends toward random disorder. Murphy’s Law says that “if anything can go wrong, it will.”)

We have no biographical detail about Enoch, but his descendants certainly followed Murphy’s Law: all of his children’s children’s children were destroyed in the Flood except one great-grandson, Noah, the son of Lamech, the son of Methuselah, the son of Enoch. The entire human race – that’s us – descended from Enoch (through Noah), and look at the world now.

So is Elijah a rare exception? Let’s see: His astounding victory on Mount Carmel over “the four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal, and the four hundred prophets of Asherah,” was one of the mightiest displays of God’s “consuming fire” in the Bible, causing

the watching crowd representing Israel to fall on their faces in repentance.

Then Elijah went to the top of Mount Carmel and prayed for rain, which ended the three and a half-year famine he had earlier spoken into being, literally. As rain poured down he outran King Ahab's chariot some thirteen miles back to Jezreel, an obviously supernatural accomplishment (1 Kgs 17-18).

But in chapter 19 we find Elijah running, this time "for his life" to the southern tip of Israel/Judah, to Beersheba, some ninety five miles away, from the threat of Jezebel to kill him.

What Elijah did is what King Saul and the other kings should have done, and what Hezekiah and David did, and apparently Solomon, which explains *why* God lets us fail so miserably and the outcome He's looking for. And most heartbreaking, what Josiah should have done before rashly running into battle against Pharaoh.

Then Elijah continues his journey another 200 miles to "Horeb, the mountain of God." Though he's running from Jezebel, *he's running to God*, to take the *time* he needs to renew his spiritual strength and see the face of God, as Moses had done on that same mountain some 500 years earlier.

For the verse in Hebrews after the one that tells of Enoch's translation to heaven, says, "But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him" (Heb 11:6).

As we take a closer look at King David in the next chapter, we'll see in more detail the secret to "recovery," a model for all of us.

The Apostle Paul

The picture changes in the New Testament, not because believers have been "changed" by the New Birth and renewing of the Holy Spirit, for we are still a "treasure in earthen vessels," subject to the same human weaknesses, but because we've learned that the "Promise Land" and the Kingdom of God are not material and political, but spiritual. It was the same in the Old Testament, but it was not that easy to perceive, especially since they were so preoccupied with a nation (Israel) and its land (2 Cor 4:7).

By the time of Christ, Israel was under complete domination by the mighty Roman Empire and its antichrist emperors, where believers were persecuted for their faith by both Romans and Jews, and success was no longer measured by material prosperity,

but “by their fruit,” their walk with God spiritually (Mt 7:16–27).

For after Paul was “caught up to paradise and heard things so astounding that they cannot be expressed in words, things no human is allowed to tell,” God had to specifically assign “a messenger of Satan,” a demonic spirit, to harass Paul on a regular basis just to keep him from falling into the same pride that stalked the Old Testament saints. I know it’s hard to believe God would do something like that, so here it is, as God revealed it to Paul:

“So to keep me from becoming proud, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger from Satan to torment me and keep me from becoming proud. Three different times I begged the Lord to take it away. Each time He said, ‘My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness.’ So now I am glad to boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ can work through me” (2 Cor 12:4–9 NLT).

Yet, even though we see clearly in the New Testament how God’s grace and power come as we “take pleasure in weaknesses, and in the insults, hardships, persecutions, and troubles” on behalf of Christ, and that “when I am weak, then I am strong,” we still tend to “boast” more in our outward, visible, material success, than in our weakness and hardships. And that is probably because our hardships are usually not as obviously related to Christ and His Kingdom (2 Cor 12:10).

However, simple faithfulness in our daily responsibilities in employment and family, as well as commitment to our church family, will bring enough difficulties, perplexity, troubles, and hardship to give us opportunity to “take pleasure” in them, and thus experience “the power of Christ” working through us. But still we have to *remind* ourselves to “give thanks” in everything and resist the natural temptation to let circumstances get us down (1 Thes 5:18; 1 Pet 1:7).

My own experience

Philippians 3:3 has for years been one of three of my lifetime mottos, all three of which, by the way, are in Philippians, the other two being 2:5–8 and 3:10–12. But 3:3 applies especially to this chapter: “For we are the circumcision, who worship God in the Spirit, rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh.”

But I, like the others named above, also learn the hard way. In the 1990s, I signed up for a summer class in Landlord Tenant Relations at the local college, feeling it was necessary for my job as “property manager” for a group of rental homes. I wanted a lawyer’s insight as a landlord for my own protection against

deceitful, negligent, and destructive tenants to make my job less stressful, for I'd lost many nights of sleep, not to mention lost rent, in dealing with some of them, and I had a long list of 'bad tenants' over the years. This course would change everything, I knew.

But almost from the day the course started, the tenant next door quit paying his rent. And what I learned during every class at the college was how many rights tenants have against landlords. Each week brought more insight into how dependent on God I was, rather than my legal strength as a landlord. After several weeks with no letup, I fell on my face before God in my bedroom and repented in tears for my "confidence in the flesh," and told God I would trust Him from now on instead of the legal system.

Within a week or two the "bad tenant" left and I gained the kind of wealth Peter mentions: "In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith – more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire – may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ" (1 Pet 1:6–7 ESV).

My next example illustrates this verse even more precisely. Around 1984, feeling confident, like Joshua after his defeat of Jericho without taking time to hear from God, I rented to a young couple and their two kids who were living in a tent at the beach. The husband's boss said he'd stand behind him financially, but within a few weeks he ended up in jail for molesting his wife's children. When I talked with him in jail, however, he said she was the guilty one and had him thrown in jail to cover herself. I ended up believing his story more than hers.

Because she soon had a drug-addicted couple move in with her, along with their German Shepherd dog, and in a week or so the house smelled like a dog kennel and the front yard turned into a junkyard. She also quit paying the rent, and each time I attempted to collect it, she threatened to sue me for harassment if I tried to evict them, and one time she screamed in terror as if I'd raped her.

So to stave off depression while I sought God for wisdom, I glued myself to James 1:2–3 in the Amplified Bible: "Consider it wholly joyful, my brethren, whenever you are enveloped in *or* encounter trials of any sort, *or* fall into various temptations. Be assured *and* understand that the trial *and* proving of your faith bring out endurance *and* steadfastness *and* patience. But let endurance *and* steadfastness *and* patience have full play *and* do a thorough work, so that you may be [people] perfectly and fully

developed (with no defects), lacking in nothing.” (Italics and brackets theirs)

For several weeks I kept this memorized passage in my mind constantly. We went on a vacation to see our relatives in the north that summer, but my wife said she was miserable because I remained silent the entire time as I concentrated on those three verses, hanging on to my sanity in my attempt to resist anger and depression.

Finally I realized I needed more than the encouragement of the Word, even though it said I would be “perfectly and fully developed” through this trial. I was fighting for air – the breath of the Holy Spirit. So I determined to get alone with God until I broke through the flesh-barrier into the spirit realm.

To my surprise, within half an hour I was literally leaping for joy over the trial, thanking God and telling Him not to remove it, knowing I’d discovered a pleasure far deeper than the relief that would come when the trial ended.

I came home free as a bird. Within about ten minutes or less, the phone rang, and the tenants’ neighbor, who had been watching the situation, since he had once lived in the same house, said, “Hey Vic, your tenants are moving; I saw a truck go down the road full of their furniture” (Read Prv 16:7; 2 Cor 10:6).

My joy, however, turned to compassion as I said goodbye to the young addict who had moved in with his girlfriend and dog. I saw the emptiness in his eyes as he looked at me from a position of poverty, natural and spiritual, to one who’d again learned the security of Him who supplies all our needs “according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus” (Phil 4:19).

And perhaps the patience he saw in me through God’s grace, rather than the anger my flesh might have otherwise displayed, may have spoken to him more clearly than any spoken words in my attempt to “witness” the Gospel to him.

“These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world” (Jn 16:33).

CHAPTER 4

Why God Chose David Over Jonathan

God's standards, not ours

Some of the saddest accounts in the Bible are of the people God set aside as unusable for a higher purpose, and why He did it. The lifestyles and attitudes of Ishmael, Lot, Esau, Eli and his sons, Samuel's sons, King Saul, Absalom, Adonijah, and many others through Bible history clearly reveal why God bypassed them in His choice of leadership.

But others God bypassed showed fine qualities without an obvious reason why He couldn't use them, when the ones He used in their place failed far worse than they did.

Reuben and Abigail are two of my favorites. Reuben is the only one of Jacob's ten sons outside Jacob's favorite two (Joseph and Benjamin) who attempted to save Joseph from the wicked plot of his other nine brothers. Yet God rejected him in favor of Judah, who'd sold Joseph to the slave traders and then left his brothers and married one of the forbidden Canaanites, following in the footsteps of his "profane" uncle Esau (Gen 27:46; 28:6-9; 37:18-30; 49:8-12; 1 Chr 5:1-2; Heb 12:16-17).

And Abigail, whom David married after her wicked husband, Nabal, died, was probably the godliest of his eight wives and had saved David from what would have been a senseless massacre of many innocent lives, destroying his good reputation in Israel. Yet God bypassed her and chose *two* sons of Bathsheba, who had committed adultery with David, to continue David's lineage down to Jesus (I'll tell you why later). And posterity agrees with my feelings, for we generally prefer the names Reuben and Abigail to Judah and Bathsheba. (1 Sam 22:18; 25:13-42; 2 Sam 5:14; 11:3ff; Lk 3:31).

Finally, Jonathan – one of the most beloved and enduring of all names from Bible times to the present. It means *Jehovah has given*, very close to the New Testament *John*, meaning, *Jehovah is a gracious giver*. Without doubt it was the character of this prince, King Saul's son, that has attached such favor to this name.

Jonathan's humility

Jonathan did something unheard of among royal heirs, an act that immediately placed him as one of the clearest “types” or examples of Christ in the Old Testament.

After David killed Goliath, “the soul of Jonathan was knit to the soul of David Then Jonathan and David made a covenant, because he loved him as his own soul. And Jonathan took off the robe that was on him and gave it to David, with his armor, even to his sword and his bow and his belt” (1 Sam 18:1, 4).

As their *covenant* of friendship continued, this act came to represent the transfer to David of Jonathan's right to the throne as crown prince, heir to King Saul. It corresponds to the self-emptying of Christ who transferred to us, through His death on the cross, His heavenly glory, and granted us to be heirs with Him on His throne (1 Sam 23:17; Phil 2:5–8; Rom 8:17, etc.).

While David's victory over Goliath turned Jonathan's heart to David, it made Saul insanely jealous when he saw his approval rating dip in favor of David's new popularity among the women (1 Sam 18:6–9).

So for the next ten or fifteen years, Saul sought every occasion to kill David, and spent some of the final years of his life deploying his 3000 elite troops for that purpose. During this time Jonathan risked his life to meet David in secret to encourage him and renew his covenant with him (1 Sam 20:41-42; 23:8, 16–18; 24:2; 26:2).

Saul's disobedience; God's rejection

Years before David killed Goliath, Jonathan had demonstrated the same level and quality of faith after his victorious attack on the Philistine garrison at Geba. This aroused their anger and they mustered their entire army, “as the sand on the seashore in multitude,” and advanced to Michmash against Israel.

In response, Saul blew the trumpet and attempted to gather an army. But “when the men of Israel saw that they were in danger (for the people were distressed), then the people hid in caves, in thickets, in rocks, in holes, and in pits. And some of the Hebrews crossed over the Jordan to the land of Gad and Gilead” (1 Sam 13:6-7a).

What further complicated this already impossible predicament is that Samuel had previously told Saul to wait seven days at Gilgal and he would come to offer burnt offerings and peace offerings (1 Sam 10:8).

It seems to the “natural mind” that God expected far too much from Saul in this hopeless situation. It’s no surprise, then, that Saul, after waiting almost to the end of the seventh day, went ahead and offered the burnt offering himself. But “as soon as he had finished,” Samuel showed up and rebuked Saul for his disobedience (1 Sam 13:8–11; 1 Cor 2:14).

Saul excused himself, saying, “The Philistines will come down now upon me to Gilgal, and I have not made supplication unto the Lord: I *forced* myself therefore, and offered a burnt offering” (1 Sam 13:12 KJV).

His excuse revealed his problem: he’d misunderstood God’s purpose in this important test, aimed at reducing him to complete trust, which the burnt offering symbolized. The burning to “ashes” of all human zeal and ambition until God alone is exalted, gave Him the freedom to work miracles without man taking the credit (Lev 1:1–9; Is 30:18; 1 Cor 1:27–31). *Selah* (Stop and meditate on it.)

Forcing himself to offer the burnt offering instead of humbly *yielding* to God’s will as a burnt offering himself, a *living sacrifice*, revealed that he had no idea of its meaning and concerned himself only with religious activity – “dead works” (Ps 40:6–7; 51:16–17; Rom 4:1ff; 12:1; Gal 3:5–14; Heb 6:1; 9:14).

A second failed test some years later regarding God’s order to destroy the Amalekites confirmed Saul’s spiritual blindness, and the occasion gave us Samuel’s immortal warning, “Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams” (1 Sam 15:22b).

Left to his own human strength and will, Saul’s kingdom would end in failure, like all the kingdoms of man. God would now begin seeking “for Himself a man after His own heart” (1 Sam 13:13–14).

Jonathan, man of faith and vision, but . . .

What Saul failed to do, however, his son Jonathan did with the childlike trust God had expected of Saul. For in that same hopeless situation, Jonathan decided to face and challenge the Philistines with only his armor bearer. “But he did not tell his father,” who would have considered it suicidal (1 Sam 14:1).

Leaving the 600 men who remained with Saul after the rest had fled, “Jonathan said to his young armor-bearer, ‘Come, let us go over to the garrison of these uncircumcised; it may be that the

Lord will work for us. For nothing restrains the Lord from saving by many or by few” (v. 6).

The surprised Philistines panicked, began fighting one another, and *God* joined the battle with an earthquake. Then Saul heard the commotion, inquired and found Jonathan and his armor bearer were gone, and set out to join the battle. Soon the scared and scattered men rallied and followed in pursuit behind Saul’s 600. “So the LORD saved Israel that day, and the battle shifted to Beth Aven” (1 Sam 14:13–23).

But “the men of Israel were distressed that day, for Saul had placed the people under oath, saying, ‘Cursed is the man who eats any food until evening, before I have taken vengeance on my enemies.’ So none of the people tasted food” (v. 24).

What Jonathan’s spiritual sensitivity accomplished, Saul’s spiritual blindness and ill-timed religious zeal now frustrated. It confirmed why God looked for another to replace him as king. And it would seem He had his man right there in Saul’s house – Jonathan.

Years later when Saul and his army faced Goliath and the Philistines, David challenged and defeated the giant with that same spirit of faith Jonathan had earlier manifested. Why then did God look for anyone else, considering Jonathan’s faith, humility, and self-sacrifice, absolutely unheard of among kings and princes?

For years I pondered this question with no answer until one day my eyes opened to something I’d never considered that serious. Maybe it was that I’d grown more aware of how much *attitudes* affect our lives.

In the heat of victorious pursuit of the Philistines through a forest, Jonathan stopped to refresh himself with a taste of honey from a honeycomb. But his exhausted men wouldn’t touch it and warned him of his father’s oath.

“But Jonathan said, ‘My father has troubled the land. Look now, how my countenance has brightened because I tasted a little of this honey. How much better if the people had eaten freely today of the spoil of their enemies which they found! For now would there not have been a much greater slaughter among the Philistines?’” (1 Sam 14:28–30).

Jonathan’s answer revealed his resentment toward his father, and it *uncovered before his troops* the weakness of their commander and chief. Even though Jonathan spoke truth, it would encourage disrespect for authority and hinder the morale and unity of the soldiers.

When Saul found out Jonathan had disobeyed his order and ordered him to be immediately executed, Jonathan responded, “I only tasted a little honey with the end of my rod that was in my hand. So now I must die!” Although it illustrates in Saul the radical and unrealistic extreme of religious zeal, Jonathan’s answer again exposed his disrespectful attitude (1 Sam 14:37–45).

As I write this article (June 24, 2010) the major story in the news is the forced resignation of General McChrystal for comments he made that were critical of high government officials, including President Obama. His remarks have been taken with “profound” seriousness, because they threaten the unity and trust in the U.S. war effort in Afghanistan.

Honor and glory: understanding authority

Paul calls the fifth commandment “the first commandment with *promise*”: “honor your father and mother . . . that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth.” Our parents are the root-system of our identity; and psychologists have found our attitude toward them forms a major part of our *character*. For character develops through either *learning* from or *reacting* to their weaknesses and strengths (Ex 20:12; Eph 6:2–3).

This partly explains why in a family where at least one parent is an alcoholic or abusive, one child may also end up an alcoholic or abusive and another may never touch alcohol or abuse his wife or children. The child who forgives and *learns* from his parent’s failure *liberates* himself from repeating it. But the one who *reacts* in anger binds himself to the same “generational curse” with the chains of resentment and bitterness (Mt 5:44–45; 18:34–35; Mk 11:25–26; Rom 12:20–21).

The New Testament Greek word translated *honor* (*timao*) in Ephesians 6:2 means to *value*. The Old Testament word for honor (*kabed*) means *heavy*, which in this case means attributing *weight* or *substance* to the one honored. It is also the root word for *glory* – *kabod* (Rom 12:10; 1Cor 15:9; Eph 4:2; 5:21; Phil 2:3–4).

Authority, as in any kind of leadership, from the head of the home to a crew foreman to a king, can be *stressful* or *effortless*. It depends to a large extent on how the leader *values* those he leads. If he sees them in a negative light, he feels the *burden* of having to bear them.

Moses’ emotional breakdown when he asked God to take his life came at a moment when he saw the people he’d led out of Egypt as a heavy burden to bear because of their endless complaining. But when he saw their *value* and pleaded with God to

spare them from His wrath, God showed him His glory (*kabod*) (Num 11:11–15; Ex 32–33).

When Israel asked Samuel for a king “like all the nations,” God gave them Saul, who ended up using his authority to gain honor for himself. But when He looked for one after *His own heart*, He looked for one whose *authority* patterned His own authority, one who “speaking the truth in love” would guide and judge His people as God Himself does (1 Sam 15:12, 17, 30; Eph 4:15; 1 Pet 1:22; 1 Jn 3:18).

“He also chose David His servant, And took him from the sheepfolds; from following the ewes that had young He brought him, to shepherd Jacob His people, and Israel His inheritance. So he shepherded them according to the integrity of his heart, and guided them by the skillfulness of his hands” (Ps 78:70–72).

By the time David killed the giant, Jonathan had begun to see the cracks in his dad’s integrity. He must have seen in David what he missed in his father. No wonder his soul “knit” with David’s soul (Prv 25:3).

The forming of character

1 Samuel 20:41 records the second to the final meeting between Jonathan and David. By this time Jonathan knew for sure his dad intended to kill David and that it was necessary to meet with him in secret in fear of his own life.

When they met again alone, “they wept together, but *David more so.*” It’s another strange statement I pondered for years without understanding its significance – why it was necessary to record that David wept more than Jonathan. Eventually the whole picture began to fit together and I finally understood why God found in David the man He was looking for.

The end of the next verse partly explains why David wept more: “So he arose and departed, and Jonathan went into the city.” While Jonathan returned to the comfort of the king’s residence, David remained hiding in the wilderness, the number one man on the Israeli Secret Service’s “most wanted” list, and yet the most innocent and pure man in the nation..

We have a similar picture in Jeremiah 48:11, where Moab, a nation descended from a nephew of Abraham, never allowed God to “empty” it of its (fleshly) “scent” through “captivity.” The nation Israel, however, endured affliction, slavery, captivity, and continual chastening as a refining fire (Gen 36:31; Ps 66:10–12; Is 48:10; Zech 13:9; Mal 3:2–3; Heb 12:10; 1 Pet 1:7; 4:12–13; Rev 3:18).

Not that Jonathan refused or resisted correction. It's just that he didn't understand the "profound seriousness" of his attitude, his desperate need for correction, and how lack of it would play out in the years ahead. If so, he would have humbled himself before God and his father in deep repentance, whatever the cost (Lam 3:25-40).

But when Saul discovered his son's disobedience and threatened to execute him to fulfil his oath (again, wrongly motivated by religious zeal), Jonathan reacted with "an attitude" instead of repentance: "I only tasted a little honey with the end of the rod that was in my hand. So now I must die!" (1 Sam 14:43b; see also 20:34)

Who wouldn't have reacted the same way? It's *normal* in families today, with parents and children against one another, and "not afraid to speak evil of dignitaries" (government leaders, from the president to the police). It's one of the conditions of "the last days" (Mal 4:5-6; 2 Pet 2:10; Jude 1:8-9).

However, we are not dealing with man's kingdom but God's! In God's kingdom, man's will goes up in smoke, as in the burnt offering. Jesus' teaching on the Kingdom of God shows in every statement the giving up of all human rights, trusting *God* to make things right, either dealing with the offender Himself or through giving us *wisdom* in handling it (Mt 5-7; Rom 12:17-21).

Character is not so much a product of genetics as it is of the circumstances that form it. I regard with awe the lengthy and sometimes terrifying process it takes to mold one's character, "emptying" him from self-interest to the genuine love and concern for others that come from "a broken and contrite heart" (Ps 34:18; 51:17; Is 57:15; Jer 48:11)

Jonathan watched his father turn into another Hitler when Saul later ordered the massacre of all eighty-five priests – along with their wives, children, infants, and even animals. Why? Because the high priest had aided David, unaware he was fleeing from Saul (1 Sam 22).

It is only when I see how David behaved in far more difficult and dangerous situations than Jonathan, do I realize the exceedingly rare prize God saw in David, a standard hardly equaled except by Moses and in the New Testament (Dt 9; Acts 7:60; Rom 9:2-3; 12:17-21; 2 Cor 11:23-20, etc).

David's heart

In all the years Saul pursued David like a hunted animal, David never uttered a word of slander against his would be assassin.

During this time those who were distressed, in debt, and “discontented gathered to him,” about 400, growing to 600. Now they would have had a good excuse, if not a real reason, for their suspicion and bitterness toward a king who’d become not only their enemy, but the arch-enemy of their leader, David (1 Sam 22:1-2; 23:13).

The tension reached a climax when “Saul took three thousand chosen men from all Israel and went to seek David and his men on the Rocks of the Wild Goats.” David and his men were hiding in a cave when Saul entered it to relieve himself, unaware of how easily David, undetected, could kill him on the spot. Which is exactly what his men urged him to do (1 Sam 24).

Instead, “David arose and secretly cut off a corner of Saul’s robe” before Saul left the cave. Then he held it up as evidence to convince Saul that although he had opportunity and the urging of his men to kill him, he refused, saying, “I will not stretch out my hand against my lord, for he is the Lord’s anointed.” But what is more significant is that as honorable as this act of mercy was, “David’s heart troubled him because he had cut Saul’s robe” (1 Sam 24:4).

Why David’s conscience bothered him for cutting Saul’s robe is dealt with in Bible commentaries in at least three ways: 1. It showed disrespect to Saul’s person and position, since his garment represent him and his kingly office; 2. The act came close to what David may have actually been tempted to do, especially at the urging of his men with him; 3. It represented claiming Saul’s royal position for himself.

All three reasons may have been churning in David’s mind, but I believe it boils down to the same problem we’ve dealt with regarding Saul’s motives: doing good outwardly without inward correspondence, “faith working through love.” “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. . . and whoever fears has not been perfected in love” (Gal 5:6; 1 Jn 4:18 ESV).

It is one thing to perform an act of great mercy, but quite another to be conscience stricken because you didn’t do it with a completely pure motive. For it would be humanly impossible for David not to feel at least some resentment toward this insane king who followed the pattern of the world’s worst dictators.

So God provided a sure cure for this lingering heart-problem in David. For we next find him with his 600 men near the town of Carmel, where Nabal’s servants were sheering his sheep. Because David had provided protection to Nabal’s shepherds, he sent to

Nabal asking him for any food he might willingly give for his men (1 Sam 25:2–8).

Nabal refused with such slanderous words against David that David immediately headed toward Nabal with 400 of his men, determined to destroy every “male of all who belong to him by morning light” (25:22).

When Abigail, Nabal’s wife, heard of David’s plan, she quickly loaded bread, wine, dressed sheep, grain, raisins, and fig-cakes, all on donkeys and headed out to meet David. Falling on her face before him, she pleaded with him to avoid such a bloodshed, which would greatly damage his reputation when he became king (25:18–31).

On hearing her David immediately backed off from his intended retaliation. When Abigail told her husband about it the next morning, “his heart died within him, and he became like a stone. Then it happened, after about ten days, that the Lord struck Nabal, and he died” (25:36–38).

Exam retake

Anyone familiar with David’s psalms knows David as a man of deep heart-searching. I’m sure David must have pondered the whole incident in shocked wonder: how close he had come to such disaster, and how swiftly God’s judgment had come to Nabal – judgment that could have struck himself instead (Ps 32, 38-39, 51, etc.).

As I mentioned, God gave King Saul a second chance after he failed the first. David’s second chance came probably not long after the incident at Carmel. For the people of Ziph had told Saul of David’s location, and Saul went and camped near the place with his 3,000 elite troops, intending to kill him as soon as possible (1 Sam. 26:1ff).

But David found his location, waited until they slept, and crept into the camp with Abishai at his side. When they reached Saul, Abishai said, “God has delivered your enemy into your hand this day,” and urged David to let him kill him with his sword right then and there. To Abishai it looked like a “God thing,” planned by the Lord. But David responded, “Do not destroy him; for who can stretch out his hand against the Lord’s anointed, and be guiltless?” (26:1–9).

It was the same sense of trust in God’s sovereign will and timing that had kept his hand at the previous opportunity. Only now, no doubt because of what he had just gone through with Nabal, a new understanding of his own deceitful heart gave him

deeper insight into the mercy it took for God to forgive either of them – Saul or himself. His “captivity” under Saul had served its purpose: he was not of Moab but of Israel, for he had “struggled with God and with men” and had “prevailed” (Gen 32:28; Hos; 12:3-4; Rev 2:7, 11, 17, 26, etc). *Selah!*

So David quietly took Saul’s spear and jar of water and both men went a far distance to the top of a hill, where David called out to Abner, Saul’s army commander. He pointed out the spear and water jar and accused Abner of failing to *guard* his king: “As the Lord lives, you deserve to die, because you have not guarded your master, the Lord’s anointed.” Then Saul called out, and realizing David had again spared his life, repented of having “erred exceedingly” and “played the fool” (26:15–21).

David concluded his remarks with these highly significant words: “And indeed, as your life was *valued much* [precious, highly esteemed] this day in my eyes, so let my life be valued much in the eyes of the Lord, and let Him deliver me out of all tribulation” (v. 24).

What Jonathan lacked and failed to pursue – the *honor* and *respect* he needed for his own father, David, through many tears, found . . . for his greatest enemy! (1 Sam 20:41).

I am my brother’s keeper

Our love, concern, and respect for others, including our enemies, is God’s ultimate goal for every one of us. It’s the theme of the Bible! But without a doubt it’s the most difficult and rare of attributes found among believers.

It is so serious, in fact, that what David told Abner was prophetic: Abner died for exactly what David warned him of – the *danger of failing to guard* (*shamar*, keep, preserve, protect) – his king, Saul’s son Ishbosheth, who’d taken the throne after Saul’s death (2 Sam 3:6–27).

This theme began with Cain’s answer to God over where his brother Abel was: “I do not know. Am I my brother’s keeper?” It is the heart of relationship. For if a man of great faith and spiritual knowledge is not motivated by love, he is an insignificant nobody (Gen 4:9; 1 Cor 13:2).

But how could Jonathan be so self-sacrificing toward one he knew would be king in his place, and yet fail to deal with his attitude toward his own father? (1 Sam 20:34).

Most of us, like Jonathan, are too comfortable to be concerned about attitudes toward injustices we don’t deserve. But David knew better. He had spent his formative years watching sheep, a job so

insignificant, his father Jesse didn't even think to invite him to the sacrificial feast Samuel had come to hold in order to anoint one of his sons to eventually replace King Saul (1 Sam 16:1ff).

But it was in this humble and quiet service that David came to know God and his ways. No doubt he spent thousands of hours in those Judean hills pouring over whatever form of the Word he had available, especially the writings of Moses, who had also learned to know God while keeping sheep (Ps 1; 78:70–72; 103:7; Ex 3:1ff).

Perhaps David also noticed that Moses first humbly secured his father-in-law's permission before he set out to obey God's voice in returning to Egypt to deliver Israel. And when Saul threatened his life I'm sure his mind went back to scenes where Moses put his life on the line for the very people who wanted to stone him, willing even to be blotted out of God's "book" in order to spare these hard-headed, stubborn and rebellious people (Ex 4:18; 32:9–13, 31–33; Num 14:10–21; 16:21–22, 45ff; Dt 9).

So David knew God used Saul's hardness to refine him, pressing him to a deeper understanding of God's mercy. But he probably didn't realize that his leading military generals would be just as hard-headed as Saul and would outlive him. He would struggle with their obstinacy the rest of his life, in addition to the many other enemies he faced, especially in his own family (2 Sam 3:39; Ps 66:10–12).

Any normal king would have eliminated them, and after David died, his son Solomon did exactly that, including his own half-brother, Adonijah. But these rebels kept David in God's face as they had Moses. Without the same pressure and with too much ease and glory, Solomon eventually backslid. When God did raise up enemies to correct him, he refused to receive it, tried to eliminate them, and after his death one of them, Jeroboam, took most of Israel away from his son Rehoboam (1 Kgs 2, 11, 12; Ps 16:8; 119:71, 75).

If the stress came close to overwhelming David many times, what would it have done to Jonathan? If Jonathan had been king having never dealt with his attitude toward his father, it would certainly have darkened his judgment in his dealings with these obstinate, hard-headed people and leaders. He might have ended up behaving more like his dad than serving as a role model for every king after Him, as David did (2 Sam 3:26–39; 15:1ff; 20:9–10; Ps 38:11ff; 55:2ff; Mt 1:1; 9:27, etc).

It was Reuben's *attitude* toward his father Jacob that disqualified him from his firstborn inheritance. For Leviticus 18:8 reveals

that a son who has sex with his father's wife *uncovers* his *father's nakedness* (Gen 35:22; 49:4; Dt 27:20; compare Judah: Gen 38:26; 44:18ff; 49:11-12; 1 Chr 5:1-2).

And though Abigail was probably David's most godly wife, I believe it was her *attitude* toward her "scoundrel" of a husband, Nabal, that disqualified her from being queen mother. For what would then her attitude have been toward David through his intrigues with Bathsheba? Like Jonathan, what would have driven her to "overcome" it in the luxuries (and gossip) of the palace? (1 Sam 25:25; 2 Sam 3:3).

My little kingdom

In 1979 I took a job as property manager in Florida. Because the number of homes was small and the finances limited, I did the maintenance, bookkeeping, and tenant management. I hated roofing in July in Florida or crawling under a house in vermin-infested muck. But at the end of the day I could at least clean up and treat my wounds or infections, like "creeping eruption," a traveling worm borne by cat feces that under one house chose my skin as its host and irritated me for many months, recurring again and again.

And there were other calamities and injuries while cutting trees, working with dangerous power tools, falling off a roof in the middle of a hurricane, and the time I fell out of a tree, cracked my pelvic bone, and lost my memory for weeks (or was it years?).

On my sixtieth birthday, while attending a ministers' prayer retreat, I secretly took pride in how young and energetic I felt around these brethren. In the middle of the day I received an emergency call to deal with a maintenance problem with one of the rentals. I drove home fifty miles, and while dealing with the problem fell off an eight foot step ladder, injuring my spine, and returned to the retreat barely able to walk. I took that lesson as a spiritual chiropractic adjustment on my pride, and laughed at the heavenly humor that accompanied it.

But what gave me more stress than anything was dealing with hard-headed tenants. (A rental applicant with a bad attitude toward his present landlord promises to be a high risk tenant. I avoid them when possible.)

Yet God showed me, even in 1979, the key to dealing with difficult renters: learn to *value* them, to try to understand them and love them as though they were my own family – my brother, sister, or children, for "he who fears has not been made perfect in love" (1 Jn 4:18).

When I'd "break through" the fear-barrier into God's love, wisdom would come, along with the divine authority needed to deal with the problem. On one occasion, typical of several, I evicted a young tenant with my arm around him as a father counseling his son about taking responsibility.

One of the most difficult cases that had come with this job concerned a woman who had accumulated five state-supported children through men she'd "fished" off the highways with her citizens' band two-way radio. She and her children were destroying the place, had drug parties in the yard, and one of her boyfriends dared me to evict them: for they'd get "four months free rent" during the process, which they intended to drag out through free legal aid.

Every time I'd "pray through" about them, God gave me only one word: "become her servant." This went on for two years, and His answer to me was the same each time I'd seek Him about it. Yet I just couldn't stoop to "serve" this woman who made my job such a heavy burden.

One sweltering July afternoon found me shoveling dirt in her back yard as I wrapped up a septic tank drain-field project. I looked into her living room window and saw her with her feet on the coffee table and talking on her CB microphone, probably baiting another fool. *There sits a queen and I'm her slave*, I thought.

Suddenly God spoke to my heart: *Who is the slave and who are you?* In that instant my eyes opened: *I was a royal heir with King Jesus, and this lost woman was a slave to sin. What was I doing about it?*

Right there, leaning on the shovel handle, I melted, almost weeping. From then on it was an *honor* to serve her with loving compassion. Anything she demanded, whether just or unjust, I gladly did it. The "joy of the Lord" had replaced my fear, torment, and longing to be rid of this "cross" (Neh 8:10; Mt 18:33-34; Lk 9:23).

And in a few short weeks the place was empty: they had all moved to California.

Heaven now?

I had experienced my first breakthrough in 1976 while pastoring a congregation of people I didn't understand, and they didn't understand me. But my life changed from hell to heaven on earth with no change in the outward situation. All it took was spending enough time with God until the mercy He showed me bubbled out

to them. It was so glorious I couldn't imagine anything else that needed fixing in me. Until I took this property management job.

It helps me understand what Jonathan might have faced had he become king without the lengthy and severe preparation God brought David through. And who knows "the things which God has prepared for those who love Him," who like David, endure with patience, wondering if the end will ever come (1 Cor 2:9-10).

The Good News is this: the end is not just heaven when we die. It is "*near* you, in your mouth and in your heart." It is as close as our relationship with Jesus, especially in the heaviest of trials. Because through them God births His love in us for others, even the Sauls in our lives (Rom 10:8).

"And He said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.'" Paul actually *gloried, boasted* in, took *pleasure*, not in his success, but in the afflictions, insults, persecutions, and hardships that made him weak. For it was in weakness that he experienced God's strength. *When the worst things in life become more valuable than the best, there's no way to lose* (2 Cor 12:10; see Job 23:10; Ps 66:10-12; Prv 17:3; 1 Pet 1:7).

Even now this job can get me down and find me dreaming of a "normal job" where I don't have to deal with the deceitful and conniving. (Is there such a job?) But when I again get my eyes on Jesus and see things from His *Kingdom* perspective (or read about Caleb and Joshua in Numbers 13-14), I'm back in the glory, excited about the challenge. And filled with the Father's love for His wayward children. What a small price to pay for a heavenly education in stewardship, responsibility, and wisdom (Lk 16:10-12).

David, with "nowhere to lay his head" may have wept more than Jonathan, but the pain only uncovered the areas God wanted to take charge of, freeing David of everything that would hinder him from *letting go*, and *letting God* reign through Him. No wonder Jesus was known as "the Son of David" (Mt 8:20; Jn 14:30).

"Weeping may endure for a night," David wrote, "but joy comes in the morning." As surely as there is a night, there will be a morning. "Though it tarries, wait for it; because it will *surely* come, it will not tarry" (Ps. 30:5; 16:11; 40:1-8, Hab. 2:3).

CHAPTER 5

Five Reasons Why David Was a Man after God's Own Heart

*As the heavens for height and the earth for depth,
So the heart of kings is unsearchable.*
Proverbs 25:3

INTRODUCTION

David is the most mentioned named in the Bible.

His name appears more than 1100 times. God said he's "a man after My own heart, who will do all My will." Perhaps for this reason alone, besides others, he became the standard and role model for kings after him. Only a handful of his king-descendants were godly, but none had a heart so intense about doing "all" God's will, as we're about to see (Acts 13:22; 1 Sam 13:14; 1 Ki. 11:4; 15:3).

(Solomon-1 Kgs 9:4; 11:6; 2 Chr 7:17; Jeroboam-1 Kgs 11:33,38; 14:8; Abijam-1 Kgs 15:3,5; Asa-1 Kgs 15:11; Jehoshaphat-2 Chr 17:3; Amaziah-2 Kgs 14:3; Ahaz-2 Kgs 16:2; 2 Chr 28:1; Hezekiah-2 Kgs 18:3; 2 Chr 29:2; Josiah-2 Kgs 22:2; 2 Chr 34:2)

Because of him God blessed his descendants.

God extended favor to Judah's *wicked* kings - David's descendants - and the city of Jerusalem, because of His promise to them based on his covenant with David. He gives *us* the same favor through "the Son of David," though not many of us take advantage of it, as it was with Judah's kings

(1 Kgs 2:45; 8:45; 9:5; 2 Chr 6:16; 7:18; Jer 33:17,21; Solomon-1 Kgs 11:12; Rehoboam-1 Kgs 11:13,32,34; Abijam-1 Kgs 15:4; Jehoram-2 Kgs 8:19; 2 Chr 21:7; Jerusalem-2 Kgs 19:34; 20:6; Mt 9:27; 15:22; Mk 10:46-52; Lk 13:23-30).

The Kingdom of God is also the Kingdom of David. His rule was a model of God's kingdom in the five ways that made him a man after His heart, which correspond to the five steps in the "mind of Christ," His self-emptying (Phil 2:5-8, Is 9:7, Mk 11:10).

After King Saul died in battle for his disobedience and David took his place, Israel's kingdom was ruled from "*the throne of David*" until the split after Solomon, and the following 20 kings of Judah (David's descendants) continued to reign from "the throne of David." Furthermore, Jesus is seated on "the throne of David," also called "the throne of the Lord" (2 Sam 3:10; 1 Kgs 2:12,24, 33,45; Jer 13:13; 22:2,4,30; 29:16; 36:30; 1 Chr 10:13-14; 29:23; Ps 132:11; Lk 1:32).

Jesus is called "the son of David" about 15 times. He's called "the seed of David" three times. As the final conqueror of our planet, He refers to Himself as "the Root and the Offspring of David, the Bright and Morning Star."

The reason may be that Jesus, as "the Son of Man," had the same *intimate* relationship with His Father which David continually sought to have with God out of his spiritual hunger. In so doing, David reversed the choice Adam made when he chose "the tree of knowledge" over "the tree of Life," re-establishing union and communion with God.

(Gen 2:16-17; 3:1-13; Mt 5:6; 9:27; 12:23; 15:22; 20:30-31; 21:9,15; 22:42; Mk 10:47-48; 12:35; Lk 18:38-39; 20:41,44; Jn 7:42; Rom 1:3; 2 Tim 2:8; Rv 22:16).

David's life is a study in spiritual authority.

Jesus refers to Himself primarily as "the Son of Man" over eighty times. It is His identity with fallen man that gave "Him authority to execute judgment also, because He is the Son of Man." Those who needed healing recognized in Him the authority of their long awaited Messiah, "the Son of David" (Jn 5:27; Mt 9:27, etc, see previous references). *Kingdom* and *authority*, therefore, refer to David.

"The seed of Abraham," referring also to our humanity, always refers to *believers*, except once, where Jesus took on the nature of fallen man as "the seed of Abraham." "Abraham's children" are those who "believe," who in spite of impossibilities and human weakness, keep trusting in God (Heb 2:16; Lk 1:55; Jn 8:33,37; 9:39; Acts 3:25; Rom 4:13,16; 9:7; 11:1; 2 Cor 11:22; Gal 3:3-9,16,29).

The difference is that Abraham models a life of faith toward God, whereas David goes on to model our relationship with *one another through our relationship with God* (2 Sam 22-23; Ps 2; 18; 68:1-2; 110; 144:1-2, etc)

And spiritual authority is about God's *Kingdom reign* among us humans who don't know how to relate to one another because

of our insecurity. How essential that we learn of our authority in Christ over “all principality and power and might and dominion” (satanic angels). Because “He put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.”

Then out of this profound sense of identity, fulfillment, and authority to set others free through prayer, we will, hopefully, “love one another fervently with a pure heart,” because we’ve found our purpose (Eph 1:21–23; 1 Pet 1:22).

“That Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height – to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen” (Eph 3:17–21).

The Church is called the Tabernacle of David (Acts 15:16). The Church is God’s instrument or vehicle to establish His Kingdom authority and dominion on earth (and “all creation”). The book of Revelation is the final stage (“futurist” view) as well as the ongoing activity (“historical” view) of reclaiming earth from Satan by Christ through His Church (the “overcomers”), which is the ultimate purpose for which we have been given authority and power over Satan.

(Mt 10:1,7–8; 16:19; Mk 16:17–18; Lk 10:9, 17–18; Acts 1:8; 2:43; 3:11; 4:14,16,22,30,33; 5:12,16; 6:8; 7:36; 8:6–7; 14:3; 15:12; 19:11; 28:8–9; 1 Cor 4:20; 6:2–3; 2 Cor 10:4–6; 12:12; Eph 1:19–21; 6:10–12; Heb 2:4; 11:32–35, Rv 1:6; 2:26–27; 3:21).

Jesus will return as the Lion of the Tribe of Judah, the Root of David, the Root and Offspring of David. With these titles of authority He will reign on earth with and through His saints (Rv 5:5; 19:11–15). Saints who’ve matured through the trial and testing of their faith (“overcomers”) are given “the key of David” (authority) to open and close doors in the spiritual realm (Rv 3:7; Mt 18:18–19; Prv 31:8–9; Is 45:11; Josh 10:12; Dt 9:19; 25–29).

Jesus first declared this authority to Peter when he understood who Jesus really was: not only their promised Messiah, but “the Son of the living God” – implying God in flesh (Mt 16:16–19; Jn 1:1–2, 14; 10:33; 20:28, etc. See Rom 8:17; 2 Tim 2:12; Rv 1:6; 2:26–27; 5:10; 12:5; 20:6; 22:5; Ex 19:5–6).

THE FIVE REASONS INVOLVE
FELLOWSHIP WITH GOD
AND RESPONSIBILITY TO PEOPLE

These are the two main things all parents want from their children. We long for their fellowship, and when they're old enough, we expect them to be responsible for themselves and, finally, for others – beginning with their mate and children. David fulfilled these two ideals in five areas: fellowship (1, 3) and responsibility (2, 4, 5). Tragically, he failed with his own family – the consequence of having multiple wives.

1. He made intimacy with God his highest priority..

a. His troubles drove him *into* God rather than away from Him.

(1) The 73 or 75 psalms attributed to him reflect the intensity of his heart for God's presence. "I have set the Lord always before me; because He is at my right hand I shall not be moved" (Ps 16:8a).

"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" (Ps 63:1b) "I spread out my hands to You; My soul longs for You like a thirsty land. Selah" (Ps 143:6).

(2) Almost half of his psalms are "psalms of lament" ending with trust in God, revealing the secret of his intimacy with God: he took his pain, trials, darkness, and distress, to God alone.

This is the first step in reversing the "Fall of man," for Adam's choice of "the tree of the knowledge of good and evil" was his choice to live independently of God – living by "the carnal [natural] mind" instead of "the mind of the Spirit," the "tree of life." Jesus revealed Himself as the Tree of Life (Rom 8:5–8, 27; 1 Cor 2:9–16; Gal 5:16–18; Eph 4:23; Gen 2:9; 3:17–22; Prv 3:18; Jn 3:36; 5:26; 6:27; 1 Jn 5:11–12, 20; Rv 22:2).

(4). Psalm 25 reveals his attention to God's heart through *waiting* for Him. *Waiting* is what makes "life in the Spirit" so difficult. Because "it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy," and "He has mercy on whom He wills." But since "God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble," we must *wait* for our hearts to get low before Him (Jas 6:4; 1 Pet 5:5; Is 30:18; 50:10–11).

Of the 22 occurrences of the various forms of the word *wait* (for God – waited, waits, etc) in the Psalms, 17 of them are David, waiting: for deliverance (39:7; 40:1; 62:1,5; 69:3, 6), vindication

and reward (37:7; 8:34; 52:9), and strength, guidance, encouragement, and integrity (25:3, 5, 21; 27:14; 59:9).

b. His lifestyle of worship and prayer increased his intimacy with God and allowed him to share it with others (Ps 34).

(1) One of his first acts after becoming king over all Israel and the conquest of Jerusalem was to bring the Ark of the Covenant to the city and establish continuous worship before it (1 Chr 13–16).

(2) His attention to God corresponds to Abraham's driving away the vultures attempting to devour the sacrifices he had cut in half when God "cut covenant" with him in Genesis 15 (vv. 10–11; more in greater detail, ch 10 in this book).

(3) His Psalm 16:8–11 gives one of the secrets behind the resurrection of Jesus, specifically mentioned by Peter on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:32). (see Ps 30; 31:4–5)

"I have set the LORD always before me; because He is at my right hand I shall not be moved. Therefore my heart is glad, and my glory rejoices; my flesh also will rest in hope. For You will not leave my soul in Sheol, nor will You allow Your Holy One to see corruption. You will show me the path of life; In Your presence is fullness of joy; At Your right hand are pleasures forevermore (Ps 16:8–11).

One might question how this passage could influence the resurrection of the Son of God. The reason is that Jesus said, quoting Moses, that "man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God" (Mt 4:4; Dt 8:3).

Remember, that "word" was penned by human beings inspired by the Holy Spirit. This would also include the Psalms. So David's words regarding "Sheol" and "the path of life" may have become a word "from the mouth of God" that sustained Jesus through His death in payment for our sin. And as Peter said, also by the same Spirit, that God would not leave Him in Hades (Sheol in the OT) nor allow Him so see corruption – based on David's words!

2. He took seriously his responsibilities – shepherd, warrior, armor-bearer, company commander, leader of his own army, then of the nation, and teacher of God's people. He honored his commitments and covenants (Ps 15:4).

a. He took his shepherd's job with a dedication far exceeding any normal man. He trusted God in face to face encounters with lion or bear, and his defeat of Goliath for the *nation* was the natural outcome of his faithfulness over a flock of sheep (1 Sam 17:34).

Psalm 78:70–72 relates David’s care of sheep with shepherding God’s inheritance, noting David’s integrity and skill. His years of worship on his harp as he watched sheep led him to play before the king and become his armor bearer (1 Sam 16:14–23).

b. Saul observed his skill and wisdom and made him an army commander (1 Sam. 18:5). When Saul became jealous and placed David in dangerous situations to be killed, David, instead of rebelling or being resentful, “behaved more wisely than all his servants,” and Saul feared him increasingly and “knew that the Lord was with David” (1 Sam 18:10–30).

c. He unified and led social misfits and political and military discontents into a small army and refused to allow them to defend him against Saul when they had opportunity. Through his example he won the hearts of the best of Saul’s army, including the mighty Benjamites, “until it was a a great army, like the army of God” (1 Sam 22:2; 23:13; 24:4; 26:8–9; 1 Chr 12:1–22).

d. He regarded God’s anointing and sovereign choice with such respect and reverence, that he refused to pave the way for or hasten his own calling by terminating Saul’s wicked reign by his own hand or by eliminating his personal enemies, no matter what they did to him. In this he followed in the footsteps of Jesus, “the Son of David” (1 Sam 24; 26; 2 Sam 1:1–16; 3:29–39; 15:25–26; 16:5–14; Ps. 35:11–14).

e. He took covenant and commitment seriously. He honored his covenant with Jonathan by restoring his lame son, Mephibosheth, a political enemy, to the palace (1 Sam 18:3; 20:16, 42; 23:18; 2 Sam 9).

He sought God to find out the reason for a three year famine, then restored the covenant Joshua had made with the Gibeonites, which Saul had broken and which had led to the famine in Israel (Josh 9:15–21; 2 Sam 21; Ps 15:4).

3. He saw relationship with God’s people as an extension of his relationship with God.

a. His number one desire was God, and he knew God’s presence, beauty, guidance, protection, power, glory, and goodness are found “in the house of the Lord” (Ps 26:8; 27:4–6; 63:2; 65:4; see Ps 48; 50:1–6). A thousand years ahead of his time, he saw God’s “saints who are on the earth” as “the excellent ones, in whom is all my delight,” seeing them with spiritual insight (Ps 16:3; see 2 Cor 5:16–17; Eph 4; Col 1:24–29).

b. He regarded God’s house as more important than his own home, comfort, and sleep because he knew it was *God’s* highest desire, *His “dwelling place,”* His “resting place forever.” There God

would provide for the poor, clothe her leaders with “salvation” (*yeshah*,¹ deliverance, safety, welfare, prosperity, victory), and deal with His enemies (Ps 132, in memory of David).

c. He recognized that authority, judgment, peace, anointing, prosperity, and blessing issue from the *unity of the brethren* (Ps 122; 133; see Ps 2; 48:4–7; 50:1–6; 1 Cor 12; Eph. 3:1–10; 6:10–18).

d. When he broke through darkness into revelation and victory, he “proclaimed the good news of righteousness in the *great assembly*.” “I have not hidden Your righteousness within my heart; I have declared Your faithfulness and Your salvation; I have not concealed Your lovingkindness and Your truth from the great assembly” (Ps 40:1–10; see Ps 22:22; 25; 51:13; Mk 16:15; Rom 10:14–15; 2 Cor 5:18–21; Eph 4:11–13; Heb 10:25).

4. He took full responsibility for his errors and sins without interfering with God’s chastening and purging (Ps. 32, 51).

a. He invited God to allow the enemy to destroy him rather than let him get away with evil or injustice (Ps 7:3–5). When Shimei cursed him and threw stones at him as David fled Jerusalem because of Absalom, he took it patiently because he recognized that “the Lord has ordered him” as “a rod of correction,” no doubt with his own sin in mind (Prv 22:15; 2 Sam 16:5–13).

When Zadok the priest brought the ark with him to accompany David in his escape, David told him to return to Jerusalem with it. “If I find favor in the eyes of the Lord, He will bring me back and show me both it and His dwelling place. But if He says thus: ‘I have no delight in you,’ *here I am, let Him do to me as seems good to Him*” (2 Sam 15:24–26).

b. When he sinned and God exposed him through Nathan, he “acknowledged” his sin and repented deeply, begging God to “purge” and “wash” him until his heart was clean, his spirit was “steadfast,” truth was deep in his heart, the joy of salvation had returned, and he was assured of the presence of the Holy Spirit (Ps 51; 2 Sam 11–12:23).

He longed to be totally *honest* before God, a man “in whose spirit there is no deceit,” and accepted God’s punishment as designed to bring him to complete *transparency* (Ps 32:1–5; 39:4–11; 139:23–24; 141:5).

c. Instead of harboring bitterness in the face of God’s anger and the terrible suffering that resulted because of his sin, David drew even closer to God. When “loved ones and . . . friends” turned against him because of it, and his enemies plotted his

destruction, it weaned him of every other desire but God, and he became *deaf* and *dumb* to every accusation, fear, and need to react or defend himself. He presented his case entirely before God, knowing in Him alone was deliverance (Ps 38).

5. He endured the darkness far beyond normal human endurance, paving the way for our transformation through the suffering of Christ. (Is. 50:4-11)

a. His suffering and endurance became a pattern for the crucifixion of Christ. Abandoned by his “own familiar friend” and seemingly even by God, David kept enduring. Little did he realize that his prayer from the lowest pit would detail the crucifixion of Christ a thousand years later, and Jesus would cling to it in His darkest hour when He “became sin for us” and God had apparently “forsaken” Him. This enabled Him to “rest in hope” for the resurrection, becoming “a word that proceeds from the mouth of God,” sustaining Him (Ps 16:8-11; Ps 22; 38; 41:7-9; see Is 53; 2 Cor 5:21; Rom 4:25; Heb 2:14-15).

b. The revelation he received in his darkness connected Christ’s sacrifice with our obedience.

It’s another example of how different he was from Saul. In his anguish David said, “I waited patiently for the LORD; and He inclined to me, and heard my cry. He also brought me up out of a horrible pit, out of the miry clay, and set my feet upon a rock, and established my steps” (Ps 40:1a-2).

This breakthrough led him to what the prophets spoke of concerning the future: “But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people” (Jer 31:33; also Ez 37:25-27).

For David goes on to say, “Sacrifice and offering You did not desire; my ears You have opened. Burnt offering and sin offering You did not require. Then I said, ‘Behold, I come; in the scroll of the book it is written of me. I delight to do Your will, O my God, and Your law is within my heart’” (Ps 40:6-8).

The writer of Hebrews quoting this passage from the Greek translation (Septuagint) applies it to the Sacrifice of Christ: “Therefore, when He came into the world, He said: ‘Sacrifice and offering You did not desire, but a body You have prepared for Me. . . .’ Then I said, ‘Behold, I have come – in the volume of the book it is written of Me – to do Your will, O God’” (Heb 10:5, 7).

In other words, David’s “delight to do Your will” becomes the Sacrifice of Christ by whom our obedience is fulfilled. He “puts”

Himself into our hearts, by His Spirit, so that it is no longer a duty like keeping the law or the sacrificial rituals, but a “delight” (Heb 10:5; see Heb 8:10 and 10:16, quoting Jeremiah 31:33; Ez 36:25–27; Rom 8:9; 1 Cor 3:16; Gal 5:5).

“Then He said, ‘Behold I have come to do Your will, O God.’ He takes away the first that He may establish the second. By that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all” (Heb 10:9–10).

Through waiting before the Lord in the darkness caused by his sin, David received the same New Covenant revelation a millennium ahead of his time, in agreement with the prophets after him: “For You do not desire sacrifice, or else I would give it; You do not delight in burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and a contrite heart – these, O God, You will not despise” (51:16–17; Is 1:11–15; Am 5:21–23; see Col 1:24; 1 Pet 3:17–18; 4:1–2; Is 50 – of Christ, vv. 4–9; of us, vv. 10–11).

c. He followed the footsteps of his forefathers, especially Judah.

(1) Judah sold for 20 silver shekels his half-brother Joseph, the most perfect type (metaphor, example) of Christ in the O.T. He then left Jacob’s family and married into the wicked Canaanite line, where God slew his two eldest sons for their wickedness. And when his widowed (Canaanite) daughter-in-law (Tamar) became pregnant, he had her brought to be burned to death, but she proved he was the father. Therefore Judah is a type of Judas, Greek for Judah, who betrayed Jesus for 30 shekels, also the price of a slave at that time (Gen 38; Mt 26:14–16).

David stole the wife of his neighbor and high ranking officer, Uriah, listed among the top 37 “mighty men” in his army. When he couldn’t get Uriah to sleep with his wife after bringing him home in the middle of war in order to “cover” her pregnancy by David, he sent Uriah back to the battlefield and ordered him to be placed immediately under enemy fire to be killed, which he was: the ultimate betrayal! (2 Sam 11; 23:8–39; 1 Chr 11:41).

(2) But Judah “acknowledged” his sin and overcame his wickedness through “binding his donkey [old man, sin-nature] to the vine [God’s Kingdom]. . . , He washed his garments in wine [atoning blood], and his clothes in the blood of grapes. His eyes are darker than wine [renewed vision], and his teeth whiter than milk” [transformed by the word of God he’d heard through Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and perhaps God himself] (Gen 49:11–12; see 32:22–32).

Several of David’s psalms record his deep and profound repentance in the wake of God’s judgment against his sin with

Bathsheba and murder of her husband. Because he so completely broke before God in this regard, he became a forerunner of Him who became contaminated with our sin and wickedness, as we saw in Psalm 22. Psalm 51 is the most well-known psalm of his repentance. But there are others which record his inner agony as the consequences of his sin regarding the havoc it led to among his own sons, which followed him to his death: Psalm 32, 38–40, 69; see 2 Sam 12 through 1 Kgs 1.

(3) When Joseph, as governor of Egypt, severely tested Jacob's ten sons through what they would do with their half-brother Benjamin (they had reason to be jealous of him as they had been of young Joseph), Judah, now humbled and broken by reason of his own failure, offered his own life in place of Benjamin, to be a slave forever in Egypt (Gen 42–44).

David, broken by his past failure and horrible role model to his sons, felt such remorse when he heard his son Absalom had been slain in the battle against his order, that he wept, saying, "O my son Absalom – my son, my son Absalom – if only I had died in your place! O Absalom my son, my son!" (2 Sam 18:33).

(4) Both Judah and David thus became true "representatives" before God of *real* fallen humanity. In their sinful weakness and among sinful humans, like Jacob, they "struggled with God and with men, and have prevailed." This "wrestling match" changed Jacob's name to Israel, *prince*, because he "overcame" or conquered his "Jacob" (supplanter, deceiver) nature through *facing God* instead of *avoiding* Him (Gen 32:22–32; see Is 6:5; Hos 12:3–6).

(5) This is why Jesus will return as *the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the root of David*. He will rule this earth, *with His saints* (overcomers), as our *true Representative*, like a judge who truly *understands* our fallen condition. (Rv 5:5; 2:26–27; 19:14–15; 1 Cor 6:2–3; Heb 2:14–18; 5:1–9).

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CHAPTER 6

The God Factor: Regaining Our Lost Dominion

*The heaven, even the heavens, are the LORD's;
but the earth He has given to the children of men.*
Psalm 115:16

The glue of the universe

I first heard about the God factor in a *National Geographic* article as I waited for a dental appointment. It told about the Large Hadron Collider (LHC) on the border of Switzerland and France. It's the world's biggest particle accelerator, a seventeen mile circular tunnel 320 feet underground, with huge magnets designed to accelerate subatomic particles (parts of an atom), mainly protons, to nearly the speed of light, and then collide them with each other. The collision smashes the protons into more basic subatomic particles for a fraction of a second, during which computers analyze the results in hopes of getting to the bottom of what makes everything function in the universe: the *theory of everything*.

On July 4th, 2012, scientists finally announced the discovery of the Higgs boson, the "God particle," which seemed to confirm the existence of the Higgs field, responsible for determining the mass of all other subatomic particles. But years later, they still don't understand the relationship between the four forces that keep everything in the universe from falling apart: strong, weak, and electromagnetic forces that hold an atom together, and the mystery of gravity that attracts massive objects to each other by warping time and space. Or so they thought until new discoveries about the *graviton*.

Trying to grapple with the latest science on this subject leaves my brain spinning like the "spin" of atoms in sync with each other on opposite sides of the universe (now how did they figure that out?). And the more they discover, the more complicated and *endless* it gets – literally! – and the more "upgrades" they must add to the LHC to get to the bottom of what they thought they'd gotten to the bottom of.

Some day, perhaps when it's too late to do anything about it except fall on their faces before their Creator ("no, not . . . Jesus?"),

these brilliant physicists will realize their problem was that the “God factor” behind the universe is *spiritual*, not physical. Duh! (2 Cor 11:3).

The Christ factor

One of the factors that helped Columbus conclude the earth was indeed round was Isaiah 40:22, where God “sits above the circle of the earth.” If today’s scientists would take a closer look at Colossians 1:17, they might get insight into what they’re looking for.

Verse 16 tells us that Jesus created everything “visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers.” They were “created through Him and for Him.”

But verse 17 goes right to the heart of the matter, or the heart of *matter*: “And He is before all things, and in Him all things consist” [cohere, are held or bound together, Greek, *sunistao*, #4921].”

How could anything be plainer in telling us the *God factor*, the *unified field theory*, the *theory of everything*? It is simply *Jesus Christ*.

But Paul doesn’t stop with that. He goes on in the same chapter to explain a “mystery which has been hidden from ages and from generations, but now has been revealed to His saints.” It “is Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Col 1:26–27).

In fact, the entire purpose of his ministry, that for which Christ worked in him “mightily,” was that he “may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus.”

In the next chapter he tells of his “great conflict” or struggle, his longing to see the believers “knit together in love.” *Knit together* (*sumbibazo*, #4822), means “to cause to coalesce, to join together, put together” (*Thayer’s*). *Coalesce* means “to grow together, fuse, to come together so as to form one whole; unit” (*The American Heritage Dictionary*, 1976 edition).

God’s original intent in creation was “that in the dispensation of the fullness of the times He might gather together in *one* all things in *Christ*, both which are in heaven and which are on earth – in Him.” This is the “fellowship/ relationship” part of family life. The pleasure a father and mother have with their children is directly related to the fellowship their children have *with each other* (Eph 1:10).

Paul told the Philippians, “Fulfill my joy by being like-minded, having the same love, being of *one accord*, of *one mind*.. . . Let

each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others” (Phil 2:2, 4).

But fellowship and relationship must lead to *responsibility*. The first definition of *responsible* in *The American Heritage Dictionary* is “legally or ethically accountable for the care or welfare of another.” It’s the definition that fits my purpose in this article.

For I intend to show biblically that the *love* that bonds people together in Christ and makes them accountable and responsible to one another is the same *law* that holds the universe together, from micro to macro, from the atom to the cosmos. It’s the *God factor*.

The instruction of wisdom

Governments based on freedom are called “democracies” (Greek *demos*, common people) because they are “government of the people, by the people, for the people,” by representatives taken “from the people” (*Gettysburg Address*).

But democracies, like aristocracies (kings, nobles), work only as well as the people who run them, that is, when their leaders are accountable to the people as their *true* representatives.

Because we’re all messed up through the fall, we need someone *weak* enough in himself to understand us, yet *strong* enough in God to deliver us: someone totally aware of the awful limitation of his humanity, yet completely dependent on the awesome limitlessness of God’s power. One who, though limping, stays in God’s face. Like Jacob (Gen 32:28–31; 49:10–11; Ps 16:8; 22; 24:6; 25; 38; 40; 88, etc; 2 Cor 12:9–10; 13:4).

“For every high priest taken *from among men* is appointed *for men in things pertaining to God* . . . He can have compassion on those who are ignorant and going astray, since he himself is also subject to weakness” (Heb 5:1–2).

Solomon gave us the book of Proverbs as a guide to *wisdom*, because “wisdom is the principal thing.” “She is more precious than rubies, and all the things you may desire cannot compare with her.” By wisdom “kings reign, and rulers decree justice. . . princes rule, and nobles, and all the judges of the earth” (Prv 4:7; 3:15; 8:11,15).

Wisdom guided the Creator as “a master craftsman” during creation. “And I was daily His delight . . . and my delight was with the sons of men.” Notice again wisdom operating in both the personal and the physical, the *God factor* behind everything (Prv 8:30–31; Heb 1:3).

Another theme in Proverbs and essential to wisdom is *instruction* through *reproof, rebuke, correction, and chastening*. It's the conditioning, breaking, and mellowing of the heart toward undoing the curse of the Fall. Five Hebrew correction words in Proverbs repeated 64 times in 52 verses reinforce the *fear of God*, the basis of wisdom (Prv 1:7, 27; 2:5; 8:13; 9:10; 15:33).

The warning!

The final chapter, Proverbs 31, begins with a mother *instructing* and warning her son, Lemuel, who is heir to the throne or already king. One common view of King Lemuel is that it's another name for King Solomon. She is passionate with vision for this son, like Hannah, who vowed that if God would give her a son, she would give him back to Him (1 Sam 1).

"Do not waste your strength on women, on those who ruin kings. It is not for kings, O Lemuel, to guzzle wine. Rulers should not crave alcohol. For if they drink, they may forget the law and not give justice to the oppressed. Alcohol is for the dying, and wine for those in bitter distress. Let them drink to forget their poverty and remember their troubles no more" (Prv 31:3-7 NLT).

If King Lemuel is Solomon, and since Solomon's mother is Bathsheba, her passion might have grown out of the terrible conflict over her sin of adultery with King David and his murder of her husband and the suffering that followed to the end of David's life (2 Sam 11ff).

At any rate these nine verses of warning to this son capture the purpose of kingly responsibility to "keep [guard] your heart with all diligence, for out of it spring the issues of life." A listening heart opens the door to wisdom: "Blessed is the man who listens to me, watching daily at my gates, waiting at the posts of my doors. For whoever finds me finds life, and obtains favor from the Lord (Prv 4:23; 8:34; 90:10; 15:31-32 Cor 1:30).

And why is "the fear of the Lord . . . the beginning of wisdom"? Answer: It keeps us humble, "tuning" our hearts to hear Him who is wisdom. And a sensitive ear to His voice will keep us from sin. "The fear of the LORD is to hate evil; pride and arrogance and the evil way and the perverse mouth I hate" (Ps 25:9; 34:2; Prv 8:13).

Can you feel their pain?

What happened in the Fall of man is very simple, but impossible to recover from without outside help. Not just Adam and Eve, but "*all we like sheep have gone astray.*" We eat of the Tree of Knowledge through our addiction to the five senses - food,

money, comfort, material things, entertainment, TV, Internet, reading, social media, and so on (Is 53:6; Gen 3:5-6; Rom 3:9-23).

Many of us are in some way so *intoxicated* by the “cares, riches, and pleasures of life,” we don’t feel enough pain to empathize with or relate to others. We live for ourselves with little or no sense of responsibility to help the needy around us. Even the desperately needy have too many alternative “remedies” to turn to in place of God (Mt 25:31-46; Lk 8:14).

“Truly, this only I have found: That God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes [inventions, devices]” (Eccl 7:29).

Proverbs 23:29-35 describes someone who drowns his troubles in alcohol. “They have struck me, but I was not hurt. They have beaten me, but I did not feel it. When shall I awake, that I may seek another drink?” Like *peripheral neuropathy* – a diabetic’s loss of feeling in his feet or hands that may lead to amputation.

What God needs are those who will endure “the reproofs of instruction”: whatever it takes to expose them to real pain, sorrow, rejection, darkness, desolation, and despair without *escaping from or medicating* it. Because what they’ll feel is not their pain alone, but the pain of most of the people on this planet (Is 50:10-11).

King Lemuel’s mother saw what would happen to her son if he allowed women and alcohol to dull his senses and destroy his sensitivity to the human predicament, *lest [he] drink and forget the law, and pervert [neglect] the justice of all the afflicted*. She pleads with him, “Open your mouth for the speechless, in the cause of all who are appointed to die. Open your mouth, judge righteously, and plead the cause of the poor and needy” (Prv 31:5; 8-9; 23:29-35).

We believers are “a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people,” called to “deliver those who are drawn toward death, and hold back those stumbling to the slaughter” 1 Pet 2:9; Prv 24:11).

Incredibly, *the integrity and stability of the universe depend on it*: “Because the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now” (Rom 8:21-22).

This has to be true even from common sense: If the physical world exists for the personal and spiritual and not the other way

around, then personal/spiritual relationships have a higher priority over physical laws and in fact *cause* them! It's the *God factor*.

Solomon's failure

For many years I wondered why God gave Solomon riches if He knew they would contribute to his destruction, especially considering that Solomon only asked for an "understanding heart," to "discern between good and evil," in order to rule with wisdom and justice. I actually felt a little critical toward God because of it, yet knew He was God. So one day I specifically asked God to show me why (1 Kgs 3, 10–11).

Within a few minutes, what I believe is the answer came: Besides the wisdom God gave him, Solomon inherited the wisdom David had gained through a lifetime of the pain and suffering that drove him, David, to God and kept him in His face. Through it we have the inexhaustible treasure of his more than 70 Psalms, and a similar number of Psalms written by those he influenced (Ps 16:8).

King Solomon, then, is the outcome of the foundation laid by David. Jesus acknowledged the glory and wisdom of Solomon. Why then would God seem to lure Solomon to his spiritual ruin by *material wealth*, when through Moses He warned of its danger to kings? (Mt 6:29; 12:42; Dt 17:17).

For two reasons: First, because the ultimate value of relationship occurs within the context of *freedom*. Love is meaningless unless we are completely free to choose another path, but priceless when we *choose* to endure everything that would threaten to destroy it (Josh 24:15; Song 8:6–7; Gal 5:1, 13; 4:24–31; 1 Cor 13:4–7).

This is why the book of Job is such a goldmine of wisdom. Under enough pressure to destroy almost anybody, Job persevered. If he had found a way to escape or deaden his pain or the stress of his "miserable comforters," he would have aborted the refining process and missed his "metamorphosis," his transformation (Ps 40:1ff).

For the pressure finally brought to the surface, not only his pride in his own righteousness (Job 30–31), but the wrong attitudes he'd bottled inside himself when he lashed out against his persecutors (Job 16:2).

When God finally spoke, Job's eyes opened to a God infinitely more awesome and sovereign than he'd ever dreamed. The humility and security he gained through this insight liberated him

to *pray* for those who had accused him. That's when his "captivity" turned and he ended up with much more than he had before (Job 42; Dt 8:3,7ff).

The book of Job places human *freedom* deep within the heart of a *sovereign* God. Despite centuries of debate, the two opposites cannot be separated, because it's a mystery, a paradox only God understands – unless He chooses to reveal it to us through His Spirit (Mt 11:25; Lk 10:21; Rom 8:25,29; 11:2,22,32–36; 1 Cor 2:9–16).

The test

The second thing I learned that day is that God didn't "bait" or "tempt" Solomon to sin; He simply exposed him to enough *freedom* to *test* him and ultimately *refine* him, as with Job, through *revealing his own heart to himself* (Dt 8:2; 2 Chr 32:31; Job 40:4; 42:5-6; Jer 17:9; Rom 3:19–20; 2 Cor 3:18).

It's very similar to why God left Satan in the Garden of Eden, with its forbidden tree, to test Adam and Eve. And why He prospers us as a reward for our obedience even though our prosperity will often lead us to the complacency that lures us away from Him, as He warns in Deuteronomy eight. Not to ruin us, but to reveal and expose the dead seriousness of our need to depend on Him – that *without Him we can do nothing* (Jn 5:19; 15:5; 1 Cor 3:11–13; 2 Cor 12:9–10; 13:4; Phil 4:13; Jas 1:13; Dan 11:35; Zech 13:9).

So 1 Kings 11 records Solomon's turning away to other gods because of his many "foreign wives," despite God's attempt to correct him through enemies He raised up against him. His stubborn refusal to heed the correction he'd so powerfully taught in his Proverbs would later serve to magnify God's mercy and love in the face of his disobedience (1 Kgs 11:9–43).

What Solomon did with his freedom was to indulge in everything the Fall of man represents, everything that can possibly satisfy the senses. He "surpassed all the kings of the earth in riches and wisdom." "He had 700 wives, princesses, and 300 concubines." "Whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I did not withhold my heart from any pleasure" (Gen 3:6; 1 Kgs 10:23; 11:3; 1 Jn 2:15; Eccl 2:10).

But what did it bring him? "The eye is not satisfied. . . . All is vanity and grasping for the wind. . . . For all his days are sorrowful, and his work burdensome; even in the night his heart takes no rest" (Eccl 1:8,14; 2:23).

Hearing the rebukes of life

Solomon experienced the darkness that haunted Adam and Eve after they yielded to the same categories of sin. In his emptiness no doubt he could hear his dear mother pleading with him to turn away from “that which destroys kings” (Gen 3:6, 1 Jn. 2:16)

And, broken by sin, he awoke from his “drunken” stupor. For he wrote Ecclesiastes at the end of his life, when “strong men bow down” and “desire fails.” More than any other book in the Bible, it reveals the complete futility of human effort apart from God (Eccl 12:3–5).

“For the creation was subjected to *futility*, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself also will be delivered from the *bondage* of corruption into the glorious *liberty* of the children of God (Rom 8:20–21).

It is the 9-11 of man’s achievements: “I returned and saw under the sun that – the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to men of understanding, nor favor to men of skill; but time and chance happen to them all (Eccl 9:11).

It’s the perfect joining of man’s freedom and God’s sovereignty – the *goal* of our freedom, the conclusion of doing it *our* way, that we might finally understand God’s mercy and grace in order that, ironically, we might *truly* be free! (Rom 9:15–23).

It explains why God reveals Himself not to the “wise and prudent,” but to “babes,” and why He *waits* while we do *our* thing. And why we must *endure* until we come to the end of ourselves: “Therefore the Lord will wait, that He may be gracious to you” (Is 30:18a; 42:16; Mt 11:25; 24:13; Lk 21:19; Jas 1:3–4; 5:11).

Does sin lead to more grace?

For some, this wisdom can only be gained through experience (the hard *way*), as with Solomon. The phrase, “I saw/have seen,” occurs 19 times in Ecclesiastes. Does all this mean it’s better to experience sin and then repent, than to resist temptation and never fall? For “where sin abounded, grace abounded much more” (Rom 5:20).

Paul raised the same question. “What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? Certainly not! How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it?” (Eccl 12:3, 5; Rom 6:1–2).

Solomon did not have an advantage in using his “liberty as an opportunity for the flesh.” He reaped *much grief and sorrow* for

his tiny “vapor” of pleasure, and *paved the way for the downfall of his son and the whole kingdom.*

David had paved the way for the *success* of his son and fought all the battles that gave Solomon the kingdom. Solomon did the opposite, going against all the wisdom he’d taught others in his Proverbs (Gal 5:13; 6:8; Jas 4:14; 1 Kgs 12).

Moses chose “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” (Heb 11:25–26).

His reward was that he almost overcame death, like Enoch before him and Elijah after him. For we see him standing with Elijah and Jesus in their “transfigured” bodies thousands of years ahead of the resurrection of the saints yet to come (Mt 17:3; 1 Cor 15:20ff; Jude 1:9).

Stripped of joy and peace in his old age, exhausted, wasted, humbled, and broken, Solomon’s wisdom returned to him. In “the fear of the Lord,” he began to “hear the rebukes of life” (Prv 15:31–33; Eccl 12:13).

Ultimate love

There is no solid date given to “the song of songs, which is Solomon’s.” I believe it may be the final product of his failure and recovery. Ecclesiastes deals with his emptiness without God. In light of the wisdom he had known, and with a thousand wives and concubines among whom he had not “found one,” it must have left a deep longing for an intimacy with God far beyond what most of us know (Song 1:1, 6–7; 8:5–7; Eccl 7:28; 12:14).

I’m convinced God heard his cry and gave him what he longed for – an intimacy with the King of the Universe that matched the wisdom God had given him. Didn’t Jesus rebuke Simon the Pharisee for his lack of love in contrast to the sinful women, who “loved much” because she had been “forgiven much”? The flask of costly perfume demonstrated a depth of love far surpassing that of the religiously “up-right” Simon. (Job 28:12–28; 42:5; Lk 7:37–48).

No wonder the most intense description of love in the entire Bible is found in Solomon’s Song: “Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm; for love is as strong as death, jealousy as cruel as the grave; its flames are flames of fire, a most vehement flame. Many waters cannot quench love, nor can the floods drown it. If a man would give for love all the wealth of his house, it would be utterly despised” (8:6–7).

It is spoke by his bride, “leaning upon her beloved” as she comes “up from the wilderness,” her place of refining, as it was with Israel in the Sinai Desert (8:5; Deut 8:2).

Solomon’s love song is a poetic description of the intimacy of marriage. “This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the church.” And therein lies the mystery, I believe, of why “he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than” John the Baptist, whom Jesus said was the greatest “among those born of women” until then, which includes Enoch, Moses, Elijah, and David (Eph 5:32; Mt 11:11).

“And all these, having obtained a good testimony through faith, did not receive the promise, God having provided something *better* for us, that they should not be made perfect apart from us” (Heb 11:39–40).

The perfect Tabernacle: Christ and the Church

The New Covenant added the dimension of a “new birth” through the Spirit, with a restored “tabernacle” fulfilled in flesh and blood. “For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body,” the Church (Acts 2; 1 Cor 12:13a).

This is the fellowship of believers *in one accord* the Old Testament spoke of only in prophecy or in the symbolism and worship of the Tabernacles of Moses and David (Ex 26; 40:35; Lev 9:22–24; 1 Chr 15–16; 2 Chr 6; Is 16:5; Am 9:11; Acts 15:16; Ps 27, 48, 132–133).

Those who have *experienced* such union and intimacy with God and His children understand what Paul meant by “the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the ages has been hidden in God. . . .” For them the Song of Solomon describes the progression of this “marriage” within God’s family. *It is the finished product of what God originally intended in creation* (Eph. 3:9; Song 6:8–10; Acts 1:14; 2:1,46; 4:24; 5:12; Eph 1:10,22–23; 2:13–22; 3:18–19; 4:1–16)

It is His “dwelling place,” “the mountain of the Lord,” “the Jerusalem above,” Zion, from which His dominion over creation issues (Ex 15:17; Dt 12:5; 1 Kgs 8:30ff; Ps 2; 50:1–6; 76:2; 132–134; Is 2:2; 11:9; 25:6–12; Ez 20:40; Joel 2:1; Mic 4:1–2; Gal 4:26; Eph 2:22; Heb 12:22).

This is not to negate or do away with natural Israel and Jerusalem, which will be “a cup of drunkenness to all the surrounding peoples” as their wickedness lures them to their destruction. It will be a time when a refined and purified spiritual and natural Israel fight together with spiritual weapons and

become “one stick” in God’s hand through Him “whom [we] pierced” (Ps 66:10; Is 48:10; Ez 37–39; Zech 12;1ff; 13:9; Mal 3:3; Rom 9).

The New Covenant was the fulfillment of the law,

“written not with ink but by the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of flesh, that is, of the heart” (2 Cor 3:3; Ps 40:8; Jer 31:33; Ez 36:26, 27; Heb 8:10; 10:16).

It is “the law of the Spirit of Life in Christ Jesus” which sets us “free from the law of sin and death,” liberating us to love and serve one another, and so fulfills the whole law (Mt 12:30–31; Jn 13:34; 15:12; Rom 8:2; 13:8–10; Gal 5:13–14; 1 Tim 1:5; 1 Jn 4:7–8; Jas 1:25; 2:8, 12).

It’s the answer to Jesus’ prayer before His crucifixion, “that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me . . . and have loved them as You have loved Me” (Jn. 17:21, 23).

It’s God’s “dwelling place, where His “fullness” dwells. “And He put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church, which is His body, the *fullness of Him who fills all in all*” (Eph 1:22–23).

“That Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height – to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you [plural in the Greek] may be *filled with all the fullness of God*” (Eph 3:17–19).

This love is the “kingdom of heaven,” the “kingdom of God.” It functions through God’s family, the Church. God’s true Church is not a social organization, but His saints bonded together in intimate love. It mirrors or points to “the marriage supper of the Lamb” (Mt 4:17; 12:28; 16:18; Eph 3:10; 5:23–32; Col 1:18; Rv 19:9).

His government of Israel began with the “Tabernacle in the wilderness,” a symbolic picture of His “congregation in the wilderness,” “coupled together . . . that it might be one” (Ex 26:1–18; Acts 7:38; Heb 8:2; 9:1–2; 13:11).

Coupled together in Hebrew is *habar* or *chabar* (guttural h/ch; Strong’s #2266). It means “joined, united, bound, compact,” as in Psalm 122:3, “Jerusalem is built as a city that is *compact together*.” It’s the word-root of *Hebron*, the area in Canaan occupied by the *giants* which put fear into the ten spies and caused all the adult

warriors to miss their inheritance in Canaan, the Promise Land (Num 13:22; Josh 14:13-15).

God waits for us?

God now controls the spiritual realm – our inheritance – and its giants, “rulers of the darkness of this age,” *through the prayers of His saints*, especially when they know who they are “in Christ” and agree “in one accord” (Mt 16:17-19; 18:19-20; Jn 17:21-23; Acts 2:1ff; 1 Cor 12:12ff; Eph 4:1ff; 6:12-18; Col 1:27-28).

It is the *God factor* fulfilled, not only through Christ, the Head, but through His body, the Church. Notice the verse following Colossians 1:16-17, where He created “throne or dominions or rulers or authorities, . . . And He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together” (ESV): The next verse reads, “And He is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the preeminence.”

Incredible! Christ maintains “preeminence” (dominion, control, authority), not alone, but *through His body the Church*, the way any head functions. Which is why Paul says, “Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world will be judged by you, are you unworthy to judge the smallest matters? Do you not know that we shall judge angels? (1 Cor 6:2-3; 15:25-26; Heb 1:13; Rv 19:14-15; see also Gen 1:26, 28; Ps 2:8-9; 8:5-6; 48:1-8; 50:1-4; 115:16; 149:5-9; Dan 7:18, 22, 27; 2 Tim 2:12; Rv 1:6; 2:26-27; 5:10; 10:4, 6).

And that it may be done “legally,” not arbitrarily (by decree or force), God will *use His Church* to make known His “manifold wisdom . . . to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places” – all ranks of angels, both good and bad. For a principle in jurisprudence is that “justice must not only be done, but it must be seen to be done.”¹ Because love and relationship can exist only in a context of freedom (Eph 3:10; see Prv 8:15-16; 24:6-7)

God’s legal basis for dominion

Bible history is the story of His people conquering the “evil empire” on this planet, not as personal achievement, but through taking responsibility as our brothers’ keeper. But we will not be *able* to “keep” our brother *from the heart* unless we feel his pain. Christ, our Forerunner, has “been there and done that” *for us*, “leaving us an example, that [we] should follow His steps” (Ex 14, 32; Josh 10; Acts 13:11; 1 Pet 2:21).

“Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, *He Himself likewise shared in the same*, that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage. . . .

“Therefore, *in all things He had to be made like His brethren*, that He might be a merciful and faithful High Priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For in that *He Himself has suffered, being tempted*, He is able to aid those who are tempted.

“He can have compassion on those who are ignorant and going astray, since *He himself is also subject to weakness*. . . . And no man takes this honor to himself, but he who is called by God, just as Aaron was” (Heb 2:14–15, 17–18; Heb 5:2, 4).

As the Lamb *slain in our place*, Jesus became *legally* qualified before the throne of God to open the seals of judgment that will restore our fallen planet. He became our High Priest through taking our sin and feeling our pain (Heb 5:1–9, Rv 5).

How can we do any less than, through our failure and weakness, *identify* with others, *feeling their infirmity* in order to bear their burden and see their deliverance as God delivers us? This will qualify us to “rule and reign with Him,” regaining the dominion we lost (Lk 22:28–30, Rom 8:17, 2 Tim 2:12, Rv 20:4).

“I now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up in my flesh what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ, for the sake of His body, which is the church” (Col 1:24; see Phil 3:10).

This is the reason we are saved not by works, but by faith. The lengthier process by which faith grows allows God to show us what’s in our hearts in order that we may *understand* the weakness of others. If we live by the law instead of by the Spirit, we’ll be *disqualified* as heirs and joint heirs with Christ (Rom 4, Gal 3).

If all creation awaits the outcome, it should be our highest priority to find and experience the true *God factor* through which our Redeemer will “make all things new.” And the saints “will possess the kingdom forever” (Is. 65:17; 66:22, Dan 7:18, 1 Cor 15:25, Heb 10:12–13, 2 Pet. 2:13, Rv 12:10–11).

1. Arthur C. Custance, *The Seed of the Woman* (Brockville, Ont.: Arthur C. Custance, 1980), p.403

SECTION TWO

Hand to Hand Combat Battling Darkness with Light

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ.

2 Corinthians 10:3–5

CHAPTER 7

My Jeremiah 29:13 Assault on Depression

Bordering insanity

Year 1975, age 33. It was the time of the month when the missionary pledge I'd committed myself to was due. I lay on my bed, writhing in agony, screaming. I was trapped in a religion of terror, trying to serve a God who demanded that I "give sacrificially" or He would turn His fiery eyes toward me, and pointing his finger, allow the devil to take everything I'd worked hard for, including my wife and children.

There was no escape. I'd been raised from childhood by well-meaning parents who loved me, but whose love carried with it the condition that I serve and obey this holy God of absolute justice. Yes, He was also a God of mercy, but only to those who met the conditions.

As far as I was concerned, His demands affected me in only three ways: praying, fasting, and giving. I worked hard at all three, but prayer and fasting were private, my personal goals of achievement to make me the "spiritual" man I aspired to be one day.

But giving obligated me to others, pointing me to their lifestyle, measuring my standard against theirs. And as far as I could tell, nobody measured up to my expectations, not even missionaries. Yet God held his rod of correction over my head, threatening me with His demands that I "give to him who asks you, and from him who wants to borrow from you do not turn away" (Mt 5:42).

Dad had pioneered and pastored his own church in Florida where I spent my teen years sitting under the preachers he invited to speak. Some of them spent half or more of their sermon time taking their own offering, putting us under a guilt trip for not "yielding to God" in giving what he felt we should give. No wonder their threats of God's judgment on those who didn't give added to my conclusion, as I turned nineteen, that God did not exist.

But Dad, true to his character as a "man of prayer," prayed me back to God a few years later, but only to come face to face again with this God of vengeance on those who don't *give!*

My depression over trying so hard to please God had turned to anger. "The leech has two suckers that cry out, 'More, more!'

There are three things that are never satisfied – no, four that never say, ‘Enough!': the grave, the barren womb, the thirsty desert, the blazing fire” (Prv 30:15–16 NLT).

As I lay there writhing in torment, trying to muster up the faith to write that monthly missions check, it dawned on me that something was wrong. I had somehow lost the beauty I’d also perceived in the endless stories of faith and purpose Dad and Mother had told us kids in our childhood. But how would I find what I’d been searching for so long?

I wish, through the following Hebrew words for *wait* to unfold the story of God’s incredible mercy toward me as he led me out of my legalistic nightmare into His glorious liberty. That is, if you can wade through my technical nerd-approach. Sorry; but learning to “be me” – in Christ – came with my “deliverance.”

Waiting for the Higher Power

Year 2015: As I studied the lives of these godly prophets and kings it became obvious that their success or failure hung on whether they took time to “wait” for His direction and anointing, either before or after their blunders. And since the Bible pinpoints the ultimate failure of King Saul to that one issue in 1 Samuel 13, confirmed by his further disobedience in chapter 15, I decided to do a study on the waiting words in the Old Testament.

For waiting provides a path from the natural to the spiritual. And in the New Testament it became that literally, when Jesus commanded his followers to go to Jerusalem and “wait for the Promise of the Father,” to be “baptized with the Holy Spirit,” through Whom they would receive the power to witness “to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:4-8).

So I copied 120 verses divided among seven of the most important Hebrew words for “wait,” four with their matching nouns. However, since I’d been meditating in these verses occasionally since then, I wanted to use them somehow, but the list was too overwhelming to know how and what more to do with them or how to organize them in a meaningful way for the benefit of others.

Then one morning around 1:30 when I couldn’t sleep, I began browsing through the waiting verses again, and lo and behold, I began to see a pattern based on the intensity and use of these seven Hebrew words. You’ll find them on any computer Bible program or Bible app.

As I pondered them, I realized the way God delivered me from depression fits perfectly with these seven increasingly intense

verbs for waiting. While my definitions may seem abbreviated and oversimplified to experts in Hebrew word studies who use the 15 volume *Theological Dictionary of Old Testament Words*, I trust the end result is an appreciation of the concept of hope/wait when you see *how* it led me out of my depression and into the glorious liberty I still enjoy – when I practice what I preach in these chapters.

Note: The two volume *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (TWOT) is my favorite Hebrew word study, a step beyond *Strong's* Hebrew and Greek dictionaries and *Brown-Driver-Briggs-Gesenius Hebrew-English Lexicon* (BDBG), all of which are golden standards for basic definitions.

1. *Shamar* (H8104)
2. *damam* (H1826), *dumam* (noun, H1748)
3. *Sabar/shabar*(H7663), *seber* (noun, H7664)
4. *Chakah* or *ḥakah* (H2442)
5. *Yachal* or *yah̄al* (H3176) and *tohelet* (noun, H8431)
6. *Qavah* (H6960) and *tiqvah* (noun, H8615)
7. *Chul*/*chiyl* or *ḥul/ḥil*(H2342)

Note: Pronunciation of “ch,” transliterated (transferred) from the Hebrew letter *heth* to its English equivalent, as in *chakah*, *yachal*, and *chul*, has neither an English *ch* sound (used by Strong's, BDBG) nor an *h* sound, which TWOT uses with a dot under it. *Heth* is closer to a German *ach*, though a little softer. *Kh* comes closer to avoid confusion with the *ch* sound as in church. This is true with all Hebrew words transliterated with a *ch*. Since I don't have a dotted *h* on my keyboard, I use an underlined *h* for *heth*, as follows: *ḥakah*, *yah̄al*, *ḥal*. Think *khakah*, *yakhal*, *khul* (that German *ch*).

1. *Shamar* (H8104) to keep, guard, observe, give heed (BDBG) a lifestyle of watchful obedience – a listening heart, doing everything as unto the Lord,

Shamar is used in 440 verses in the Hebrew Old Testament, but only a few times as *wait*. Yet one of those uses marks one of the most important verses in the Bible.

“Blessed is the man who listens to me, watching [alert] daily at my gates, waiting [*shamar*] at the posts of my doors. For whoever finds me finds life, and obtains favor from the LORD” (Prv 8:34–35).

I have long seen these two verses as the key, along with many other passages having the same meaning, to our entire relationship with God, because it describes a *listening heart*. It also connects Jacob's history-changing wrestling match with God, giving Israel its name (Gen 32), and applies it to our daily walk with Him:

"Yes, he struggled with the Angel and prevailed; he wept, and sought favor from Him. He found Him in Bethel, and there He spoke to us – that is, the LORD God of hosts. The LORD [*Yehovah*] is His memorable name. So you, by the help of your God, return; observe [*shamar*] mercy and justice, and wait [*qavah*] on your God continually" (Hos 12:4–6). We'll meet the importance of *qavah* when we get to level six.

For years I tuned pianos for a living. Normally, a tuner begins his tuning procedure with the note A below middle C. All other 87 notes are set relative to this standard pitch, which vibrates at 440 beats per second. Whether it's coincidence or not, *shamar* sets and maintains the believer's lifestyle "pitch," keeping him "tuned" to God, for we were made in His image, and the "Fall" got us hopelessly "out of tune."

"The basic idea of the root [of *shamar*] is 'to exercise great care over.' . . . In combination with other verbs the meaning is 'do carefully and diligently.'" (TWOT #2414)

"Whoever is wise will observe [*shamar*] these things, and they will understand the lovingkindness of the LORD" (Ps 107:43).

This verse concludes Psalm 107 in which are four kinds of trials God's people go through, which when they turn to God in their trouble He brings deliverance, victory, and understanding. It describes what should be the normal lifestyle of any believer, and if we "observe," that is, "give attention to" (tune in, wait on) God's promises, we'll grow strong and powerful in His might (Eph 6:10).

It also applies to the diligence we give to the things or people under our care, our stewardship or responsibility, including our own behavior, as well as our "attention to, or reverence for, God or others." It may refer to "preserving" or "storing up" knowledge (Mal 2:7), food (Gen 41:35), "or anything that is precious" (Ex 22:7), as well as, negatively, storing up anger against others (Am 1:11).

Some of my friends felt my depression was caused by taking God's Word too seriously, for I "observed" it with the same perfectionism that characterized everything I did. While I saw their point later, that it's not by self-effort, God, in His mercy, used

my desire to *observe* and *keep* His Word to eventually find the answer, rather than conclude God didn't entirely mean what He said, or using the excuse that "we're only human," expecting mercy and grace to take up the slack. For I wanted something that actually worked, not just a "religious crutch."

I just installed a GPS device in my wife's car and in mine, mailed to us by our auto insurance company. It will monitor our driving habits in order to test our worthiness for a discount on our rates. Now the care we exercise in our driving is being monitored, and, hopefully, will save us money. (Three months later: we now enjoy a 17.5% discount on our insurance, that is, as long as we avoid tickets and accidents.).

That's how I see *shamar*. When we take God and His instructions seriously and *pay attention*, we activate His benefits in our lives. Otherwise, they lay dormant, allowing "the enemy" (Satan) to bring unnecessary harm, problems, and misdirection (Dt 28; Ps 103).

Which was the root of King Saul's problem: "And Samuel said to Saul, 'You have done foolishly. You have not kept [*shamar*] the commandment of the LORD your God, which He commanded you. For now the LORD would have established your kingdom over Israel forever'" (1 Sam 13:13).

"So Saul died for his unfaithfulness which he had committed against the LORD, because he did not keep [*shamar*] the word of the LORD, and also because he consulted a medium for guidance." He had never learned to *wait* for God! (1 Sam 28:6ff; 1 Chr 10:13).

Faithfulness in little

In Exodus 44 God disqualified the Levites who had "not kept [*shamar*] charge" of the "holy things" in the Temple for which they were responsible. "But the priests, the Levites, the sons of Zadok, who kept [*shamar*] charge of My sanctuary when the children of Israel went astray from Me, they shall come near Me to minister to Me . . . and they shall keep [*shamar*] My charge" (vv. 15-16).

There are many responsibilities in the Bible God requires of us as faithful stewards of His grace, but it is so easy to *not* take them seriously when it is inconvenient, difficult, even impossible, especially when "we're not called" to it. Jesus said, "He who is faithful in what is least is faithful also in much; and he who is unjust in what is least is unjust also in much," and "all things are possible to him who believes" (Lk 16:10; Mk 9:23).

As we seek Him, He will show us what responsibilities apply to us. But learning His will occurs in the context of our faith-

fulness in “what is least.” Because, as is well known, the most important factor in success has to do with our daily habits – our lifestyle. Furthermore, studies show that those who start at the bottom and make it to the top in the company are the ones who do more than they’re required to do, because their *heart* is in it.

Philippians 3:12b sets the standard or “pitch” for the believer, like *shamar*: “I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me.” It is *my number one fear*, lest I come short of what God has called me to do. Which is why I’m writing this, in hopes of encouraging you toward this end also.

Key to the Romans seven gold mine

Any biblical passage may become life-changing when we approach it with the diligence and dedication of *shamar*. Such is Romans seven, which begins, “Or do you not know, brethren (*for I speak to those who know the law*), that the law has dominion over a man as long as he lives?” (v. 1).

Those who see “the law” only as Old Testament “legalism” miss the point of this critical chapter. For it is not Old verses New Testament, but *how* we “keep” His commandments, especially in the New Testament, which are much more difficult than the Ten Commandments, because they deal with our *motives*, not merely our actions (Prv 13:7; Mt 5:28).

Romans seven set me free from a twenty-year period of suicidal “clinical depression” (I should have been institutionalized). I tell the whole story in chapter one of my first book, *Jail and Prison: Devil’s Playground or God-Given Opportunity*, available through Amazon.com or Kindle.

I had assumed my problem was some unresolved issue in childhood, but the years I spent studying psychology failed to lead to the root of my problem, other than aspiring to live up to the expectations of my parents. After more years trying to find the answer in philosophy, theology, and “deeper life” Christian books, I finally launched out on Jeremiah 29:13, “And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart.”

It was my *shamar* and the beginning of a year and a half “waiting” process that covered all seven levels of waiting, from a desperate attempt to “keep” God’s laws, to the “travail” (*hul*) that finally gave birth to the answer.

I would never have experienced this amazing and complete deliverance had I not taken God’s “holy law” seriously enough to find out why I couldn’t “keep” it through grace, as the Bible

teaches: “For sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law but under grace” (Rom 6:14).

“Poverty and shame shall be to him who refuses instruction and correction, but he who heeds [*shamar*] reproof shall be honored (Prv 13:18 AMP).

It may be the most important Hebrew word in the Bible.

I consider it so important because it not only shows where our heart is, what our intentions are, how *authentic* we are, but how to stay open to the leading of the Holy Spirit.

I call it the *main breaker* of our heart. Most every modern home and building with electricity has a main breaker enclosed in a “breaker panel,” which also contains a separate breaker for each circuit in the building. These depend on the *main breaker*, which connects or disconnects the electricity to the entire breaker panel.

In chapter 15 I list eight areas of stewardship God expects of us, the “works” we’ll be held accountable for. Because while we are *saved by faith*, we’ll be *judged by our works*, which should follow naturally and spontaneously from our faith, as James brings out (Prv 24:12; Mt 16:27; 1 Cor 3:13–15; 2 Cor 5:10; Jas 2:14–26; Rv 2:23; 20:12–13).

So in the analogy of the breaker panel, each sub-breaker illustrates the spiritual energy and love that activate each one of these eight areas of our responsibility, enabling us to do it “from the heart,” and not legalistically, by “self-effort” or “dead works.” But the “main breaker” is *shamar*, our attentiveness, awareness, and expectancy of God’s leading as we “walk according to the Spirit” (Rom 8:1–2; Gal 5:16–25).

The eight areas are our (1) relationships, (2) local family of believers, (3) access to the needy, (4) job or daily assignment, (5) personal assets – knowledge, education, money, talents, spiritual gifts, (6) physical bodies, (7) cross or handicaps, (8) time.

It’s so easy to live day to day without the awareness of God’s presence and our responsibility to Him. Our main breaker is off, as though there’s nobody home, or we’re still in bed, sleeping when we’re supposed to be watching, waiting, and listening, praying “without ceasing” (1 Thes 5:17).

You may have been shocked when I said *shamar* may be the most important Hebrew word in the Bible, but hopefully it’s obvious now: our responsiveness to what God desires of us reveals the condition of our heart, which is why God chose David in place of Saul. But it goes even further, for God also chose David over Jonathan, as we saw in chapter 4.

Abiding in God's sovereign love

Why *shamar* is so important is very simple: The Fall disconnected us from God. There's nothing we can do of our own initiative to correct it, because our very will has been corrupted, like a computer virus that won't let the computer function normally or even turn on. The more we do apart from God, the deeper we dig the hole we're in. We're entirely dependent on God's mercy and grace to sovereignly pull us out of the pit.

And yet the entire Bible is written as though we ourselves are responsible to obey Him and keep [*shamar*] His commands. In the New Testament, especially! From John thirteen through fifteen, Jesus tells us nine times in various ways to *keep* his commandments. But in 15:9–10 He tells us how:

“As the Father loved Me, I also have loved you; abide [remain, continue] in My love. If you keep My commandments, you will abide [remain] in My love, just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide [remain] in His love” (cf. Jn 13:34).

And if that's not plain enough, try 1 John 4:7–8, “Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love.”

Wow – “does not know God”! This is how I measure my walk with God, not by those easy to love, by those hardest to love, perhaps because they disagree with me, don't like me, or cause me stress, worry, harm, or financial loss. Or have betrayed or tried to ruin me or my reputation with long range consequences, like getting me fired from my job or cheated me out of some opportunity or blessing.

Because God wants to forgive and love them through me, and the love they get from those they have wronged will be much more meaningful than the “love” they get from their friends (Mt 5:44–47; Lk 6:27–29; Rom 12:17–21; 1 Cor 13:7; 1 Pet 3:9).

God is not telling us to abide in his discipline or commands, but in His *love*. Only then will our “works” be both motivated by His love, and His love will be evident to others through our works. That's why Christianity is the “ideal religion,” because it's not a religion, but a relationship. “Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are My disciples” (Jn 13:35 NLT).

At the end of the first century, the church at Ephesus was a model church. Jesus sent this message to them: “I know your works, your labor, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars; and you have persevered

and have patience, and have labored for My name's sake and have not become weary.”

Now that church is “top of the line,” we’d think. “Nevertheless,” Jesus continued, “I have this against you, that you have left your first love. Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place – unless you repent” (Rv 2:4–5).

Notice how “abiding” relates to our discussion of “right and wrong” in chapter 2: “But the anointing which you have received from Him abides in you, and you do not need that anyone teach you; but as the same anointing teaches you concerning all things, and is true, and is not a lie, and just as it has taught you, you will abide in Him” (1 Jn 2:27).

This does not contradict other scriptures which show our need for the ministry of teaching, but rather that our *hearing* and *interpretation* must be Spirit-anointed, rather than intellectual. Seeing scripture logically instead of spiritually is often the reasons it is so easy to be controversial in matters of biblical doctrine, for the Greek word translated “doctrine” (*didache*) is actually the same word for “teaching” (Rom 12:7; Eph 4:11; Col 3:16; Tit 1:9; Heb 6:2; 13:9).

My brother’s keeper

The first mention of a subject often indicates its importance. The first word in which *shamar* occurs is Genesis 2:15, “Then the LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to tend and *keep* it.”

And the next two verses are God’s warning about disobedience and its cause: “And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, ‘Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.’”

In other words, our ability to *keep* His commandments depends on avoiding the “tree” that indicates self-reliance instead of living in *relationship* with God and the right “tree,” the Tree of Life (Gen 2:9; 3:22; Prv 3:18; 11:30).

The second time *shamar* appears is Genesis 3:24, “So He drove out the man; and He placed cherubim at the east of the garden of Eden, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to guard [*shamar*] the way to the tree of life.” The “tree of life” would finally be revealed through life “in His Son,” Jesus, not knowledge in itself (Jn 10:10; 1 Jn 5:11–12; 1 Cor 2).

This is the other aspect of the meaning of *shamar*: to guard, protect, watch, preserve. Which brings us to the third time the word appears, indicating its function in our relationships with one another: “Then the LORD said to Cain, ‘Where is Abel your brother?’ He said, ‘I do not know. Am I my brother’s keeper [*shamar*]?’”

This is precisely the relationship God expected of the “man after His own heart,” David, in regard to King Saul, even as Saul sought eagerly every day to assassinate him. It is the test Jonathan failed and why God chose David in his place. But to his credit and godly character, Jonathan knew God’s choice in David and kept encouraging him as he hid and fled from his wicked father, Saul (1 Sam 13:14; Acts 13:22; 1 Sam 18:3; 23:16).

As we saw in chapter four, the last time David confronted Saul, he spoke first to Saul’s army commander, Abner, who had been sleeping by Saul’s side with the army as Saul hunted David to kill him. Here’s what David told Abner, not realizing he spoke prophetically of Abner’s death:

“So David said to Abner, ‘Are you not a man? And who is like you in Israel? Why then have you not guarded [*shamar*] your lord the king? For one of the people came in to destroy your lord the king [speaking of Abishai, who urged David to kill Saul as he slept]. This thing that you have done is not good. As the LORD lives, you deserve to die, because you have not guarded [*shamar*] your master, the LORD’s anointed” (1 Sam 26:15–16).

Your labor is not in vain in the Lord (1 Cor 15:58).

This brings up the other side of *shamar*. For when David himself was about to slaughter all the males in wicked Nabal’s family, he complained in his anger, “Surely in vain I have protected [*shamar*] all that this fellow [Nabal] has in the wilderness, so that nothing was missed of all that belongs to him. And he has repaid me evil for good” (1 Sam 25:21).

The last two occurrences of *shamar* in the Old Testament are Malachi 3:7 and 14, where God reminds His people that they had not *kept* His “ordinances,” urging them to return to Him. For they had complained, as David did, saying, “It is useless to serve God; what profit is it that we have *kept* His ordinance, and that we have walked as mourners before the LORD of hosts?”

What “ordinances” is God referring to here? Specifically, the “tithe,” giving to God a tenth of one’s income.” As you read at the beginning of this chapter, my “battle” with depression and its cause was closely tied to my being “forced” to “give,” which nearly

drove me insane. What I would learn is that “keeping” God’s ordinances and laws is impossible without an intimate relationship with the only One able to keep them in and through us. Again, it’s all about “abiding,” “remaining” in Christ, as a branch lives off the vine (Jn 15).

At any rate, it should be obvious now that *shamar* is the first step in waiting for God to do whatever He wills to do in and through us. “Blessed is the man who listens to me, watching daily at my gates, waiting [*shamar*] at the posts of my doors. For whoever finds me finds life, and obtains favor from the LORD; but he who sins against me wrongs his own soul; all those who hate me love death” (Prv 8:34–36).

Yikes!

***Shamar* is the key to healing of the body.**

The biggest problem with praying for healing of our body is that sometimes “it works,” and sometimes it doesn’t. There are many books written about healing and how to receive it, and the various reasons why we may not, such as lack of genuine faith, failure to deal with sin in our lives, unforgiveness, disunity in relationships, ignorance of God’s promises on healing, distractions, and lack of focus or fervent, prolonged prayer with fasting.

However, we are complex beings, and when we feel we’ve covered all of these issues thoroughly, and still no answer, *shamar* is all that is left – waiting expectantly, day by day. Because when we question why we’re not healed after doing everything we know to do, we reveal our lack of faith, and that we may well be relying on our own efforts, or at least our own assessment of where we stand with God.

“Oh, how great are God’s riches and wisdom and knowledge! How impossible it is for us to understand His decisions and His ways. For who can know the LORD’s thoughts? Who knows enough to give Him advice? And who has given Him so much that He needs to pay it back? For everything comes from Him and exists by His power and is intended for His glory. All glory to Him forever! Amen” (Rom 11:33–36 NLT).

So then in *shamar*, we turn the matter over to a sovereign God, for our faith comes from Him anyway (Rom 12:3; Eph 2:8). And as we learn to *wait* on and for Him, His Spirit works in us to accomplish His purpose, beyond our limited understanding.

“As you do not know what is the way of the wind, or how the bones grow in the womb of her who is with child, so you do not know the works of God who makes everything” (Ecc 11:5).

This explains why some people are healed miraculously for “no reason” in our opinion, and we who have “tried so hard” to receive our healing seem to go unnoticed by God. So I repeat, when we think we “deserve” to be healed by following all the spiritual principles and rules of faith, and are disappointed when we’re not healed, it should be a huge red flag: we still don’t have genuine faith:

“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” (Jas 1:2–4).

“Even though the fig trees have no blossoms, and there are no grapes on the vines; even though the olive crop fails, and the fields lie empty and barren; even though the flocks die in the fields, and the cattle barns are empty, yet I will rejoice in the LORD! I will be joyful in the God of my salvation! The Sovereign LORD is my strength! He makes me as surefooted as a deer, able to tread upon the heights” (Hab 3:17–19a NLT).

This is the attitude from which faith springs – our hearts entirely directed toward the Lord, not “of ourselves.”

“So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God” (Rom 10:17; cf Mt 4:4; Dt 8:3).

Jeremiah 29:13 – Learning to Wait

2. *Damam* (H1826), *dumam* (noun, H1748) To be silent, be still, wait, be dumb, grow dumb (BDBG).

I place it second among these seven waiting words because it, like *shamar*, is so foundational to knowing and hearing God. It is waiting in dumb silence to let the awareness of our emptiness and depravity sink in, lest we interfere with God's plan through self-initiative. "For without Me you can do nothing" (Jn 15:5b)."

Long before God delivered me from my depression, I'd found this incredible jewel hidden in Lamentations three in one of my lowest pits. I had driven a doctor friend, at his request because he was old and losing his sight, to a Methodist retreat at Bridgewater College in Virginia.

The speakers, to me, were so boring, my depression plummeted to a crisis low. As one of the evening speakers *read* his sermon, I decided that as soon as he finished, I was going to find help through a phone call or a letter to a man of God, like Bob Mumford or Judson Cornwall, both of whom had influenced me profoundly in the past through their teaching.

When the speaker finished reading his sermon, he looked up and said these exact words: "If you're thinking of writing a letter or making a phone call, just look up to the One who hears and answers prayer."

I knew in that moment God had just given me a personal, intimate word straight from His mouth. The next day I met a friend attending the college who gave me notes titled "Waiting on God," by Walter Beuttler. There I found the jewel that became my ultimate super-antidepressant – Lamentations 3:1–42, esp. vv. 22–32.

I had never taken antidepressants because I'd become a "health nut" when I discovered that avoiding junk food eliminated the sinus agony that had stalked me most of my teen years. Eventually I found certain Bible passages that acted like antidepressant drugs, only much quicker, I assumed, since I'd never taken them. Five passages became my constant "companions" to keep me "sane" enough until God finally delivered me. They are Job 3, Psalm 22, 38, 88, and then Lamentations 3.

Just as different antidepressant drugs deal with specific areas in our brain chemistry, so these scriptures dealt with specific issues in my thinking that brought peace. And Lamentations three dealt with my need to “be silent, still, dumb,” so God can work (Is 64:4).

“I am silent before You; I won't say a word, for my punishment is from You. . . . When You discipline us for our sins, You consume like a moth what is precious to us. Each of us is but a breath. Interlude [Selah]. Hear my prayer, O LORD! Listen to my cries for help! (Ps 39:9, 11-12a NLT).

Around the age of 20 as an atheist I'd gone to a hypnotist in hopes he could use hypnosis to help me forget “everything I'd ever learned,” because my endless analyzing was “driving me crazy.” He refused, of course, saying it was impossible anyway. Now, ten years later, God had just personally given me a heavenly prescription, a therapeutic “tutorial” on waiting, designed to deal with my overactive mind, biblically known as “the carnal mind” (Rom 8:6-7).

Here it is, in part, Lamentations 3:24-29, “‘The LORD is my portion,’ says my soul [not drugs, alcohol, entertainment, sex, etc], ‘Therefore I hope [*yahal*] in Him!’ The LORD is good to those who wait [*qavah*] for Him, to the soul who seeks Him. It is good that one should hope [*yahiy*], from [*yahal*] and wait quietly [*damam*] for the salvation of the LORD. It is good for a man to bear the yoke in his youth. Let him sit alone and keep silent [*damam*] because God has laid it on him; Let him put his mouth in the dust – there may yet be hope [*tiqvah*].”

Notice more of our waiting words in addition to the blessing of reducing us to dumb silence – *dumam*! What neither the hypnotist nor the psychologists could do, God did, by dealing with the root problem, caused by the “Fall,” the “tree of the knowledge of good and evil.”

“Because the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be. So then, those who are in the flesh cannot please God” (Rom 8:7-8).

“But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Cor 2:14).

I'm looking at it now in hindsight. But at the time I had little awareness of why this passage in Lamentations 3 gave me so much peace and rest. I had a long way to go, but the Holy Spirit, our Teacher and Counselor, leads us gently, “grace for [more] grace,” “from faith to faith” (Jn 1:16; Rom 1:17).

These antidepressant passages offered temporary relief, like drugs, or in the same way one might offer cooked fish to a hungry person until he learns to catch and cook fish for himself. They “fed” me, but I had no idea why until I learned to “fish” for myself and then learned to “cook” what I “caught.” You’ll see as we progress through these waiting words.

Weaned

Around the same time, however, God began to deal with the *cause* of my depression in baby steps. And coincidentally He used the same word [*damam*], this time, from Psalm 131.

“LORD, my heart is not haughty, nor my eyes lofty. Neither do I concern myself with great matters, nor with things too profound for me. Surely I have calmed and quieted [*damam*] my soul, like a weaned child with his mother; like a weaned child is my soul within me. O Israel, hope [*yahal*] in the LORD from this time forth and forever.”

Don’t forget *shamar*, for without a serious intent to please God, I would have never realized God was using this psalm to deal with my lifetime problem with depression. But as I began to “wait on the Lord,” thinking about the meaning of “great matters or in things too high for me” (KJV, at the time), I began to gain insight into my problem.

I had known my perfectionism was related to trying to live up to the expectation of my parents, especially my mother, who talked about her brilliantly successful brothers. Two were missionaries to India (as she also had been, before she married Dad), and one was a multimillionaire in business who had once taught at Princeton. (In 1983 Butler College, one of Princeton’s six undergraduate residential colleges, was named after him.) Without realizing how it would affect me, Mother had made them my role models.

Then Dad talked about great men and women of God who made tremendous sacrifices in ministry and I continued to read their biographies as I got older. So they became my spiritual role models. But deep inside I knew I was neither as smart nor as dedicated, disciplined, or spiritual, and the sense of inadequacy ate away my identity until I felt God had no use for me, and furthermore, waited for an opportunity to ruin me in some way, once I proved I would never “overcome” (Rom 12:21; 1 Jn 2:13–14; 4:4; 5:4–5; Rv 2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:12, 21; 21:7).

Now years later, God had my attention: could my whole problem be simply that I was trying to be someone I was not

“called” to be, and felt so inadequate because I was trying to live on a level “too high for me”?

So over the next year or two, He began to “wean” me from these “highly spiritual” sources that fed my ego and intellect more than my true spiritual needs. First to go was a monthly “prayer retreat” where my wife and I heard the “greatest” Charismatic speakers in the nation. Then the popular Charismatic *New Wine Magazine*. Then a “Tape of the Month Club,” featuring the “best” teaching ministries.

I also listened constantly to “Scripture set to music” on my cassette “walkman” when not at work, and even at work if it was allowed, or the Bible on tape. I felt I had to be “learning” constantly, as I aspired to reach the spiritual heights I knew God required of me. So I let go of both of them, first the music, and finally the Bible tapes. It sounds easy and quick, but letting it all go one by one took place over a period of a year or two.

I was getting emptied – silent and dumb – like the ship Jonah had boarded when the storm came and the crew jettisoned their valuable cargo overboard. But I still had one last thing I would not give up, nor did I feel convicted about it: studying the Bible and spiritual books. That was a “no brainer”; how could God expect me to *not* study His Word and learn from those who knew it well?

“But [now] I am fearful lest that even as the serpent beguiled Eve by his cunning, so your minds may be corrupted *and* seduced from wholehearted *and* sincere *and* pure devotion to Christ” (2 Cor 11:3 AMP, bracket included).

3. *Sabar/shabar* (H7663), *seber* (noun, H7664) to inspect, examine, wait, hope, wait upon (BDBG). A mild form of expectant waiting as we learn to “tune in” to God and the voice of His Spirit

Being emptied, however, is only the beginning. God wants to fill us with Himself, restoring us to His likeness. So as He “weans” us of “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil,” the root of the Fall, He intends to “feed” us from “the tree of life” – if we’ll listen.

“The eyes of all look expectantly [*sabar*] to You, and You give them their food in due season. You open Your hand and satisfy the desire of every living thing.” “These all wait [*sabar*] for You, that You may give them their food in due season” (Ps 145:15–16; 104:27).

“Waiting on God to act can truly be one of the worst things we have ever done. One of the most exasperating aspects of God is His slowness to step in on our behalf.”¹

It is often easier to do almost anything than wait, when you have no idea what's going on "behind the scenes" in the spirit realm. The waiting-on-God form of prayer is no different. But it can also be the most intimate and fruitful aspect of prayer.

I've gone through all kinds of physical extremes in the work I do, like working with hot tar on a roof in the hot Florida sun in July when I'm drenched in sweat, my feet are burning, and I'm about to have a heat stroke if I don't get down quickly and lie on the grass under a shade tree and pour water on my head, besides drinking it. And hoping the hot tar kettle doesn't get too hot and blow up, burning down the house! (Not to mention almost losing my leg by a hot tar burn that got infected!)

Or digging a cave under a concrete bathroom floor to crawl in and cut away four inch cast iron piping with a powerful, seven inch angle grinder inches from my face, knowing that if it kicked back (which it had done years before, leaving a large scar on my abdomen), I'd get a "facelift," but not one my wife would appreciate - if I lived through it! Or hand dip 800 gallons of sewage from a septic tank into a huge hole I'd dug next to it.

I got a Bible college education to avoid "manual labor" and "spend [my] time teaching the Word of God." By now I should be pastoring some big church somewhere. What happened? But as you read through this book, you'll understand how much it had to do with the same problem Saul had. Failure to *wait . . . long enough!* (Acts 6:2; 2 Tim 4:2).

Because to lie down in pure comfort just for the privilege of tuning in to the voice of our Father and His Spirit is often more difficult, perplexing, and at times even agonizing, than all the above jobs combined. And if you're under a time constraint, waiting only increases the pressure, getting you alarmingly farther behind, increasing the torture! Which proves suffering is more mental than physical.

And that's why I feel for King Saul. What amazes me is that he did wait almost to the end of those seven days, when I've given up waiting after fifteen minutes when God didn't "say something" and I couldn't stand to "waste" any more time.

Update: Long after writing the above about how difficult *waiting* on God is, I experienced the perfect example. On April 6, 2020 I took my usual "quiet time" in the morning to "wait on the Lord" and feed in His Word, to "tune in" with my heart rather than legalistically "have devotions."

As I sat in silence, I thought of the roof job I had *waiting* for me. What finally got to me was the humiliation of knowing the person living under that roof would think I'm lazy, as though I'm sleeping in, rather than getting to work on his roof early, as any normal roofer does, and which I also do when I'm on a tighter schedule or facing rain in the afternoon. Well, my pride overcame my hunger for God's presence and I suddenly quit my quiet time to "get to work" and "look good in the eyes of the world."

If I'd taken the time I needed with God, He would have alerted me to the stupid and very dangerous thing I was about to do. For it is one of the main advantages of taking time to listen to Him before I go to work, especially with the kind of work I do. I have many stories that prove this – some, where God warned me about what would have literally killed or crippled me had I not listened. And others, like this one.

Well, I replaced the concrete or steel cutting blade I normally use on my "industrial duty," seven inch angle grinder, with a seven-inch carbide-tipped, 64-tooth wood cutting blade – without a guard! Anybody who knows what this is will feel his stomach knotting up in anticipation of what could happen. And it did!

As long as I pulled the blade away from its drag as I cut into the "built up roof" I was removing, I was safe. But it worked so well and saved so much time, I got slap-happy, and soon forgot the directional principle. Then as I was cutting around a plumbing vent, it kicked back around my foot, cutting through my boot, barely missing my big toe, and caught the back of my left ankle, almost cutting through the Achilles tendon. It took four months to heal and stop oozing liquid through the stitched cut, during which time I learned to walk again (and sleep!) – and finished the roof hobbling around on an *orthopedic* boot!

But I took it as a lesson that God had exposed my "Achilles heel" – my pride and ego – the root of the Fall! Our strongest, but most vulnerable tendon, as basketball players will attest to.

King Saul was no different. While he waited, seven days in obedience to the prophet Samuel, the 2,000 men he had with him, realizing they faced annihilation by the massive Philistine army, headed by thousands of chariots, were fleeing and hiding, until he had only 600 left. The situation was humanly *impossible*, a *suicide* mission, for sure! And Samuel had not come! (1 Sam 13–14)

But that is precisely why waiting was so vital. During that seven days he should have been reminding himself of Israel's recent history, when God refused to let Gideon face a similarly

massive army of Midianites with his 32,000 Israelite soldiers until he sent all but 300 of them home (Judg 7).

In fact the entire book of Judges, not long before King Saul, is story after story of God's miraculous military interventions in the face of imposing impossibilities. But only when His people turned wholeheartedly to Him in repentance and obedience . . . and then *waited* for His deliverance, that He alone would be glorified.

The story of Samson illustrates the supernatural power available even to one person, when his or her mind and heart are "in tune" with God, and how weak we become when temptation, distractions, and pride destroy our focus (Judg 13–16).

David's entire life, except for his lapse into sin, was built on his intimacy with God through waiting. And his sin could easily been avoided had he only remained in that spiritual union with God – his otherwise normal lifestyle (Ps 5:3; 40:1; 59:9, etc.).

Incidentally, he fell into sin while also on his roof. Go back and read what led to his "confidence in the flesh" (lack of *dumam*) in chapter three of this book and the chapter preceding David's "fall," 2 Samuel 10 (Phil 3:3).

"I will bless the LORD who has given me counsel; my heart also instructs me in the night seasons. I have set the LORD always before me; because He is at my right hand I shall not be moved" (Ps 16:7–8).

Two keys to waiting on God

a. Understanding our purpose. This is what *sabar* is all about. Knowing what we're waiting for gives a sense of meaning, and therefore removes the anxiety of wasted time.

(1) The overall purpose of waiting relates to the Fall when Adam chose to live by sense knowledge instead of spiritual communion with God. The Last Adam – Jesus – reset humanity by doing "nothing of Himself, but what He sees the Father do" (Gen 3:5-6; Jn 5:19; 1 Cor 15:45).

So waiting on God is actually turning the reins of control over to Him. And the reason it's so hard is that we've spent a lifetime living in the natural, earthly realm instead of the spiritual.

When Mary poured the expensive vial of perfume on Jesus, the disciples, led by Judas, considered it the waste of a year's wages because they saw it only in terms of earthly value. But she saw Jesus through heaven's eternal values, where relationship and character cannot be measured by any amount of wealth, and some will spend all their wealth to fill the emptiness that can only

be filled through relationship, beginning with God and continuing with people.

That's why I wrote the article, "Buy Real Estate in Heaven: Cheap Now; Priceless Later." It is the most unpopular article I've ever written, with almost no feedback from anybody. Because it has to be read with spiritual, not natural, eyes. I've placed it last in this book for anyone who may need the extra background and preparation.

"But as it is written: 'Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him. But God has revealed them to us through His Spirit. For the Spirit searches all things, yes, the deep things of God. For what man knows the things of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so no one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God' (1 Cor 2:9-11).

(2) Another main purpose for waiting relates to our second waiting word, *dumam*, where we get quiet and dumb enough (no reaction - Ps 38:13-15) to let God get a word in edgeways. It's also expressed in one of the main waiting verses that deals with the Fall of man and its cure: Isaiah 30:18, where God waits until we get *reduced* to zero. We'll see the complete verse in our fourth waiting word, *hakah*.

(3) A third major purpose for waiting is what I call *experiencing our own incarnation*. I tell inmates that their weakness and failures carry incredible value if only they will *take time to feel it* instead of medicating it through chemicals or avoiding it through distractions. It's rooted in the endless attempt to replace discomfort with pleasure, and substitute role playing and hypocrisy for transparency and vulnerability.

But we all do it to some extent, no matter how "spiritual" we are, or the apostle Paul would not have needed his "thorn in the flesh" to keep him from pride. We love the approval of others, especially our peers, which is why waiting on God to "examine" ourselves, or rather, to expose ourselves to the Light of the Holy Spirit and the Word is so critically important (2 Cor 12:7).

"Search me [thoroughly], O God, and know my heart! Try me, and know my thoughts! And see if there is any wicked *or* hurtful way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting" (Ps 139:23-24 AMP; cp Heb 4:12-13).

Shocking discovery

When I stopped constantly reading spiritual books and learned to wait on God, two major things happened to me that completely

changed my life and led to the victory and liberty I had been reading *about* for so many years, but never experienced it.

First, I discovered I was no different from anybody else, including the people I'd always felt I was better than, because of my "superior knowledge." Second, I experienced *genuine* heart-hunger for God and His Word in place of intellectual curiosity and craving for knowledge as an end in itself (tree of knowledge). This led to *feeding* on the Word instead of reading it for information (head-knowledge).

This twofold metamorphosis set me free from my prideful attitude toward others, and I fell in love with everybody because I could at last "understand" them. But I would never have experienced the benefit and blessing of this transformation without allowing the Holy Spirit to *interpret* what was going on inside me. Because without seeing it through His eyes, the shredding of my religious mask would have increased my depression dramatically, if that could have been possible.

In other words, our need for acceptance and approval from people (Achilles heel) is a feeble and sickly substitute for the glory of knowing God in the face or our utter depravity. More on this later, because it's what changed my life from hell to heaven on earth.

This three-fold purpose – transfer from the natural to the spiritual, being reduced to total dependence on God, and having our hypocrisy exposed so we can face the *real* world – paves the way to *knowing the Lord Jesus Christ* and His ways, as well as *knowing one another, through our spirit, rather than our flesh* (Ps 103:7; Jn 2:24; Phil 3:10).

"So we have stopped evaluating others from a human point of view. At one time we thought of Christ merely from a human point of view. How differently we know Him now! This means that anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun!" (2 Cor 5:16–17 NLT).

b. Timing

"To everything there is a season, A time for every purpose under heaven: . . . I have seen the God-given task with which the sons of men are to be occupied. He has made everything beautiful in its time" (Ecc 3:1, 10–11).

In 1970 after hearing that Judson Cornwall had set aside his books in order to hear from God, I tried it. But it was more than I could handle, and I quickly gave up before I panicked without my reading "drug." I have friends who vow they are quitting

Facebook; it lasts for a day or two. So although I don't do social media other than email, I can relate.

I had also made attempts to "seek God with all my heart," but because my heart was not really in it, I quit after a short time. However, on that day in April, 1975, I knew my life and ministry were over if I didn't hear from God, especially now that my terror over the simple act of writing a small check for missionaries had exposed me as a religious hypocrite who tried to do holy things with an unholy heart.

"So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy" (Rom 9:16 ESV).

It was the right timing, but if I had known it was going to take a year and a half to get an answer, I may never have started. I would have seen the "waste" only from the natural realm, rather than the heavenly (Mk 14:3-6).

Timing is vital to getting answers for ourselves as well as ministry to others, as we learn to cooperate with the heart and Spirit of God. Which again, is why Proverbs 8:34-35 (*shamar*) is so important, especially when combined with the other words for waiting.

How encouraging to realize that the healing, miracle, or answer to prayer we don't seem to be getting may be only a matter of waiting for God's timing, And He is at the same time waiting for us, which brings us to our fourth level of waiting, and Isaiah 30:18.

4. *Chakah* or *hakah* (H2442) To wait, wait for, tarry, long for. Here we've moved more specifically into waiting over a period of time, as indicated by its usage in scripture.

"The waters covered their enemies; there was not one of them left. Then they believed His words; they sang His praise. They soon forgot His works; they did not wait [*hakah*] for His counsel, but lusted exceedingly in the wilderness, and tested God in the desert" (Ps 106:11-14).

God had given them *manna*, meaning "what is it," and designed to alert them to God's provision so they would learn to listen to Him. "So He humbled you, allowed you to hunger, and fed you with manna which you did not know nor did your fathers know, that He might make you know that man shall not live by bread alone; but man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the LORD" (Dt 8:3; Ex 16).

The passage above (Ps 106:11-14) gives us perhaps the major clue to how the manna would become a word from God's

mouth, and why all the adults, except Caleb and Joshua, failed to *hear* it. They didn't "hear" because they didn't take *time* to stop and think about it, to meditate in God's faithfulness, to absorb spiritually what God was doing for them every morning when He gave them food, of all places, *in the desert!*

I read or heard somewhere that it would take a continuous line of semi-trucks or railroad cars to supply two or three million people with food in the desert. Imagine the city of Philadelphia or Brooklyn, N.Y., with its food supply trucks running in and out of the city day and night to keep its thousands of grocery stores in stock. But God did it by a supernatural supply of a very simple food, perfectly balanced nutritionally, every morning, enough for the day, and on Friday, enough for two days, because it would not be there on the Sabbath. It *had* to be a daily miracle from God (Ex 16).

When we take time to stop and remember how God has provided for us in the past, or meditate on how He did it for His people in Bible times, it encourages us and renews our faith (1 Chr 16:12; Ps 77:10–11; 78:11; 111:4).

It's not that easy to let go.

"And we desire that each one of you show the same diligence to the full assurance of hope until the end, that you do not become sluggish, but imitate those who through faith and patience inherit the promises" (Heb 6:11–12).

The following verse indicates that waiting is not that easy, by *God's* choice, because it involves the transfer of our "natural mind" to "the mind of the Spirit" (Rom 8:27; 1 Cor 2:14; Eph 4:23).

"And I will wait [*hakah*] on the LORD, Who hides His face from the house of Jacob; and I will hope [*qavah*] in Him" (Is 8:17). God hides His face from us when we're not ready, as Isaiah 30:18 explains:

"Therefore the LORD will wait [*hakah*] that He may be gracious to you; and therefore He will be exalted, that He may have mercy on you. For the LORD is a God of justice; blessed are all those who wait [*hakah*] for Him."

It's tempting to get impatient when God doesn't respond to our need, but our impatience confirms *why* He has to wait: we're not reduced to total dependence on Him. For He "acts for the one who waits [*hakah*] for Him" (Is 64:4).

This implies "an attitude of earnest expectation and confident hope," which is what the daily manna should have produced in

the hearts of God's people in that "great and terrible wilderness" (Dt 1:19; 8:15). (TWOT #645)

When Habakkuk felt something was terribly wrong with the way God was using the wicked Babylonians to chastise His people, he didn't develop an "attitude" toward God about it or deaden his pain with alcohol, but determined to get alone to seek His face for an answer. And God not only gave it to him but His answer became the basis for the entire New Testament (please read Prv 23:29-35; 31:1-5).

"For the vision is yet for an appointed time; but at the end it will speak, and it will not lie. Though it tarries, wait [*hakah*] for it; because it will surely come, it will not tarry. Behold the proud [wrong attitude], his soul is not upright in him; but the just shall live by his faith" (Hab 2:3-4; Rom 1:17).

Notice how these verses perfectly match Isaiah 30:18, showing us *why* God waits (*hakah*) for us: He waits until we are totally broken, emptied, and He alone is exalted (Jer 48:11-12).

And when He is exalted, we worship Him, even when circumstances seem hopeless, which is how the book of Habakkuk concludes. "Even though the fig trees have no blossoms, and there are no grapes on the vines; even though the olive crop fails, and the fields lie empty and barren; even though the flocks die in the fields, and the cattle barns are empty, yet I will rejoice in the LORD! I will be joyful in the God of my salvation! The Sovereign LORD is my strength! He makes me as surefooted as a deer, able to tread upon the heights" (3:17-19 NLT).

What really moves God

Isaiah 30:19 hints at the final product of our waiting: "For the people shall dwell in Zion at Jerusalem; you shall weep no more. He will be very gracious to you at the sound of your cry; when He hears it, He will answer you."

The goal is "Zion at Jerusalem." If I see it only as the literal city of Jerusalem, I won't see the deeper meaning, for Zion and Jerusalem are often used to indicate God's family knit together in unity, as in Psalm 133; and that psalm is 14th in 15 "psalms of degrees," the 15th being spiritual warfare - standing by *night* in the sanctuary (Eph 6:10ff).

"But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven, to God the Judge of all, to the spirits of just men made perfect" (Heb 12:22-23; cf Gal 4:26).

Jesus said that if we won't forgive others, God won't forgive us. This will block our prayer of faith, which could otherwise move mountains (Mk 11:23-26; cp 1 Pet 3:7).

Read these passages to see a link between God's family knit together in unity and His second coming for His Bride, His Church: Ps 48, 50, 102:16; Jn 17, Rv 21:2-10.

However, waiting, enduring long enough for God's grace is not about chronological time, but "time" outside our time/space dimension. For example, 1 Corinthians 2:9 on the surface might seem to apply to when we get to heaven. But it actually refers to a "quantum leap" out of "time," where we experience it right now in the realm of the Spirit.

"But as it is written: 'Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things God has prepared for those who love Him.' But God has revealed them to us through His Spirit." (1 Cor 2:9-10a).

Paul is quoting Isaiah 64:4 (in the Greek Septuagint translation), which brings it into our *hakah* perspective. "For since the beginning of the world men have not heard nor perceived by the ear, nor has the eye seen any God besides You, Who acts [works] for the one who waits [*hakah*] for Him."

They waited, in Old Testament times for millennia until these "things" were "revealed" by the Spirit and now we may partake of them "freely," unless we're not ready spiritually. And so we continue to *hakah* (Lk 10:24).

How long can you wait?

Daniel 12:12 is one of the most difficult verses to understand, and there is a variety of interpretation to explain these 45 extra days beyond the 1290 days in the previous verse. "Blessed is he who waits [*hakah*], and comes to the one thousand three hundred and thirty-five days." (Dan12:12).

But in keeping with the meaning of *hakah*, combining endurance with attitude, I see a clear relationship with verse 10, "Many shall be purified, made white, and refined, but the wicked shall do wickedly; and none of the wicked shall understand, but the wise shall understand."

The wise will understand because they have waited (*hakah*) to the point of the brokenness for which God is *waiting* (*hakah*) (Ps 25:9; 51:17; Is 57:15; 66:2; Mt 24:13; Lk 10:21; 21:19; Jas 4:6).

If you "understand" this, you'll also understand the last use of *hakah* in the Old Testament (Zeph 3:8), where the righteous *wait*

until it is *time* to rain destruction on the wicked. Which answers also to 2 Corinthians 10:6, “and being ready to punish all disobedience when your obedience is fulfilled.”

At the end of my year and a half waiting in 1975–6, when scriptural truths God had been “revealing” as I *waited* finally came together, I suddenly “broke through” an invisible barrier into a realm where everything that had before depressed me, I now saw filled with incredible meaning. I called it “heaven on earth,” and I lived in that glory for an entire year.

But to maintain it takes more “waiting,” which has become a continual daily challenge. As we progress through this waiting study, perhaps we will “understand.” I say *we*, because that’s part of the answer – we’re in this struggle together!

1., (R.T. Kendall, “When You’re Tired of Waiting on God,” Spirit Led Woman, Charisma Media, April 2017 p.29).

Jeremiah 29:13 D-day – Deliverance

5. *Yachal* or *yah̄al* (H3176) and *tohelet* (noun, H8431) to wait, hope, expect, tarry

If *hakah* is waiting for God to “work” behind the scenes, both in circumstances and on our attitude, the emphasis in *yah̄al* is on the attitude itself – “used of ‘expectation, hope,’” and is “closely linked with ‘faith, trust’ and results in ‘patient waiting.’” It is the word most translated in the Greek by *elpis/elpizo*, the word (noun/verb) for hope in the New Testament (TWOT #859).

“As such it is directed towards God. ‘O Israel, hope in the Lord, for with the Lord there is lovingkindness (Heb *hesed*), and with him is abundant redemption’ (Ps 130:7). . . . However, no greater testimony to such confident expectation is given than when Job cries out, ‘Though he slay me, I will hope [*yah̄al*] in him. Nevertheless, I will argue my ways before him’ (Job 13:15).” (TWOT, #859)

When connected with worship, it is an “active” form of waiting. “But I will hope (*yah̄al*) continually, and will praise You yet more and more” (Ps 71:14; also 52:9; 65:1). We who are justified by faith “rejoice in hope [*elpis*] of the glory of God” (Rom 5:2b).

It is the word used in 1 Samuel 10:8, which pinpoints King Saul’s failure. “You shall go down before me to Gilgal; and surely I will come down to you to offer burnt offerings and make sacrifices of peace offerings. Seven days you shall wait [*yah̄al*], till I come to you and show you what you should do.”

Saul waited in *anxiety*, oblivious to his attitude problem. No wonder he lost his *patience* waiting for Samuel. For in chapter 15 when he disobeyed a second time by sparing Agag and “the best of the sheep and the oxen, to sacrifice to the LORD,” Samuel saw through his hypocrisy, calling it “rebellion” and “stubbornness,” as we saw in chapter two (1 Sam 15:15–23).

Who could have predicted that the humble man God anointed to be king and equipped him a prophetic gift would end up ordering the massacre all God’s priests because of the head priest’s involvement with David’s escape from Saul’s continuous attempts to assassinate him, then seeking counsel from a witch the day before he took his own life? (1 Sam 10, 15, 21, 22, 28, 31).

All because he had never learned the value of humbly waiting for God's strength and wisdom.

Job's secret

One of the verses that pulls me through my personal temptation to despair over the perfectionism that has hampered me all my life is Job 14:14b, "All the days of my hard service I will wait [*yahal*], till my change comes." It is Job's attitude of expectant waiting that opened the door to the intermittent flow of divine revelation between his lapses into doubt and complaining, eventually leading to the major breakthrough when God Himself spoke (Job 38-41).

I was actually proud of my perfectionism as a pre-teen before I saw how severely it would limit me as an adult. So Job 14:14 gives me enough "hope" to keep walking, though limping, like Jacob after his breakthrough encounter with God in Genesis 32. Which will bring us to our sixth word (*qavah*) in Hosea 12:6.

It reminds me once again of Lamentations three, with its three different waiting words in three verses, 24 through 29, including *yahal*, like three "active ingredients" in the best anti-depressant on the market, until the cure is found. And verse 21 adds another *yahal*, setting the tone for the entire section: "But this I recall, therefore have I *hope* and *expectation*" (AMP).

6. *Qavah* (H6960) and *tiqvah* (noun form, H8615) are more intense: to wait or look eagerly for. "It means enduring patiently in confident hope that God will decisively act for the salvation of His people" (TWOT, #1994).

"To await with the notion of holding on strongly; and during the time becoming wound together with the object of the waiting."¹

This word works best under greater pressure. The first use of *qavah* as *wait* is Genesis 49:18, "I have *waited* for your salvation, O LORD." Whatever Jacob meant by it, he uttered it in the middle of his prophecies to his twelve sons and two grandsons regarding the future of their descendants, especially after his word to Dan that he would "be a serpent by the way, a viper by the path, that bites the horse's heels so that its rider shall fall backward."

I adopted this degree of *waiting* (Genesis 49:18) for my own encouragement when everything around me seemed hopeless, and all I had left was God. It's another reason I never needed to medicate my pain with drugs: all these waiting words gave me *hope* in God alone.

“Indeed, let no one who waits (*qavah*) on You be ashamed.” “Wait (*qavah*) on the LORD; be of good courage, and He shall strengthen your heart; wait (*qavah*), I say, on the LORD!” (Ps 25:3a; 27:14).

Many times when I faced a serious crisis, had no answer, couldn't seem to pray or even read the Bible, and all I could do was silently wait, I'd find in Psalm 130 the strength to hold on minute by minute, even hour by hour, until peace, if not the answer, would return.

“I wait (*qavah*) for the LORD, my soul waits (*qavah*), and in His word I do hope (*yahal*). My soul *waits* [not a Hebrew word, but implied] for the Lord more than those who watch (*shamar*) for the morning – yes, more than those who watch (*shamar*) for the morning. O Israel, hope (*yahal*) in the LORD; for with the LORD there is mercy, and with Him is abundant redemption. And He shall redeem Israel from all his iniquities” (vv. 5–8).

Obviously God has given us these hope-filled waiting words to hold us together while He works behind the scenes, both in us, and in the difficulty we face. And also to keep us from resorting to “other gods” – what “satisfies” only temporarily but fails to deal with the real problem. God has given us these beautiful scriptural “antidepressants” so abundantly!

“And it will be said in that day: “Behold, this is our God; we have waited (*qavah*) for Him, and He will save us. This is the LORD; we have waited (*qavah*) for Him; we will be glad and rejoice in His salvation” (Is 25:9).

It is another of the keys to Job's perseverance that led him, eventually, to the answer he “longed for”: “Oh, that I might have my request, that God would grant me the thing that I long for (*tiqvah*)! (Job 6:8). And of David also: “My soul, wait silently (*damam*) for God alone, for my expectation (*tiqvah*) is from Him” (Ps 62:5).

Waiting for renewal

The most well-known verse in the Bible about waiting, set to more than one musical version for modern worship, is Isaiah 40:31. And it appears in a context of human weakness and failure:

“He gives power to the weak, and to those who have no might He increases strength. Even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fall, but those who wait (*qavah*) on the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint” (vv. 29–31).

Again, this word appears in my favorite “old standby,” Lamentations 3:22–32. “The LORD is good to those who wait (*qavah*) for Him, to the soul who seeks Him” (3:25).

But it also gave me the willingness, even the desire, as I realized how profoundly my “self” lay at the root of my depression and anxiety, to deeply humble myself, to “put [my] mouth in the dust – there may yet be hope” (*tiqvah*) (3:29).

And once again, we return to Hosea 12:3–6, where Jacob’s history and name-changing wrestling match with God is “updated” to apply to us on a daily basis: “So you, by the help of your God, return; observe [*shamar*] mercy and justice, and wait [*qavah*] on your God continually.”

Psalms 40:1–3 records David’s major breakthrough as a result of this kind of intense waiting. “I waited [*qavah*] patiently [*qavah*] for the LORD; and He inclined to me, and heard my cry. He also brought me up out of a horrible pit, out of the miry clay, and set my feet upon a rock, and established my steps. He has put a new song in my mouth – praise to our God; many will see it and fear, and will trust in the LORD.”

Notice the double emphasis. *Young’s Literal Translation* renders that phrase, “I have diligently expected Jehovah.” The “Rock” that “established [his] steps” and gave him “a new song” birthed David into an experience a thousand years ahead of his time, as I mentioned earlier, but it bears repeating:

“Sacrifice and offering You did not desire; my ears You have opened. Burnt offering and sin offering You did not require. Then I said, ‘Behold, I come; in the scroll of the book it is written of me. I delight to do Your will, O my God, and Your law is within my heart’” (Ps 40:6–8).

The writer of Hebrews quoted this passage (10:5–9) to show that Christ had fulfilled the Levitical sacrifices through His own obedience in the “body” God “prepared” for Him, putting the law in our hearts as we identify with Him (v.16; Rom 6; Gal 2:20; Col 1:27; 2:10; Heb 2:14–18).

Psalms 40:1–3 became my own experience. For the “horrible pit” in Hebrew is a pit of “noise and destruction.” It accurately pinpointed the cause of my depression – the destructive noise of self-condemnation from Satan, “the accuser of our brethren, who accused [me] before our God day and night” (Rv 12:10).

When God set me free, my “new song” was laughter and joy that stayed with me, as I said, for an entire year before I settled down to “normal,” but without the depression.

“By His divine power, God has given us everything we need for living a godly life.” And these powerful Hebrew words show us how to access it! (2 Pet 1:3).

7. *Chul/chiyl* or *hul/hil* (H2342) to twist, whirl, dance, writhe, fear, tremble, travail, be in anguish and pain.

This is the final stage or outcome of these waiting words that bring us to the travail that births in us God’s plan and purpose. In Old Testament verses it supports New Testament passages in which God warns us to prepare and be ready for His coming.

“For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God. . . . For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now. Not only that, but we also who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body” (Rom 8:19, 22–23; cf Lk 21:36; Rv 12:2).

One of my favorite psalms, part of which I memorized in my youth, is Psalm 37, which gives great comfort, especially when evil people prosper at the expense of the godly. But verse seven, where two waiting words, *damam* and *hul*, are perhaps the key to the whole psalm, and in most translations are rendered, “rest in the Lord [*damam*] and wait patiently [*hul*] for Him,” might be seen as an understatement to what *hul* really says. The Amplified reads, “Be still *and* rest in the Lord; wait for Him, *and* patiently stay yourselves upon Him” (37:7a).

Keil and Delitzsch commentary adds insight: *hul* in this verse signifies “to be in a state of tension, to wait,” the “inward gathering of one’s self together in hope intently directed towards God”; and *damam*, denoting “resignation, i.e., a quiet of mind which rests on God, renounces all self-help, and submits to the will of God.”

In the context of the prosperity of the wicked, especially when “the wicked plots against the just, and gnashes at him with his teeth” (v. 12), it takes more than normal waiting; it takes “labor” and “travail” to overcome fear, anger, resentment, and a sense of God’s abandonment, to *persevere* until “the wicked shall be no more; indeed, you will look carefully for his place, but it shall be no more” (v. 10).

How valuable is this truth during times of political tension when nobody seems to have an answer, things only get worse, and there are plenty of “politicians” to blame – even God, it would seem. Yet He has allowed it, “subjecting to futility” His creation in

order to produce that “travail” in us that will bring to birth His purpose (Rom 8:20).

“As a woman with child is in pain [*hul*] and cries out in her pangs, when she draws near the time of her delivery, so have we been in Your sight, O LORD” (Is 26:17).

My last battle

During the last few weeks of my Jeremiah 29:13 seeking time in 1976, our closest friend in the city began calling my wife every day warning her to do something about my not working, although I still preached at the church I pastored. He constantly reminded her of 1 Timothy 5:8, “But if any provide not for his own, and especially for those of his own house, he hath denied the faith and is worse than an infidel” (KJV).

Each day when I came home, she would be upset and in tears, telling me about his call and how negligent I was as a husband and father hiding away all day in my car. Both were doing what they felt from the Lord was their obligation to save my family from the “terrible deception” I’d succumbed to, with no end in sight. We survived on cabbage someone regularly gave us, and beet leaves from her brother’s garden, along with fish he caught.

And miraculously, someone with no idea of our financial problem or my “indolence,” who didn’t attend church anywhere, began giving us his tithing money (ten percent of his weekly income) regularly (Lev 27:30).

But God used the increased pressure to elevate my “waiting” and “seeking” to an even more intense level. Because for months I had already been so desperate, I didn’t have the patience to drive three miles to the church where I could have been more comfortable, along with the convenience of a bathroom, but instead drove to a nearby space to park, crawled to the back seat of my 1971 VW “bus” (van), and sat there for six to eight hours daily, battling depression while I *waited intensely* (*hul*) for some sense of direction of where to read in the Bible.

For I no longer had my spiritual books and Bible commentaries to feed my intellect and make me feel useful and important. I was past *empty* and needed God Himself, like an addict withdrawing from heroin “cold turkey.”

But every day God was faithful, for eventually I’d sense where to read and end up with just enough insight – a “word from the mouth of God” – to give me relief from the depression and the anger I knew was the beginning of insanity (Dt 8:3; Mt 4:4).

Two things would trigger an insane rage: (1) trying to “force myself” to pray. Prayer had once been the backbone of my walk with God, for I’d “pray the Word,” reminding God of His promises and lay claim to them. Besides, that’s what some of the books I’d read on prayer said, and I not only agreed, but applied it with great fervor at times.

But I had no idea that for years my fasting and prayer were not really from my heart, but role-modeling the great men and women of God I’d read about, like Praying Hyde and Reese Howells, two of the greatest prayer intercessors in modern Church history. And G. C. Bevington, whose book, *Remarkable Incidents and Modern Miracles through Prayer and Faith* is filled with his experiences of waiting on God for as long as nine days in total silence for a miraculous breakthrough. Absolutely thrilling to read, but *impossible* to role-play. Just ask me!

In the early 1970s I had read Watchman Nee’s three volume *The Spiritual Man*, in which Nee outlines the ingredients of what it means to be “spiritual” as opposed to “natural” or “soulish.” When a friend told me he’d also read it and how important it was, I knew I had to read it again.

As I started to read, I felt the Spirit say, clearly, *No! No!* So I immediately answered, “I am going to read it and I’ll accept the consequences.” (Incredible! I’m shocked at my rebellion and stubbornness, like King Saul, but now you know why it took so long for me to listen and obey.)

The consequences? I believe this marks the time, soon after, that my depression morphed into rage – trying to be “spiritual” by following Nee’s principles by willpower, motivated by ego. “So then it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy” (Rom 9:16; cf 1 Pet 5:5; Jas 6:4; cp Rom 8:6–8).

But it wasn’t until God “weaned” me from “things too high for me” that I realized all this hard work amounted to “dead works” and produced the *anger*, like a cancer gone wild inside me. For now when I tried to pray, it would immediately trigger an anger reaction, and instead of praying, I’d start what I call rage-cursing – in private, of course.

Not a soul had a clue this pastor was anything but a kind, faithful “preacher of righteousness.” My wife also had not the slightest hint of my private cursing tantrums, or she may have realized I wasn’t being “lazy” but *desperate!*

2. The other thing that triggered anger was anything I’d see, usually while driving my car (alone) that wasn’t “perfect,” like the design of a sign, landscape, or even the front of a building, or if I

suspected any lack of integrity by the appearance of a business or its advertising,

I'd suddenly start cursing, shouting, and screaming, pulling my hair and pounding my fist on the dashboard of my VW. And I had never cursed or even used slang all my life, for Mother had taught us kids to avoid using slang words which are a substitute for God's name, like gosh, gee, golly; or darn, a substitute for damn, and heck for hell.

And it wasn't that I was bottling up the need to use these words, but that full blown curse words – except the use of God's name – now became the only means I found to vent my pent up rage at having to fast, pray, and live the perfect self-sacrificing life, which included *giving* to missionaries I knew lived better than we did. For I'd restricted my wife's grocery shopping to the bare minimum so we could "give to missions," and made her give, anonymously, her entire bi-weekly salary from school teaching, to missions.

Nor was it my lack of sincerity in praying and doing good works, for it always gave me comfort to know I was blessing others. Rather it was that the energy I put into these activities far exceeded my genuine compassion and concern.

For I did not understand people in their human weakness any more than I understood myself. And the same high standard I expected from others and from myself but failed to see, produced an internal furnace of confusion, which had boiled into rage. I would eventually have ended in a straight jacket in a padded cell at Butner, the North Carolina state mental institution.

That is, if I didn't finally succeed in ending my life first. For every day I imagined the most violent way I could kill myself, like smashing my head against a granite wall until my brains splashed out, or blowing my head off with a sawed off shotgun (the buckshot spreads quickly out of a short gun barrel and leaves much more devastation than a bullet hole). This is the degree, to a small extent, by which I hated myself with such intense violence.

Romans seven!

Finally in the middle of September, 1976, sitting in the back of my VW bus, the last pieces of the theological puzzle came together. Romans seven became the key that bridged Romans six and eight, which begins with, "There is therefore now no condemnation." This would begin to give some relief, until I read the rest of the verse, "who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit" (8:1).

It always backfired, throwing me into more condemnation, justifying my self-hatred, because I could never seem to master walking “according to the Spirit.”

When I caught a hint of the answer in Romans 3:19, which explains that the law had only one purpose, not to tell us to *do it*, but to make us *guilty* for *not* doing it, I knew somehow I had missed this critical point in all my previous Bible studies.

Romans four seemed to be the answer, for Paul takes the whole chapter to explain that Abraham’s *faith* was counted for righteousness, not his works.

I memorized the chapter, for it replaced my Old Testament “antidepressants,” offering something those old standbys didn’t. They helped because I could identify with the writers in their desolation as they *hoped* and *waited* for God. But Romans four went beyond hope, which is future. This chapter speaks of *faith*, which is *present!* It is the *answer* those saints of old waited and longed for (Job 3, Ps 22, 38, 88, Lam 3).

“For I tell you that many prophets and kings have desired to see what you see, and have not seen it, and to hear what you hear, and have not heard it” (Lk 10:24).

But I was a *New Testament believer!* *What was wrong with my faith?* Romans four was dead on, I knew: for it was now quite obvious I was undermining my faith, measuring it by my *performance* – works!

Although I saw my problem, I still could not grasp the mystery of how to “walk according to the Spirit” if we simply quit *working* at it. Why was my *faith* not “working” spontaneously and naturally? “For sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law but under grace” (Rom 6:14).

How can I explain in a few paragraphs what took me most of that year to see it come together in the most incredible masterpiece of wisdom that all my years of searching in psychology and philosophy never came close to finding? Nor even in all the theology and deeper life books I’d read, though Watchman Nee’s *Normal Christian Life* comes close.

Yet Nee never once mentions the key verses that actually pinpointed the answer I needed (7:15–20). Perhaps it is because the very verses that set me gloriously free, also lured me into the most serious mistakes – in the name of *freedom* – I’ve ever made, that turned my life in a totally different direction, impossible to undo. In that sense, it would have been better to live “under the law.” Except that “the law,” the very teaching of Jesus about total

self-sacrifice in His “Sermon on the Mount” (Mt 5–7), had already “killed me” (Rom 7:11).

“He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me”; “You are My friends if you do whatever I command you”; “Whoever commits sin also commits lawlessness, and sin is lawlessness. . . . Whoever abides in Him does not sin. Whoever sins has neither seen Him nor known Him” (Jn 14:21; 15:14; 1 Jn 3:4, 6).

That’s *New Testament* “law,” Jesus Himself upgrading the Old Testament. Yet He clearly revealed *how* it “works”: “I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing” (Jn 15:5).

But somehow I was not “childlike” enough to grasp it in its beauty and simplicity. It took Paul’s breakdown of how in Romans seven, the law produces the “death” that “baptism” symbolizes in Romans six (Lk 10:21).

That’s covered in the first half of chapter seven, which I’d known and taught – in theory. But it was the last half of the chapter that after months of analyzing and comparing with many other scriptures to see how God could let us get away with it, that finally sank in and made sense of the last verse:

“I thank God – through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, with the mind I myself serve the law of God, but with the flesh the law of sin” (7:25).

That is what liberated me – the “freedom” to “serve the law of God” with my mind, while “putting to death,” *in that same spiritual mindset*, “the law of sin” in my flesh. It has nothing to do with performance or works, initially, but with a mindset “in Christ” (Romans 6) that will lead to the kind of faith that will produce works. Then I could honestly and “legally” say, in agreement with God’s Word: “Now if I do what I will not to do, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me” (Rom 7:20).

“For those who live according to the flesh set their *minds* on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. for to be carnally *minded* is death, but to be spiritually *minded* is life and peace” (Rom 8:5–6).

Although I lived in this glory cloud of “liberty” for more than a year, it led to those hasty decisions (failure to *wait long enough to tune in spiritually – shamar!*) even in the face of God’s direct word of warning to me. I was so liberated and thrilled about my new “revelation,” I’d overlooked its entire dependence on “abiding” and “remaining” in Christ, the True Vine. No wonder I misused my newfound freedom (Jn 15:1ff).

“For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another” (Gal 5:13 ESV).

Glory in the midst of pain

But to conclude my story: When I came home that September day in 1976, light as a feather, I immediately began driving from business to business in search of a job, when suddenly I felt God tell me to go home, because I’d find a job waiting for me. When I went home, the phone rang, and God gave me the best job I’d ever had, during which I was free to meditate in the Word, wait on God, and memorize Scripture.

After God delivered me, I enjoyed “a new song” for an “entire year,” like “heaven on earth,” as I mentioned earlier. I experienced an abundance of “holy laughter” before it ever became popular among Charismatics. But until I re-read what I had written in the previous paragraph, I had not realized it was due to this job, where my mind was free to meditate on God while I worked, painting the metal frame around billboards and cutting bushes in front of them, and later as a “bill poster,” brushing on, like wallpaper, the pre-glued advertising sheets.

The job had its challenges, however. For on the day I was hired, my boss also hired a 19 year old, and two weeks later, a 23 year old, and made me their “foreman” because, at 33, I was their senior.

But the two teamed up against me. They’d jump out of the truck and quickly begin painting the bottom half of the metal trim as I unloaded the ladder and then painted the top half. When they finished way ahead of me, I’d paint over their missed places while they sat in the truck and make fun of me. If I made any attempt to correct them, they’d lash into me all the more with loud, abusive language.

However, if before I went to work, I’d spend enough time “waiting on God” to humble myself and *tune in*, these young men would behave themselves like angels. It worked like magic, except that it was obviously the Holy Spirit working in them “when [my] obedience [was] fulfilled” (2 Cor 10:6).

“When a man’s ways please the LORD, He makes even his enemies to be at peace with him” (Prv 16:7).

Bush-cutting presented another problem, physically. For I was highly allergic to the poison ivy that surrounded some of the billboards. In some cases I waded in it up past my knees or my chest. I remember staying up all night battling the itch with

showers and whatever topical treatment I had, then having to go back to work that morning in the same area.

But I also noticed that when I didn't think I could endure another day, God miraculously gave grace, and I'd come home at the end of the day realizing the truth of 1 Corinthians 10:13, "No temptation [trial, test] has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted [tried, tested] beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it."

But the spiritual benefit of this job far outweighed the physical pain. In fact, I felt so victorious that after 13 months, I decided to quit so I could pastor "full time" and "relentlessly" pursue "the lost" for their salvation. It was the first of those "tragic mistakes" in the wake of my new "walk," but obviously not entirely "according to the Spirit" (Rom 8:1).

In a future book I'll explain more challenges I've faced as I continue to "work out [my] own salvation with fear and trembling," while God "works in [me] both to will and to do for His good pleasure" (Phil 2:12-13).

In fact, 14 years ago I realized I was looking forward to "depart and be with Christ" as an escape from the trials and testing I face daily. So I "made a deal" with God: "Lord," I said, "I'm willing to live until I'm 110, and instead of complaining, I'll give thanks daily." So at present (2022) I have almost 30 more years to "enjoy" God's grace and the continual unfolding of wisdom through His "Treasure" - Christ, in our "earthen vessels" (2 Cor 4:7).

For in Him "are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Col 2:3).

1. Novak, Al. *Hebrew Honey*. NY: Vantage Press, 1965. II, 185

CHAPTER 10

Freedom: Dangerously Risky, but Priceless

Why would a loving God expose us to so much temptation and then give us the freedom to ruin ourselves because of it? *Doesn't God care what happens to us?* Proverbs 25:2 says, "It is the *glory* of God to *hide* a matter, but the glory of *kings* is to *search out* a matter." Let's "search out" this serious problem.

The reason has to do with why He made us: to mature us from perfect, childlike innocence into full compatibility with Him – for fellowship and dominion, undergirded by a love we could have never comprehended in our innocence (Gen 1:26,28; Ex 19:5-6; 25:8; Ps 8:5-6; 27:4-6; 48:1-13; 50:2; 122:1-9; 132:1-18; Rom 8:29, 35-39; Eph 1:10; 2:6, 13-22; 3:6-10, 19; 4:13-16; 5:30-32; Phil 1:6; 2:1-8; 3:9-14; Col 1:16-20, 27-28; 2:10; Heb 3:6; 12:22-23, 28; Rv 20:4; 21:2-3).

That Adam fell into sin and lost that blissful unity with his Creator is all part of God's plan to increase our bond with Him, for the final outcome will be better than if man had never fallen. That's why I don't see jail as housing the rejects of society: I see it as a gold mine where God is refining His "special treasure," His "kingdom of priests," who "can have compassion on those who are ignorant and going astray, since [they themselves are] also subject to weakness" (Ex 19:5-6; Rom 8:28-29; 11:30-36; Eph 1:11; Heb 5:2; 1 Pet 2:8; Rv 1:6).

So what if only a few come out really transformed – permanently? God always works with the smallest numbers in the midst of the majority, because it takes incredible testing and pressure by the many "vessels of dishonor" as they "work over" the "vessels of honor" (Ps 66:12; Mt 13:24-30, 37-43; 1 Tim 2:20).

Read about Joseph, Moses, Caleb, Joshua, David, Elijah, Elisha, and remember: all the apostles except John died as martyrs at the hands of the multitudes. But through their trials they learned "we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us," and without Him we "can do nothing" (Gen 37-42; Num 11-16; 1 Sam 18-31; 1 Kgs 17-18; 2 Kgs 2; Jn 15:5; Rom 8:37; 2 Cor 11:24-33; Heb 11).

So God's ultimate purpose is to provide the maximum experience needed for the most meaningful bond with Him and

with one another. To do this, He must lead us to a revelation of His *unconditional love* (Jn 13:34-35; 15:1-12).

Learning this kind of love creates a paradox, a dilemma. On one hand, we're free to willfully rebel and disobey, and yet come back to His love again and again as we learn the depth of His love. But that presents a major risk for two reasons:

First, we always reap what we sow, even *after God forgives and loves us*, "for whom the Lord loves he chastens, and scourges every son whom he receives." That's one reason I don't want to deliberately and knowingly disobey Him, because I hate suffering for careless disobedience. And I hate missing divine opportunities and blessings when I get sidetracked and miss His *timing*. I've had huge, life-altering spiritual breakthroughs, even financially, within *minutes* of missing the right timing. But I've also missed it by minutes or seconds, leading to many years of regret (Heb 12:6; Eccl 3:1-12; 8:5-6; Gal 6:7-9).

The second reason I try not to deliberately disobey is that I don't *want* to, or at least, don't want to want to. Jesus is my Savior, Shepherd, God, Lover, and best Friend, among countless other glories! Only a rebel would continue to want to disobey . . . or those who have an axe to grind through bitterness and resentment, because they simply don't *know* Him and His love (1 Jn 2:3-4; 5:20).

And apparently jail and prison house many in this category who've lost *everything* and still don't "get the message." That's why I'm writing these articles. Because I came close to losing everything, including my life, before I finally got desperate enough to *listen with all my heart* (Jer 29:13).

But getting to know God is not that easy, because He's invisible, and it takes *faith*. This is why He deals with us through *covenant*.

What is a covenant?

A covenant is a binding agreement, a contract. God uses a "unilateral covenant" as His "agreed" promise, regardless of our inability to keep our part of it. Our only part is to stay in relationship with Him while He trains us to trust Him based purely on His Promise (Covenant, Word), especially when we can't sense His presence (Job 23:8-10; Lam 3:1-42).

That way He doesn't have to always personally assure us He's with us. It's how we learn to walk by faith – our "wireless" connection to Him, in the realm of the Spirit. For "without faith it

is impossible to please Him,” because we're disconnected from our Source (Heb 11:5).

When God “cut covenant” with Abraham, He gave him and us a graphic illustration of its meaning so we'll know what to expect and not give up in the pitch darkness. He instructed Abraham to cut in half a heifer, a goat, a ram, and set them out, along with a dove and pigeon. These animals represented the various sacrifices substituted for the sinner who offered them to die in his place, setting him free of guilt so he could enjoy fellowship with God (Gen 15).

Normally, a covenant was an agreement which binds *both* parties to keep the terms of it. The one who breaks it will suffer the consequences – like the death of those animals, detailed later in Leviticus one through seven.

But after Abraham laid out the bloody animals, expecting further instructions from God about “ratifying” the covenant (passing between the pieces to seal the agreement), God didn't show up the rest of the day. Meanwhile, the vultures tried to eat the carcasses, which kept Abraham busy driving them away.

It would have been quite discouraging to someone with a reason to give up on God, which is why God chose *Abraham* to pioneer this walk of faith. For most others may have used God's absence as an excuse to let the vultures enjoy their meal. But the worst lay ahead. “Now when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and behold, horror and great darkness fell upon him” (Gen 15:12).

First, God doesn't show up, leaving Abraham wondering, perplexed. Next, the vultures. Then the sun goes down, still with no answer from God. Then he goes into a deep sleep; now there's no way he can do his part of the covenant – walking between the pieces. And then the “horror and great darkness.” The following passages give examples in real-life experiences of this symbolism – learning to trust God's promises when He's nowhere to be found: Ps 22; 38-40; 88; Lam 3:1-42; Mt 15:21-28; Lk 17:5-10; 1 Cor 4:9-13; 2 Cor 4:7-12.

God finally speaks, but what? That Abraham's *promised* descendants will go through a much longer period of darkness, leading to slavery in a “strange land” – Egypt 400 years, while the descendants of Esau, Abraham's *ungodly* grandson, enjoy the prosperity, prestige, and power of their own nation (Gen 15:13; compare Genesis 36:31 with 1 Kings 22:47).

No! No! No! What kind of covenant-keeper is this God who can abandon us for so long? How can anyone keep holding on without

getting bitter toward everybody and giving up in anger toward God? (Heb 12:15-17; Rv 3:11).

But look: in the darkness “there appeared a smoking oven and a burning torch that passed between those pieces.” It was God Himself, *alone* ratifying the covenant while Abraham was horribly out of commission. “On the same day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying: “To your descendants I have given this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the River Euphrates” (Gen 15:17-18).

If we can hold on in faith through the testing period, like Abraham driving away the vultures – distractions, temptations, demons, offenses – and not give up even in the horror and darkness, *God will birth in us something so entirely of Him that we’ll no longer need to depend on our own strength.* It’s like something in us *dies*: the habitual need to *see* for ourselves, to *know* what’s going on, to *feel* God’s presence or be encouraged and assured by some outward evidence (Jn 20:29; Rom 4:17-22).

In fact, this is the story of Abraham’s whole life, beginning when He left Babylonia, then Haran in Syria (Aram), and finally settled in Canaan, where God had told him to go. And what is his reward for such obedience? Famine! And no word from God, not even when he went down to Egypt to save the many families under his care, and then ended up giving his wife to the Pharaoh. And still no word from God! (Gen 12).

Read the whole story of Abraham and notice the long years when God seemed to abandon him, at times to his own incredible weakness – the horrors of his own darkness. Which explains why our covenant with God is not a two-party contract, but One: God alone, because we can’t keep it without Him! And it took that testing to produce the “father of faith,” the one whose children we are, who walk by that same faith! (Gen 12-22; Rom 4; Heb 6:12; 11:8-10, 17-19; Hab 2:4; 3:17-19; 2 Cor 5:7).

“I will bring the *blind* by a way they did not know; I will lead them in paths they have not known. I will make darkness light before them, and crooked places straight. These things I will do for them, and not forsake them” (Is 42:16).

God—the ultimate Perfectionist

God is a God of *quality*. Whatever He makes, He makes the very *best* that can be made. The more high-tech our scientific instruments advance for looking at things, the more astounded scientists are at the beauty and intricacy of Design.

But the physical world exists *for the spiritual*, plus it's *temporary in its present form*. And as mind-boggling as it is, from galaxies to atoms, it's nothing compared to the glory of the spiritual realm. This realm has to do with *relationships* among *personalities*, from demons to arch-angels, from dictators to orphans.

Our future is “out of this world.” Someday we will actually “judge angels,” rule the nations with tremendous authority– a scepter of iron!, and reveal God’s wisdom to “principalities and powers” – probably both good and bad angels of all ranks (Ex 19:5-6; 1 Cor 6:3; Eph 3:10; 2 Tim 2:12; 1 Pet 1:12; Heb 2:6-8; Rv 1:6; 2:26-27; 12:5).

Bible history is full of accounts where men and women of God changed the course of natural laws through spiritual laws: applied quantum physics. Moses opened up a huge path in the Red Sea so two or three million Israelis could cross over, then closed it on Pharaoh’s army in hot pursuit. Four priests holding up the Ark of the Covenant in the Jordan River caused it to stop flowing until these same Israelis crossed on the dry river bed.

Elijah and Elisha each opened a path in the same river so they could conveniently walk across. Joshua commanded the sun and moon to stay where they were for an extra day because he didn’t have night-vision goggles or infra-red technology.

Samson slaughtered 1000 Philistines with a donkey’s jawbone in “real time,” and Elijah called fire down from heaven against troops sent against him. Elisha caused a sunken axe-head to float to the top so they could return it to its owner. Elijah and Enoch went to heaven without dying, and a man came back to life when the “pall-bearers” placed his dead body against Elisha’s bones. Isaiah moved time back several hours without a time machine.

Jesus raised the dead and healed cripples, and his followers did the same things. Then God raised Him from the dead to prove his sacrifice for sin paid our sin-debt in full. Not so we can sin with impunity (no punishment), but that we may enjoy His fellowship that purifies our hearts and makes obedience way more fun than sin – and that’s an understatement!

The next thing a parent wants out of his children after love and fellowship is *responsibility*. And our responsibility will be in line with our *compatibility* with Him. Which means our *works* will be along the same lines as Jesus’ works “and *greater*.” His words, not mine.

Who knows in what capacities this will continue in our “glorified” resurrected bodies? At least two of the “angels”

ministering judgment in the book of Revelation identify themselves as John's *brethren – saints* (believers), not angels, for the Greek word for angel means "messenger." Some (Bible translations and commentaries) can't accept the idea that they could actually be saints, but this possibility certainly agrees with our position as "joint-heirs with Christ" who will "reign with Him," destroy the wicked, and "judge angels."

In light of our future responsibilities, God *must* develop our character and capacities through every conceivable test within the limit of our endurance as we trust in the power of His grace.

(For the above paragraphs: Gen 5:24; Ex 14; Josh 3, 10; 1 Kgs 18:38; 2 Kgs 1:9-12; 2:8-14; 4:35; 6:6; 13:21; 17:22; Is 38:8; Mt 10:8; 27:52-3; Lk 16:1-12; Jn 14:12; 19:10; 22:9; Acts 9:40; 20:9-10; Rom 4:24-25; 1 Cor 6:2-3; 8:17; 2 Tim 2:12; Rom 8:31-39; Rv 2:26-27; 17:1; 19:10; 22:9).

While scientists research the mysteries of quantum physics, the saints are being prepared to *inhabit* these newly discovered "dimensions," where *we'll* be in control *to the degree of our preparation* (Rom 8:17; 2 Tim 2:12).

And preparation is all about *relationships*, which find their origin and fulfillment in Christ, "by whom all things consist" or "hold together." Knowing Him is the key to everything. It can't get better than that – fellowship with God Himself, through His Son and the Holy Spirit (Col 1:16-18; Jn 17:3; Phil 3:10; 1 Jn 2:3).

Where is God when you need Him?

Because God makes the very finest quality, He has done something that for many years I felt was a terrible disadvantage. He gives us *freedom* to do whatever we want to do, *even if we destroy ourselves*.

While most of us don't intend to do that, we all have a strong tendency to piddle away eighty years on things we think are important, but Paul called them "rubbish," because they serve no purpose for eternity (Phil 3:8).

The reason I felt a little critical of God over this is that I wish He'd *make* me give Him *one hundred percent* so He could get the best out of me! And I felt that way toward my family and friends, especially those in jail, many of whom I've grown to love and see their potential and giftings.

When my (half) brother Phillip died at twenty-six and then my sister Beth at forty-six, through wrong choices, my attitude toward God approached anger. *Why did You give them so much freedom, God? Why?*

But during a Bible study as I spoke to a class in jail, the answer suddenly came: Because *free choice is the clearest revelation of our hearts*, how could God be assured of the *highest quality* in the *relationship* if He didn't give us such freedom? Then I realized He goes even further, allowing every kind of stumbling block and offense and a thousand reasons to give up and quit (Rom 9:33; Lk 9:23, 56-62; 14:26, 33).

The Bible *appears* to be full of contradictions, God's kids are hopelessly flawed, and our spiritual leaders often fall over money, power, or sex. From hypocrites, like "tares" among wheat to dictators like Pharaoh and Hitler; from the lure of luxury and lust to the terror of torture and death, it seems God deliberately tries to discourage us (Mt 13:36ff; Rom 9:17; Dt 8:11; Prv 5, Heb 11:35; Ps 66:11-12; Job 16; Lam 3; Mk 10:21).

But far worse, if there can be anything worse, is His endless silence, even when we've come to the end. And He *does* seem to abandon His choice saints, as we well know from the biblical accounts of martyrs and of missionaries slain on the field or left to die from disease or malnutrition (Job 23:3, 8-9; Ps 22; 88; 2 Cor 4:8).

At the bottom of it all is why God left Satan on planet earth, right there in the Garden to tempt *Eve*, not Adam, like a salesman who wants to talk to the wife instead of her husband! (Gen 3:1f)

And still He lets him tempt us, disguised, no less, as "an angel of light," through false prophets and profit-hungry ministers, through doctrines which lure us into "cheap grace," legalism, or wealth as an end in itself. And through cults and religions whose "humble" leaders and members present wonderful truths mixed with tiny bits of deadly poison (2 Cor 11:14; Dt 13:3; Mt 7:15; Acts 20:29; 2 Pet 2:3; Jn 7:17; Gal 1:8; 1 Tim 6:5-10, 17-21).

As a loving and protective father I would *never* allow that. But God goes even further. If someone has a *heart* for disobedience, He actually gives them *reasons* to be deceived through a lying spirit. If they persist in wickedness, He *turns them over* to "uncleanness" and "vile passions." If they want to know truth without commitment to it, He *deliberately blinds* them (1 Kgs 22:19-23; 2 Thes 2:11; Rom 1:24-32; Mt 13:13-15).

God's higher purpose

This is the *holiness* side of God, His "consuming fire." But there's another side to God, the *reason* behind His unapproachable glory: that He might lead us to His mercy and grace (Ex 24:17; Rom 4:1-16; Heb 10:2; 12:29).

Hearts broken and beautified by the Refiner's fire see abundant evidence of a deeply personal, caring God: in the beauties of nature; in the Bible's moral values which protect, cover, and guide us; in His rich wisdom in every book of the Bible; and in the people He has already changed who testify of His love (Rom 1:20; Dt 4:8; Job 28; Ps 119; Prv 8; Heb 11:1ff; 12:1).

They either take time to search out answers or to walk in faith until the answers come, either in this life or the next. For my greatest spiritual breakthroughs have come when I felt *most* abandoned by God: life out of death. No wonder the martyrs will receive such a high reward (Ps 22, 88; 2 Cor 4:8-12; Rv 20:4).

Purified hearts will look right past another brother or sister's glaring faults and sins and do whatever it takes to cover them with mercy and forbearance, to pray for them, to warn them in wisdom and love, and to encourage them (1 Cor 13:4-7; 1 Pet 4:8; Col 3:13; 1 Jn 5:16; Prv 9:8; 27:5; Lk 17:3; Gal 6:1; 1 Tim 5:20; Rom 14:9; 1 Thes 5:11).

They will deny themselves rather than cause a weaker saint to be offended by their freedom. In the timing, wisdom, and by the grace of God, they will lay down their lives for others through suffering or death because of Him who did the same for them on a blood-soaked Cross (Rom 14:1; 1 Cor 8:9-13; Jn 15:12-13; Phil 3:10; Col 1:24; Rv 12:11; Is 53).

How can human beings, many of whom were once extremely hardened in sin themselves, be transformed to such depths of love? Because in their misuse and abuse of the freedom our Creator gave them, *they finally came to see the depth of their own wickedness and rebellion in the face of God's love. Which explains why God turns people over to their own selfishness* (Ps 38, 51; 1 Tim 1:15).

If God had limited us or somehow kept us from doing what we wanted to do in our flesh, our sinful nature, we would never have discovered the true nature of our depraved minds and hearts when left to ourselves without His grace. In addition we would have resented, and eventually *hated*, a God of love who wouldn't allow us to be totally free (Dt 8:2; 2 Chr 32:31; Job 42:5-6; Ps 51:3-6; Is 1:5-6; Jer 17:9; Rom 3:19-20).

So God, in His wisdom, has done the very best thing possible to restore us into His image. Not only has He given us such freedom, but He has gone to the ultimate extreme to win our hearts back to His love. He sent His Son to live among us thirty-three years as a human, weak enough to get tired and hungry, to be tempted by that same devil "in all points as we are," to be in

such anguish over the Price He'd have to pay that an angel was sent to strengthen Him and "His sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground" (Lk 22:43-4; Heb 12:4)

And finally He "*became sin*," identifying with us so completely in our fallen state, as though He were the most horrendous sinner who ever lived. And because sin separates us from fellowship with God, Jesus experienced that "horror and great darkness," as though He were in hell for eternity, abandoned by His Father. In that moment He cried from the cross, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken me?" (Mt 27:46; Ps 22:1; Gen 15:12; Heb 2:14-18; 4:14-16; 2 Cor 5:21; Phil 2:8).

All this in order to *truly understand* the feeling of our human weakness and failure so He would know how to effectively intercede for us before His Father's throne in heaven. Yet that only scratches the surface. For His death completely destroyed the power of sin and its ability to destroy us through the "second death" – eternal damnation in Hell and "the Lake of Fire." (Rom 3:21-26; 4:23-25; 5:12-21; 6:1-10; 1 Cor 15:20-28, 50-56; Rv 2:11; 20:6, 14; 21:8).

And His resurrection from the dead confirmed that the Price He paid through His death for us satisfied all the requirements of God's holy law. He "was betrayed and put to death because of our misdeeds and was raised to secure our justification – our acquittal, and to make our account balance, absolving us from all guilt before God" (Rom 4:25 AMP).

The benefits of freedom

What this means is that our freedom has a thrilling new twist: not only are we free to *rebel* against this *amazing grace*, but we are just as free to *receive* it and *enjoy* all its endless benefits. And to *help* us enjoy it, to strengthen us in our weakness and human drive to do it wrong and live selfishly, God has sent us the Holy Spirit to live *with us*, *inside* us, and be *upon* us with supernatural power! (Jn 16:7,13; Lk 24:49; Acts 1:8; 2:1ff; Rom 6:3-8; 2 Cor 5:17; Col 1:27).

But that's not all. He has done two things to more than make up for our weakness: First, He has given us His Word. Yet His Word faces many with the same problem the people had with the "Son of *Man*." For even as Jesus was a mystery because He was so completely human, His own brothers and sisters rejected Him in the flesh, so the Bible *seems* so ordinary and full of human flaws that one may easily find reason to count it as nothing more than an ordinary book (Mk 6:1-6; Lk 4:16, 28-29; Jn 6:63; 7:5; 8:52;

8:31-32; 15:7; Rom 9:32-33; 1 Cor 1:23; 1 Tim 3:16-17; Heb 4:12-13; Jas 1:21; 1 Pet 2:2; Ps 1, 119).

Ironically, His very need to completely identify with us in our weakness as *Son of Man* gives many a reason to count Him as either not being God-in-flesh, or as reason to discount the whole Bible. Yet His humanity gave Him the *legal basis* He needed to conquer sin and death, reconcile us to the Father, and be our priestly representative before the throne (Dan 7:13; Rom 8:3-4; 1 Cor 15:42-58; 2 Cor 5:21; Heb 2:8-18; 5:1-9; 10:1-10; Jn 1:14; 5:18; 10:33; Phil 2:6).

A little serious research will begin to fit the pieces of the puzzle together until the most incredible masterpiece of wisdom the world has ever seen emerges from the confusion. In the past few decades, many former atheistic scholars have followed C.S. Lewis in surrendering to Jesus, such as Josh McDowell and Lee Strobel, once they saw the truth through honest and diligent research. One website lists 89 “famous atheists” who came to believe in a personal God – 60 of them, converts to Christianity.¹ (Prv 25:2-3).

And second, He has given us an abundance of spiritual brothers, sisters, moms, and dads, to lead and nurture us in our human weakness. Yet they present the same mystery, for they also are human, and we are free to reject them as God’s people rejected Jesus because of His humanity. But our refusal to listen to these “Treasure[s] in *earthen vessels*” is generally due to our ignorance or *pride, the blindness of our heart* (1 Cor 1:26-30; 2 Cor 4:7; Eph 2-4; Rom 12; Prv 13:10; Ps 133).

Listening to God through His family

By “earthen vessels,” I’m referring to true believers living in relationship with the Body of Christ, not those walking in error or “wolves” disguised as sheep (Mt 7:15; Rom 16:17; 1 Cor 11:18-19; 2 Thes 3:6; Titus 3:10; 2 Pet 2:18; 1 Jn 2:18-23; 4:6).

The root of our problem, of course, goes back to the very origin of the Fall of man through wanting to be like God (pride). This is what *separated* us from a loving God and is what *keeps* us away from Him. The cure is deep *repentance* and humble *faith* in the *only* means of our salvation – Jesus Christ (Gen 3:5; Is 14:14; Mk 1:15; Jn 3:16; Rom 3:23-28; 10:9-10).

But it continues with that same humility toward His Body, the Church, our brothers and sisters in Christ. Paul urges us to walk in “lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the

bond of peace.” Then He goes on to explain how the Body of Christ is composed of many members, “joined and knit together by what every joint supplies” so we can grow to maturity and encourage one another in love (Eph 4:2-3, 16; cf Col 2:19; 1 Cor 12:14-26).

If the coming of Jesus in human form was a “stumbling block” to most of the people, especially the religious people who were *expecting* Him (but not in that humble form), His Body the Church can be just as upsetting and difficult to understand. So we tend to either write it off as nothing, or we make Christianity a mere formality and miss the whole point – loving and forgiving one another, and everything that goes with it: worshiping together; praying for, encouraging, helping one another; and fellowship (Gal 6:1-2; Eph 4:31-32; Col 2:2; 3:12-16; Heb 10:25).

So while God gives us enough freedom to completely *miss* His entire purpose and glorious plan for us whom He dearly loves, yet at the same time He has provided His Spirit, His Word, and His people to give guidance, correction, and warning. We may either ignore their influence (deliberately or through neglect), or we may choose to humble ourselves and *listen* to what they and His Word have to say.

But our pride may hinder us from receiving correction from certain people, or if it's handled in tender love, or if we're not willing to change. I've been “hard of hearing” many times. Thankfully, since God chastises whom He loves, I eventually learn “the hard way.” Unfortunately, the chastening is usually more costly than if I could humble myself and *listen* even to those who try to correct me harshly or with anger (Heb 3:7-15; 12:5-29; Prv 9:8-9; 5:12-14; 12:1; 15:31-33).

Law or Grace?

Because I have finally begun to understand the priceless value of freedom, I have now come to understand and fear one of Satan's best war strategies for sincere believers: the subtle deception of legalism and control by law in place of the freedom grace brings. Jesus launched his most intense accusations – an entire chapter – against those who were *hardened* by the law instead of *broken* by it (Mt 23).

Paul's most anguished warning was against those who brought the believers at Galatia back under bondage to the law – “I would they were even cut off which trouble you” (Gal 5:12).

Why? Because living by external standards, as holy as they are, especially in the New Testament, can become a *substitute* for the *real thing* – having that law *in our heart through intimacy with*

Christ, so that, motivated by the *Holy Spirit* instead of self-effort, we *delight* to do His will (Ps 40:8; Jer 31:33; Ez 36:26-27; Gal 5:16-25; Heb 10:16)

Furthermore, the law, even the Kingdom teachings of Jesus observed as rules or principles to live by, rather than the natural, spontaneous outflow of intimate fellowship with Him, creates a “wall of separation,” dividing true believers who conscientiously observe them from those who haphazardly observe or neglect them. I know by experience how hard it is to be patient with lazy Christians or “baby” believers, simply because it’s easier for me to live by the higher standards I was raised in, but failing to realize that without His grace, I’m no different! (Eph 2:8, 15; Rom 3:9-23).

On the surface Paul’s letter to the Galatians is the ultimate disaster in the Bible – undoing 14 centuries of God’s grooming and schooling us through such high and holy standards, His righteous law, and replacing it with freedom to ruin ourselves and bring everybody under our influence down with us! And many believers seem to be doing just that.

I don’t understand why God takes such risks, that is, until I see what He’s looking for: top quality – those who are free to misuse freedom, but even after great failure, finally choose relationship, accountability, and commitment, often at great cost to comfort, convenience, and life itself (Gen 32:24–31; Ps 16:8–11; Rom 8:24–39; Rv 12:11).

This is the intent of the law, to “tutor” us into this kind of self-sacrificing love through bringing us, empty and broken, to faith in Christ and dependence on His Spirit. “But after faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor.” True faith operates through freedom because it’s got to be *from a heart made transparent and real!* (Gal 3:24-25).

And since all the “issues of life” spring from the heart, once our “tutor” has served its purpose, it must step back for the real thing, like a cast around a broken leg that has healed, and is now stronger than it was before. For what we can’t do through the law, we can do through grace! “For sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law, but under grace” (Rom 6:14; Prv 4:23).

My own disastrous experiment with liberty

In 1976, as I described in chapter nine, God set me free from many years of depression through a revelation of the liberty we have in Christ (Romans 3–8). Now with no restraint from my

former bondage to the law, especially the teaching of Jesus on self-sacrifice, I abused my liberty, and a year and a half later, resigned the church I pastored, too impatient to listen to God's warning to "wait." That led to the lowest pit in my life and I ended up living in a church basement with my wife and three small kids in the city we'd moved to in my attempt to undo my mistake by getting back into the ministry, even as God spoke almost audibly that I was "making a mistake" (Gal 5:13).

I knew if I didn't do it right this time, I'd end up in even *greater sorrow!* So I prepared myself by reading and recording an hour-long cassette tape of Bible verses that kept me hoping in God in the midst of suffering and darkness (Is 50:10-11; Lam 3:22-32).

For weeks I listened to that tape every waking minute I was not working on my job. Still, I hit bottom so hard I ended up screaming and gnashing my teeth in terror, feeling God Himself had abandoned me, like the "outer darkness" the unfaithful servant found himself in (Mt 8:12; 22:13; 25:30).

Perhaps I experienced some of the "horror and great darkness" Abraham went through in Genesis 15. Looking back to that night of terror in 1978, I now realize God allowed me to experience the "end of all flesh," the "deceitful" and "desperately wicked" condition of my own selfish heart in the absence of His grace (Gen 6:13; Jer 17:9; Rom 3:9-19).

But I could never have held on through the long "dark night of the soul" that led to that last night of horror had God not enabled me (grace) to keep my focus on those scriptures I'd recorded to keep away the vultures of depression, fear, and torment.

I compare Abraham's staring at those sacrifices, while he protected them, to the shutter of a camera staying open long enough for the lighted image outside to imprint itself on the film inside. Those who've developed film from these older, non-digital cameras know they have to be developed with chemicals in pitch darkness (or infra-red light).

The imprint of the Word in us must "die" like a seed planted in the ground so it will arise and bear its own fruit, disconnected from our striving, our "willing and running," but "of God who shows mercy." Otherwise *we* will take a little of the glory and look at others with judgment instead of mercy (Jn 12:24; 1 Cor 15:36; Rom 9:16; Eph 2:9; Jas 2:13).

Yet I admit my other choices were much more terrifying: running again – where? I did run to my pastor and his wife and opened up to them, but it caused them to lose confidence in me and they advised my wife to divorce me. After my breakthrough I

knew *God* had sovereignly led them to reject me, removing my last hope in something *human* to hold on to. "When my father and my mother forsake me, then the *Lord* will take care of me" (Ps 27:10; 38:9-15; 88:8).

The next day at work it all came together in a flash of revelation: I suddenly saw my "old man," this selfish, sniveling, snotty-nose baby of a "man" crying desperately for love, when in fact I was no less than a "new creation in Christ," perfect and "complete in Him, who is the head of all principality and power"! (2 Cor 5:17; Col 1:27-28; 2:10).

I didn't need love from anyone, not even the need to feel God's love, for He lived *in me* loving others through me! I felt overwhelmed with His glory, like being in heaven (Jn 11:40).

The following day at work, in my rejoicing I got a little too slap-happy with the table saw and suddenly saw the end of my left thumb stuck to the ceiling in bloody pieces. But that became my wake-up call when I knew I had disobeyed God and needed to take my family back to where I'd run from and start over.

When I did, the doors that had closed where I had fled, miraculously opened when I returned. We ended up living in a beautiful two-story home, like a dream. And then God gave further direction to come to Florida, where I am now, undergoing more years of trying and testing – and teaching inmates what I learn in the process . . . and the darkness.

And learning from their hard lessons!

Those years of depression and rage-tantrums are so distant a memory, I almost miss them because of the intense hunger they produced in me. Thankfully, God has other ways to produce hunger in us. As long as we keep the *vultures* away, we can wait out those periods of darkness, like *photoperiodism* in plant-growing, and quite necessary for their health, for *they* need "periods" of light (photons) *and* especially darkness (page 24).

There, God confirms His covenant again, building our faith and keeping us separated from that *sniveling child* in us that now and then rises from the dead and wants to do something "stupid," to use jail lingo (Rom 6:1-11; 8:10; Col 3:1-3).

Doing it God's way can turn even the worst failure into a learning experience if we truly humble ourselves and listen to His wisdom. But we still pay the consequences, which in some ways I'm *still paying!* It causes me to cling to Him more than ever, making me more willing to "count the cost" of "*learning from Him*" the easy way instead of the hard.

Because He Who will never leave or forsake us promised, “Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light” (Mt 11:29-30; 28:20; Heb 13:5; Ps 139).

Refined for highest quality

The freedom is ours, and also the choice. And as risky as freedom is, to the tune of billions of lost angels and people and millions of half-hearted believers, it is still the *only way* God can be assured of the highest quality. And He’s getting it. Hebrews eleven, the “faith chapter,” records the *quality* of believers who chose the best in the heat of the worst:

They were “tortured, not accepting deliverance . . . had trial of mockings and scourgings, yes, and of chains and imprisonment. They were stoned . . . sawn in two, were tempted, were slain with the sword . . . being destitute, afflicted, tormented – *of whom the world was not worthy.*” Only heaven understands their immense value (Heb 11:35-38).

From that time to this God’s people are still being refined like the purest gold. And in light of our future responsibilities, He’s going to need it. No wonder my complacency *nauseates* Him. It deprives Him of what He gave *His* best for (Rv 3:16).

But with freedom come His fatherly discipline and correction. Yet the scary thing is that it profits only those who *respond* to it, and responding means *enduring* through all the offenses, affliction, abuse, and rejection, including that dreaded *silence* of God when we need Him most! (Heb 12:7).

But through it all God brings us close to Him and *to one another in relationship, the very purpose of our creation.* “Behold how good and pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity . . . for *there* the Lord *commanded* the blessing – Life forevermore” (Ps 133).

Paul goes even further, saying that if we are “rooted and grounded in love,” we’ll eventually “comprehend *with all the saints*” so much of “the love of Christ” that we’ll be “filled with all the fullness of God.” That’s beyond mind-boggling. But it’s the *lavish wealth* of a Creator who enjoys the best (Eph 3:17-19).

What an incredible reward awaits those who *choose*, or rather *respond* to, His love and grace.

1. www.ranker.com/list/former-atheists-and-agnostics/famous-atheists

CHAPTER 11a

Seven Things that Block Prayer And How to Overcome Them

Part one

Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank Him for all He has done. Then you will experience God's peace. Philippians 4:6-7a NLT

Around 2008 my wife attended a seminar where she heard Bible teacher Charles Carrin tell this amazing story. I told it at Central Florida Reception Center (state prison, Orlando), and one of the inmates told me he's from Fort Lauderdale where it happened, and he remembers reading about it, and it agrees with the way I told it. With Brother Carrin's permission and blessing, I've copied the gist of it off the CD my wife bought at the meeting.

It concerns a Jamaican family, Herbert and Pearl Massey and daughter Elizabeth in her late teens, living in Belle Glade, Florida. Elizabeth was with her date in Ft. Lauderdale. At sunset, around 6:30, they were walking along the beach, and in a playful moment, Elizabeth jumped into the water, where a riptide immediately swept her out to sea, beyond the help of her friend's attempt to rescue her. He then called for help and the Coast Guard sent out boats to search for her. Then he called her parents to tell them what happened to their daughter.

Her parents knew the near impossibility of the situation, but they also "knew the authority of scripture." So they went to Psalm 139:7-12.

"Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence? If I ascend into heaven, You are there; if I make my bed in hell, behold, You are there. If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there our hand shall lead me," etc

Herbert and Pearl quickly called another Christian friend who joined them in their home and they began to pray, focusing specifically on verses 9 through 12, praying this way: "If Elizabeth dwells in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there Your hand shall lead Elizabeth, and your hand shall hold Elizabeth. If Elizabeth says, 'Surely the darkness shall fall on me,' even the

night shall be light about Elizabeth; indeed, the darkness shall not hide Elizabeth from You, but the night shines as the day; the darkness and the light are both alike to You.”

They prayed like that continually throughout the evening. Even as Jesus used the written Word to confront Satan when he tempted Jesus, their deep confidence in the authority of God’s written Word gave them faith to trust Him for a miracle (Mt 4; Lk 4).

At about 11:00 PM the police called, telling them the Coast Guard had discontinued the search, and that Elizabeth was drowned; they had not found her body. But Herbert and Pearl refused to believe it, and chose instead to stake their faith in what God’s Word said.

After midnight, Mr. and Mrs. James in Ft Lauderdale, a commercial fisherman and his wife, were asleep in bed. “They were not believers as we know,” Carrin said. Mr. James woke up, elbowed his wife and said, “Get up; we’re going fishing.” They hitched up the boat and set out to sea. The wife later said, “My husband started out in a direction we never go because the sharks in that area are so bad, it’s pointless to fish.” But he felt like that was the direction they needed to go.

As they went, he was trolling with his fishing line behind the boat. At about ten miles out, he stopped the engine and began reeling in a fish when a shark cut it off, leaving only the head. As he reeled it in his wife said, “Flash the light over off the bow of the boat.”

He did. Sitting in the water was Elizabeth. “Elizabeth told me herself,” says Charles, “I wasn’t swimming; I was sitting there. And the amazing thing was, it never got dark around me.”

“What happened,” says Carrin, “was that the Masseys and their friend were prophesying the Word, applying it to their need.” As they prayed, the friend had a vision of Elizabeth in a pink blouse and green shorts. But Pearl said, “No, that’s not what she was wearing.” But later they found that when Elizabeth got into the boat, Mrs. James gave Elizabeth a pink blouse and green shorts to exchange for her wet clothes.

(charlescarrinministries.com)

What do I value most?

God tells us that if we “pray about everything,” His peace will protect our hearts and minds even when we don’t understand what’s going on. But we worry instead of pray. Why? First, because *praying exercises our faith*, the eyes of our spirit, seeing

what God sees *behind* the visible, sense-world. Spiritual blindness is related to prayerlessness (Hab 2:1–3; Heb 11:1; 2 Cor 5:7).

And second, the pressures of life make prayer seem like a waste of time, especially when it's so hard to get quick answers from a God we can't see and don't understand (Ps 40:1; Prv 25:2; Is 8:17; 45:15; 64:4; Rom 11:33).

When Mary broke the alabaster flask, a perfume worth a year of a laborer's wages, and poured it on the head and feet of Jesus, the disciples considered it a waste. They looked at it from an earthly viewpoint; she saw it in light of eternity, and Jesus indicated it was the most valuable thing anybody could have done at that time, and the memorial of what she did would accompany the preaching of the Gospel throughout the world (Mk 14:1–9; Jn 12:1–8).

As I grow spiritually I am coming to understand what Jesus meant by connecting this act of "waste" with preaching the Gospel. For in the book of Acts it was *prayer* that made the Gospel so powerful and effective. It began when the disciples *waited* "in one accord" for days in the upper room (Acts 1:13–14).

On the tenth day of what to others must have seemed like a waste of time, the Spirit descended on them with such explosive power that 3,000 were saved and baptized through Peter's preaching before the day was over. The next time they prayed *in one accord*, the building they were in actually shook, and they went out filled with the Holy Spirit and "spoke the word of God with boldness." And many miracles accompanied their preaching (Acts 2:1ff; 4:23–31).

These disciples finally understood that spending time in the presence of Jesus, time that could be "better spent" helping the poor or doing some other good work, was the very highest priority in the Kingdom of God.

The reason is that the Kingdom is not natural, but *spiritual*, and it *begins* with *time enjoying* His Presence, especially when we pray *in one accord* with others. *Then* the Holy Spirit will empower and direct our ministry and good works, because it will be *God* doing it *through us* (Jn 17:21–23; 1 Cor 2:9–10; Acts 4:29–30; Heb 4).

In fact, God warns us that to enter into His presence for "sacrifice" too "hastily" is "the sacrifice of fools," even *evil*. Without connecting heart-to-heart with God, our prayers are likely to be religious exercises no different than the empty rituals of heathen religions. God *loves* to hear and answer our prayers but He wants to take *pleasure* in *us* first! Can you believe it? Not

our president, but the Creator of the Universe! (Eccl 5:1; 1 Sam 13:11–12; Ps 100; 147:11; 149:4; Mt 6:6–8; Lk 18:9–14; Jn 5:19).

Then, *after* we have *enjoyed His* fellowship, He wants to teach and train us to do His works on the earth through the power of His Spirit. That's where prayers of *asking* become effective and valuable, for it's how our faith develops. And the *prayer* element of faith is to call things out of the invisible (spirit realm) into the visible, using the authority God has given us through Christ so *others* can see His works and glorify Him (Lk 10:18–24; Jn 4:23–24; 11:4,40; 15:7–8; 16:24; 20:30–31; Rom 4:17–20; 5:2; 2 Cor 1:20; 4:15; Eph 1:17–23).

When we ask, especially for specific needs in line with God's will, it sets up an expectancy in our hearts, tuning our focus to God's love and power and releasing Him to work for us. It's how we take *dominion* over this planet, which is what God created us to do in the first place.

In fact, fellowship with God and taking dominion over the earth are so closely linked, that often it only takes worship and praise to see His enemies conquered or destroyed (Gen 1:26–28; 2 Chr 20; Ps 2:8; 149; Heb 10:12–13; Jn 14:12–14; 16:24; Num 10:33–35; Rom 8:35–39).

"Delight yourself also in the LORD, and He shall give you the desires of your heart." If we do His will, He calls us "friends," and He lets His friends know what's going on so they can cooperate with Him" (Ps 37:4).

"Surely the Lord GOD does nothing, unless He reveals His secret to His servants the prophets. A lion has roared! Who will not fear? The Lord GOD has spoken! Who can but prophesy?" These two verses relate to the story of the Masseys and their daughter. The lion roared, their daughter was gone! But in place of fear, they prayed prophetically, and God "did something" (Am 3:7–8).

"If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you. By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples. . . . No longer do I call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you" (Jn 15:7–8, 15).

Our "great cloud of witnesses" (Heb 12:1)

When Jesus gave Peter "the keys of the kingdom of heaven," He gave him *carte blanche* – a blank check – to ask whatever he

needed: “Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven” (Mt 16:19).

Bible history is filled with examples of those who moved God through prayer. Abraham asked God to spare the wicked city of Sodom in order to save his nephew Lot and his family. God destroyed the city anyway, but saved Lot *because Abraham, in effect, asked him to* (Gen 18–19).

Jacob wrestled with the Angel (God), refusing to let go until God blessed him because he’d come to the end of his rope, and an army of 400 men headed his way to take revenge. He knew unless God changed him, it was over.

God actually allowed Jacob to “prevail” against Him because He saw his desperation. He changed his name from Jacob, meaning “heel-grabber, control freak,” to Israel – one who prevails with God and wins through *prayer*, not conniving: spiritual weapons, not “carnal” or “flesh and blood” (Gen 32; Is 30:19; Hos 12:3–4; Mt 16:17; 1 Cor 15:50; 2 Cor 10:3–6; Eph 6:12).

Moses changed God’s mind on four occasions when God planned to destroy His rebellious people because he knew God’s ways. That is, he knew what God *really* wanted and how to ask “according to His will” even though it seemed he was *opposing* Him. For this, God counted him “faithful in all His house” because he gave God reason to act.

In other words, why should God do anything if we don’t care, when, in fact, He’s training is to be His hands and feet on this planet? (Ex 32:9–14; Num 14:1–20; 16:1–50; Dt 9; Ps 103:7; Am 3:7; 1 Jn 5:14–15; Heb 3:2–4; Prv 4:11–12; 31:8–9; Is 59:16; 63:5; Jer 5:1; Ez 22:30).

Joshua had the nerve to *command* the sun and moon to “stand still” to give him more time to defeat the enemy. So God gave him another day of light. Yes, read it yourself: Joshua 10:12–13, where he directed this demand “to the Lord.” And who gets the *glory* for this miracle? God, of course. Joshua asked – commanded – and made God shine (pun unintended). “Ask Me of things to come concerning My sons; and concerning the work of My hands, you command Me” (Is 45:11b).

Elijah “prayed earnestly that it would not rain; and it did not rain on the land for three years and six months.” When he announced the coming famine to wicked King Ahab, he said, “As the LORD God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, there shall not be dew nor rain these years, *except at my word.*” Elijah’s word was *God’s* word, because he stood in His place and brought the entire

nation to repentance. Read the whole story (1 Kgs 17–18; Jas 5:17).

“And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth produced its fruit.” Such authority by a man “subject to like passions as we are”! And his human weakness is obvious from what happened next: when Queen Jezebel threatened to kill him, he fled, and in deep discouragement, asked God to take his life (1 Kgs 19:1–4; Jas 5:18; 2 Cor 4:7; 1 Cor 1:26–31).

When Daniel realized the seventy year captivity of the Jews in Babylon was about over, he didn’t *assume* it would happen; he *caused* it to happen through *prayer*. He didn’t pray against the king who held them captive, nor against the satanic angel, “the prince of Persia.” So how did his prayer get *God’s* attention? (Dan 9:1–23; 10:13, 20; Ez 14:14, 20).

He prayed a prayer of *repentance* on behalf of God’s people, as Moses did. He dealt with the *root* of the problem – Judah’s rebellion, which had *caused* God to invite the enemy to destroy their holy city Jerusalem and take the people into captivity. God answered Daniel by touching the heart of King Cyrus, who not only released them to their homeland, but financed the building of their temple (Ez 1:1–8; 6:1–15; Is 44:28–45:1; Jer 21:7; 22:5; 25:9, etc).

James said, “You do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures.” That’s why taking time to enjoy God, listen to Him, abiding in Christ and His Word, gives us the *wisdom* and *authority* to *ask* whatever we “desire” because our asking will be in line with His will, and He will be glorified (Jas 4:2b–3; Jn 15:7–8; 1 Jn 5:14–15; Prv 3:7; 4:23; 8:1–36; Jas 1:5).

“Delight yourself also in the Lord, and He will give you the desires *and* secret petitions of your heart” (Ps 37:4 AMP).

What’s interesting is that the ones God did the most powerful miracles through are those who dealt with Israel at their most rebellious time: Moses during their rebellion in the wilderness where they would have killed him if they could have; and Elijah and Elisha in the northern kingdom – Israel, which had completely turned away from God, without one godly king, as Judah had occasionally (Dt 9; 1 Kgs 16:30–33; 2 Kgs chaps 1–10).

Why? Because the need was greater: for “where sin abounded, grace abounded much more.” When our situation is most difficult or impossible, God simply gives “much more” grace! (Rom 5:20; Mk 10:27; Jas 5:6).

These are a few of many examples in the Old Testament of *how God accomplishes His acts – through those who know His ways*: “He made known His ways to Moses, His acts to the children of Israel” (Ps 103:7).

When we know His acts without knowing His *ways – why* He does what He does, we’re impatient, like the Israelites in the wilderness who always complained. When we know His ways, He uses us to do His acts, as He did with Moses (Ex 14, 32; Num 11–14, 16, 20; Gen 18:16–33; 19:29; 44:18–45:1).

In the New Testament, prayer “without ceasing” was a way of life, beginning with Jesus, who could “do nothing” without communion with His Father, and continuing with the apostles after Pentecost (Lk 6:12; 11:1–13; 18:1–8; 21:36; Jn 5:19, 30; 8:28; 12:49; 14:10, 20; Acts 1:1–4, 14; 2:1–4; Rom 1:9; Eph 6:18; 1 Thes 1:3; 2:13; 5:17).

No wonder God responded “with signs and wonders, with various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit, according to His own will” throughout their ministry in the book of Acts, and still responds miraculously and with “great grace” today – when we pray! (Heb 2:4; Acts 2:33).

However the following seven areas may stifle or limit our prayers when we carelessly “drift away” from our “abiding” (remaining) and “delight” in Him. Check them out, and remember, the Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness to overcome these hurdles (Jn 15:1–5; Rom 8:26).

1. Sin, disobedience, unforgiveness

David said, “If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear.” Isaiah said, “But your iniquities have separated you from your God; and your sins have hidden His face from you, so that He will not hear” (Ps 66:18; Is 59:2).

“Husbands, likewise, dwell with [your wife] with understanding, giving honor to the wife, as to the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life, that *your prayers may not be hindered*” (1 Pet 3:7).

What God did to remove this block is shocking, yet wonderful! He gave us “the law” to make sin so obvious and our guilt so horrible that we wouldn’t rest until we fell in deep repentance before that perfect Sacrifice, and then learned to “abide in Him” (Rom 3:19–20; 7:7–14; Jn 15:1ff; 1 Jn. 1:6).

God gives grace to the humble and broken. But it’s quite common to mistake this grace for an easy-going attitude toward sin. Mercy and grace are not an *excuse* to sin, but the freedom to

enjoy guilt-free fellowship with God so we can “walk in the Spirit” and “not fulfill the lust of the flesh.” “For sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law but under grace” (Rom 6:14; Gal 5:16; Jas 4:6-7; Is 57:15; 66:2).

Grace *enables* us to serve one another in *love*, which fulfills all the law! Faith works by love, and love gives us the right *motive* to overcome sin! (Gal 3:24; 5:6, 13-26).

When Jesus told His disciples that only a tiny speck of faith the size of a mustard seed could move a mountain into the sea, he then warned that if we don’t forgive others, God will not forgive us. Now that’s scary! (Mk 11:23-26).

Power in prayer begins with faith so real that we have power to *genuinely forgive and love* others, beginning with family, spouse, and even our enemies. And as His love *abides* in us, it will deliver us from our own weakness and sin (Mt 5:44; Jn 15:9-13; 1 Jn 3:6).

In many cases, even a slightly wrong attitude toward someone, especially a family member, someone close to us, or someone in influence or authority over us, will clog up our fellowship with God. And that often leads to spiritual failure and a relapse into sin (2 Cor 2:10-11; 1 Pet 3:7).

For example, a brother in one of my jail Bible studies told me he couldn’t understand why he was going downhill spiritually and couldn’t help himself. I asked him if there was someone who hurt him in the past that he had a hard time forgiving. He said, “No.” Then I asked him about his parents, if he had a good relationship with them. He said, “Well, my dad never spent time with me, so I ignore him.”

I was surprised he didn’t see it as unforgiveness and one of the roots of his problem, if not the main root. But quite often we don’t see or admit having an attitude toward certain people or see any relationship between it and our walk with God (Mt 18:32-35; 1 Cor 10:17; 11:27-32; 1 Pet 4:8).

Yet, even as I write, I’m aware of how difficult this can be, and that it takes a rich and deep, daily fellowship with God to live above typical “human” attitudes that hinder the heavenly flow of God’s love through us to others. Yet, as I’ve already said more than once, the answer is not in working harder at it, but enjoying God more. Having experienced it many times, I know and hurt when it’s missing in my own life.

2. Hardness of heart, unbrokenness, little fear of God

Prayer puts genuine faith into spoken words. And real faith springs out of a soft, tender heart, broken, often through difficult circumstances (2 Cor 4:7–18; 12:9–10).

In the parable of the sower, the first two kinds of soil illustrate two degrees of hardness: one so hard the seeds don't even germinate before the birds eat them. The other has so many "stony" areas of hardness, the seed germinates but finally dies for lack of moisture. This soil illustrates those who receive the Word with *joy*, but under testing and persecution they become offended and "fall away" (Mt 13:20–21; Lk 8:13).

What makes a heart hard? Unforgiveness, yes, but also too much confidence in the flesh, the natural, visible sense-world, in place of childlike trust in what *God says*. "For we are the circumcision [those who *actually* keep the law – from the *heart*], who worship God in the Spirit, rejoice in Christ Jesus, and *have no confidence in the flesh*" (Phil 3:3).

God *hides* His secrets from the "wise and prudent" and *reveals* them to "babes." Jesus picked his disciples from an assortment of *nobodies* (with the possible exception of Judas) because He knew that "not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called." Yet when it came to believing Him for some of His most amazing miracles, He blamed their lack of faith on only one thing: *hardness of heart* (Mt 11:25; 14:22–33; 16:8; Mk 6:52; 8:17; 2 Cor 1:26).

Paul learned that trials weakened his *natural* self so he would lean more heavily on God, whose strength was "made perfect in weakness." He learned to gladly "boast" in his weaknesses, that "the power of Christ" may rest upon him. He came to the street-smart, corrupt Corinthian Gentiles "in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling," but the results were "demonstration of the Spirit and of power" (1 Cor 2:4; 15:43; 2 Cor 11:24–30; 12:9–10; 13:4).

When the disciples asked Jesus to increase their faith, Jesus replied by telling them a tiny "mustard seed" of faith could uproot a tree and plant it in the sea. But to get more to the point of their question, He continued with an illustration of a servant (slave) who works perhaps all day "plowing or tending sheep." When he comes in hungry and tired, he can't eat until he prepares dinner for his master and lets him finish eating and drinking. Then he doesn't dare expect thanks, for he's only a slave doing his duty (Lk 17:5–10).

A hard-hearted person will grumble at this “injustice,” but one with childlike trust will keep His eyes on Jesus with a thankful heart and receive more faith.

(Related scriptures: Ps 51:17; Lam 3:22–41; Is 57:15; 66:2; Lk 18:9–14; 22:24–29; Acts 14:22; 1 Cor 4:6–13; 2 Cor 4:7–18; 6:3–10; 11:23–30; 12:7–10; 13:4; Heb 5:2–8; 12:1–11).

3. Lack of focus: distractions interfere with time for God.

The heart is the control center, the motivation and source behind our behavior and faith, which is why a *hard heart* is so *deadly*. But the mind is the doorway to the heart. A good or bad heart is determined by what the mind feeds it – “Garbage in, garbage out.”

Jesus said it this way: “The lamp of the body is the eye. If therefore your eye is good, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness” (Prv 4:23; Mk 10:5; 16:14; Rom 2:5; Mt 6:22–23a).

“Walking after the spirit” is to be “spiritually minded,” “transformed by the renewing of your mind.” And a spiritual mind *speaks* the *Word*. “I believed and therefore I *spoke*, we also believe and therefore *speak*.” Faith that *speaks from the heart* is a *focused* faith (Rom 8:5–8; 12:2; 2 Cor 4:13; Mk 11:23).

In the parable of the sower, the third kind of soil was apparently soft, fertile soil. The seed sown in it grew and even produced fruit! But sadly, the fruit never matured. Why? It grew among “thorns,” which are “cares, riches, and pleasures of life.” How tragic and frightening. Because it shows the potential many of us have in God, *except for the endless distractions!* (Lk 8:4–15; also Gen 13:12; 25:32–34; 26:34–35; Ps 1, 119; Lk 8:14; 10:38–42; 11:34; 12:34; 14:26–35; 2 Cor 3:18; 1 Tim 4:15; 2 Tim 2:4; Heb 11:15; 1 Jn 2:15–17).

My daily life is a continual battle with distractions. My 1976 deliverance from depression took place when I got desperate enough to eliminate every distraction, even quitting my secular job, in order to spend all day seeking God. This, I realize, is not possible under normal circumstances, and I haven’t taken that kind of time since then.

In fact, another major mistake regarding misuse of my freedom occurred in 1982 when I concluded I didn’t have to be “under bondage” to “daily quiet time.” I was “free” to work all day and meditate and pray while I worked. You’ll see what happened in chapter 15 as a result of God’s fatherly discipline, for which I’ll be eternally grateful.

When problems arise for which I have no answer, I'll take half a day, all day, or even two days to get quiet before the Lord until I get an answer. Around 2004 my depression began to return. I searched my heart for any signs of the legalism that had caused it, and found nothing. So I decided to get alone with God until I heard from Him.

After some five or six hours of seeking, waiting, and looking here and there in Scripture without getting bogged down with intense study and miss the "gentle whisper" of the Holy Spirit (1 Kgs 19:12 NLT), I suddenly saw my problem in Numbers 4:18–20.

The Levitical family of Kohath, whose job it was to carry the furnishings of the Tabernacle after they were covered by the priests, is here warned: "The Kohathites must never enter the sanctuary to look at the sacred objects for even a moment, or they will die." As soon as I read this my depression vanished. Gone!

Because in that moment I knew its cause: I had been looking at the uncovered furniture, exposing myself to the "consuming fire" of God's holiness, from the time I began judging a certain minister for his weakness, as though uncovered by God's mercy and provision in the Atonement (1 Pet 4:7; 1 Jn 5:16).

Seven Things that Block Prayer And How to Overcome Them

Part two

More examples regarding focus vs distraction

Another time we had two or three homes vacant we could not seem to rent after posting newspaper ads, at some expense (before free Web advertising became available). I couldn't figure it out and got desperate and scared enough to shut down, and spent two and a half days in one of the vacancies, lying on the carpet, waiting on God and praying, coming home in the evening to eat and sleep. Although I didn't seem to get an obvious answer, I felt I had done my best to humble myself and seek His face. Within a week or two, the places were rented.

Again, we couldn't rent the home vacant at the time, after at least two newspaper ads. At the same time I'd been wrestling with whether to make a monthly pledge of money to the organization that sponsors the "Jesus film," shown around the world in many languages. Giving legalistically, because it was my "duty" was one of the three causes of my depression. Yet I knew Jesus' teaching on giving was true and powerful.

So I again marooned myself alone until God gave me either the faith to make the pledge, or released me from it. After several hours, I felt I had genuine faith, and came home to make the pledge. While I was on the phone speaking with their donor agent, another call came in, visible on "call waiting."

For some reason, I asked the agent to excuse me momentarily while I answered the other call. The caller's name was Zoe Right, and she rented the place, a good tenant. *Zoe* is the biblical Greek word for "life," not biological life, but life as it's applied to God and His Spirit. She was the "Right" one after my "obedience [was] fulfilled" (2 Cor 10:6).

I have many such stories as the result of getting alone with enough "quiet time," free of distractions (and phone!) to hear from God. Another one of my favorites from my pastoring days is the time I decided to resign the church I pastored in Greensboro, N.C., upset with a situation in the congregation. But before I resigned, I decided to take off work from my secular job and

spend the day seeking God. God gave me an answer that turned my gloom into glory, and it became one of the turning points in my ministry. I've told this story in my prison book, chapter seven.

Unfortunately, I got too careless with my newfound "liberty" and failed to seek God the next time I felt like resigning. I did resign, the first in a series of the worst mistakes in my life, all because of an oversimplified understanding of spiritual freedom, for with freedom comes *responsibility* (1 Cor 6:12; 10:23; Gal 5:13).

So seeking God has been a lifestyle, not because I'm so "spiritual," but because of the very costly lessons I've learned by not seeking Him adequately.

And also because I had godly parents who taught me well, with much love and an abundance of true stories of men and women of God who saw Him move after they "sought Him with all their heart," although I still had to learn the hard way (Jer 29:13).

I realize many reading this may not have had this advantage, which is why I'm doing my best to "pay it forward," in hopes you too will see His glory in the middle of perplexity and darkness, and avoid the temptation for a "quick fix," available through many resources, from drugs and alcohol, to unwise relationships (Is 6:1-3; 40:28-31; 42:16; 50:10-11; 2 Cor 4:7-18).

But I also have many more stories through quick prayers that needed a quick answer, like the time in my desperation I prayed, "God, I've got to have a wife in one month!" Then I apologized. That prayer is dated May 5, 1966; I was married June 5, exactly one month later. At the time of that prayer, I had no idea of any girl I would possibly even date at the Bible college I attended, much less marry. Four children and thirteen grandchildren later, we celebrated our fifty-sixth anniversary in 2022.

4. Ignorance

Ignorance of biblical truth is like a lost treasure of immense value that Jesus illustrated by the two parables: the "treasure hidden in a field" and the "pearl of great price." Each was so valuable that the one who discovered it sold everything he had to obtain it (Mt 13:44-46).

During two periods in my life I faced the same decision. The first I've already described, which led to my deliverance from depression. The second was the result of God's chastisement when I fell out of a tree, cracked my pelvic bone, and during recovery, made up for lost time not listening to Him, as told in chapter 15.

Since then I face daily the same struggle over priorities. But when I seek Him first, He makes up for the “lost time” with insight and wisdom for my secular work, a lesson I keep relearning, often “the hard way.”

There are some men and women of God, past and present, who so effectively prioritized their time with God that His Spirit-anointed Word in them gave and gives them the same *authority* in the spirit-realm Jesus had and said we would have:

“I tell you the truth, anyone who believes in Me will do the same works I have done, and even greater works, because I am going to be with the Father. You can ask for anything in My name, and I will do it, so that the Son can bring glory to the Father. Yes, ask Me for anything in My name, and I will do it!” (Jn 14:12–14 NLT; cf Mk 16:17–18).

Smith Wigglesworth is the most well-known. He read only the Bible and saw its teaching on healing in his spirit so clearly, that when he prayed for someone, either they were miraculously healed on the spot, or he counted it as done, regardless of the lack of evidence, and they received their healing later. Much has been written about him, available on the Internet.

Kenneth Hagan also experienced the same results through a faith that saw and believed what God said in defiance of evidence to the contrary. God has used these two men of God to show what is available to those who “believe,” and prove that “faith comes by hearing [spiritually], and hearing by the [revealed] Word of God” (Rom 10:17).

Many have accused Hagan’s followers of a “name it and claim it prosperity Gospel,” although I never saw this in his books or teaching tapes and the times I heard him speak. But I sat under one who emphasized prosperity through faith until I left the group in disgust.

The mighty Benjamites

However, when, after three months, I humbled myself, returned, and continued to listen and endure, my spiritual eyes opened to see an interesting parallel with David and the Benjamites. The warriors of Benjamin, although the smallest of the twelve tribes, were so skilled in weaponry, they would have annihilated the rest of the tribes, had not God turned the tide through prayer and fasting, as recorded in the last story in Judges (19–21).

“Among Benjamin's elite troops, 700 were left-handed, and each of them could sling a rock and hit a target within a hairs-breadth without missing” (Judg 20:16 NLT).

King Saul had led three thousand of them to hunt David to kill him, without success. But not long before Saul's death in his final battle with the Philistines, these mighty Benjamites began to join David at Ziklag (1 Sam 24:2; 26:2; 1 Chr 12:1).

'All of them were expert archers, and they could shoot arrows or sling stones with their left hand as well as their right. They were all relatives of Saul from the tribe of Benjamin" (1 Chr 12:2 NLT).

As soon as he became king after Saul's death, "David lamented with this lamentation over Saul and over Jonathan his son, and he told them to teach the children of Judah *the Song of the Bow*; indeed it is written in the Book of Jasher" (2 Sam 1:17-18).

"The song of " is not in the original Hebrew; it is implied, and other translations render it, "the use of" the bow. The only other mention of "the book of Jasher" is Joshua 10:13, where Joshua commands the sun and moon to stand still to give him time to defeat the Amorites at Beth Horon.

So my conclusion is that David wanted to teach his own tribe, Judah, two things: First, his own mercy, love, and honor, not only for his dearest friend Jonathan, but for the king who tried to destroy him. This is obvious by his refusal to honor the Amalekite who reported to David that he had killed Saul,

Instead of rejoicing that his enemy had been slain, ending years of being hunted like an animal by his insanely jealous king, David and his men "mourned and wept and fasted all day for Saul and his son Jonathan, and for the LORD's army and the nation of Israel, because they had died by the sword that day." Then he had the Amalekite executed, saying, "Why were you not afraid to kill the LORD's anointed one [King Saul!]" (2 Sam 1:1-16).

And second, that Judah learn and use the military skills the Benjamites were famous for.

Spiritually, it tells me this: First, we are to forgive, love, and pray for our enemies, as Jesus taught, and which is no doubt the main key to spiritual victory, for He said that when we exercise faith to remove a mountain (of impossibility), we must make sure our hearts are clear of unforgiveness, for "if you do not forgive, neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses." These four verses (Mk 11:23-26) are probably the most quoted verses by teachers in the "faith/Word" movement.

And second, to criticize those who teach the power of God through faith in His Word because many of them use it for gaining wealth instead of ministering to the needy is to blind ourselves to the incredible value of how faith works in spiritual warfare.

Because of David, the tribe of Benjamin became one with Judah, and in New Testament times the “Jews” (from the word “Judah”) included both tribes. (The ten “lost tribes” of Israel had been mixed with other foreigners by their Assyrian captors, who settled some in the area between Galilee and Judea, known as Samaria, and the people as Samaritans. See Jn 4:3–9; Acts 8:1–9)

Through this union, God gave us a transformed “Saul,” renamed Paul, the apostle, “of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews . . . concerning zeal, persecuting the church; concerning the righteousness of the law, blameless.” But he counted it all as “rubbish,” compared to the “surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus [his] Lord” (Phil 3:5–8).

What transformed him? It was not through “flesh and blood,” but “through the revelation of Jesus Christ.” Where and when? The only hint we have is that after his conversion in Damascus, he spent time in the Arabian Desert, south of Damascus. Here, possibly, he did what King Saul should have done: waited long enough for God to cleanse him of his religious tradition and reveal Christ, in whom all the law is fulfilled (Gal 1:12–17).

And through Paul’s epistles, we see the balance between the spiritual weapons of prayer and faith blended with relationship and fellowship, the purpose of prayer and faith.

“For [if we are] in Christ Jesus, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith activated *and* energized *and* expressed *and* working through love” (Gal 5:6 AMP; cf Lk 24:44; Col 2:9–13).

God’s available power when our eyes open to it

The book of Ephesians combines these two principles, for it’s the epistle of Paul that emphasizes both our authority in Christ and God’s family of believers as “His Body, which is the church” (Col 1:24).

Chapter one combines God’s purpose in bringing us together in unity, with “the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe, according to the working of His mighty power” (Eph 1:19). This one verse includes four Greek power words: *dunamis* (force, miraculous power, ability, strength); *energeia* (working, efficiency, “used only of superhuman power, whether of God or of the devil,” Thayer’s lexicon); *kratos* (dominion, might, power, strength); and *ischus* (forcefulness, ability, might, power, strength, Strong’s dictionary).

Paul’s prayer is that “the eyes of your understanding” will “be enlightened” to know the glory of our calling through the resur-

rection of Christ, God having “raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus,” “far above all principality and power and might and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come” (Eph 1:17, 21; 2:6).

And as if that’s not clear enough, “He put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all” (Eph 1:22–23).

All six chapters in Ephesians conclude with God’s purpose in His Church: chapter two ends, “in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit” (vv 21–22); chapter three ends, “to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen” (v 21); all of chapter four describes the church in operation,

Chapter five ends, “As the Scriptures say, ‘A man leaves his father and mother and is joined to his wife, and the two are united into one.’ This is a great mystery, but it is an illustration of the way Christ and the church are one. So again I say, each man must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband” (vv 31–33 NLT).

And chapter six wraps it all up by revealing how we battle against the demonic powers of darkness, not necessarily by confronting them directly, but by dealing with the legal basis they have in us because of our ignorance of who we are in Christ, which the “armor” alludes to.

“Therefore tak[ing] up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand in the evil day,” concludes with “praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, being watchful to this end with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints” (vv 12–18).

This explains why in Revelation 12:7–11, Michael, the warrior arch angel, finally has the authority to cast Satan and his angels out of the heavens to the earth. For he is here called “the accuser of our brethren, who accused them before our God day and night.”

Where does he get his right or authority to accuse us before God? From hearing God’s own children accuse one another instead of praying for one another.

We “overcome” him when we realize the full value of “the blood of the Lamb” to cleanse us from our own condemnation, while we ask God to minister “life” to fellow members of His Body who “sin not unto death,” that is through human weakness, not deliberate, willful sin (1 Jn 5:16).

To walk in this level of love and fellowship takes the highest level of surrender: “And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, and they did not love their lives to the death” (Rv 12:11).

Christ’s authority and preeminence are invested in His Body.

Colossians 1:16–18 brings three powerful truths together: first, the “invisible” creation, the spirit realm, consists of “thrones or dominions or principalities or powers.” Second, they were “created through Him and for Him,” for His purpose, and that “in Him all things “consist,” or hold together. And third, He has “preeminence,” that is, first in rank, influence, authority, through “His body the church,” verse 18.

This explains why when we “exalt Him,” we acknowledge His legal right to reign over “all things . . . visible and invisible,” beginning with our own will. It also explains why He is now seated at His Father’s right hand and “waits until His enemies are humbled and made a footstool under His feet” (Heb 10:12–13 NLT).

He’s waiting for us to take our place “in Him” and “overcome” His enemies through His Name, the authority He gave us when He “disarmed principalities and powers” and “made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it” (Col 2:15).

Now tell me, is it worth “selling everything” to buy that “field” for the “treasure” buried there? Is it worth putting less emphasis on the “cares, riches, and pleasures of life” that hinder us from bringing our “fruit to maturity” in order to give God and His Word our first priority? (Lk 8:14; cf Heb 12:2).

Peter, whom the religious leaders branded as “unlearned and ignorant,” gave us the secret of his power with God to bring thousands to Christ, pronounce terrifying judgment on Ananias and Sapphira, and raise the dead:

Through *knowing Him*, “and because of His glory and excellence, He has given us great and precious promises. These are the promises that enable you to share His divine nature and escape the world’s corruption caused by human desires (2 Pet 1:3–4).

For we enjoy the fruit of the Spirit as we are “filled with the *knowledge* of His will in all wisdom and *spiritual* understanding . . . and increasing in the *knowledge* of God.”

(Related scriptures: Acts 4:13; 2:38–41; 5:1–11; 9:40; 1 Tim 6:12; Is 5:13; Ez 22:26; Hos 6:6; Ps 103; Prv 1–4; 9:10; 15:14; 24:3–7; Is 28:9; Dan 6:10–18; 11:32; Phil 1:9; 3:10).

5. Praying against the will or the timing of God

The more you know God and His Word, the more you will understand how and when to pray *according to His will* instead of asking *amiss*. Our “inheritance” is for *God’s glory*, and our God-given blessings are not the same as our fleshly desires (Ps 37:5; Mt 6:22–23; Lk 12:16–21; Jas 4:3).

Yet, sometimes God grants our request even when it’s against His will, when He knows we won’t have it any other way, or want *now* what He wants us to wait *later* for.

When the Israelites begged for meat because they were tired of eating manna, God “gave them what they wanted.” “They were not deprived of their craving; but while their food was still in their mouths, the wrath of God came against them, and slew the stoutest of them and struck down the choice men of Israel” (Num 11:31–33; Ps 78:29–31; 106:15; 1 Cor 10:1–11).

Wow! And that was a *natural, normal* desire we hardly think of as sin. But when we get what we want *ahead of God’s timing*, it *prolongs our immaturity* and may stop our spiritual progress altogether. That generation in the wilderness never did grow up, for “He gave them their request, but sent leanness into their soul” (Ps 106:15; Num 13–14; Is 50:10–11).

Years later Israel begged for a king because they didn’t know how to live by faith and depend on God. God said, “I gave you a king in My anger, and took him away in My wrath.” That one statement marks Israel’s history under her kings for more than 400 years when those kings eventually led her into destruction and captivity (Hos 13:11; 1 Sam 8:7; 10:17–24; 2 Kgs chaps 17, 25).

John said, “Now this is the *confidence* [faith] that we have in Him, that if we ask anything *according to His will*, He hears us. And if we *know* that He hears us, whatever we ask, we *know* that we have the petitions that we have asked of Him” (1 Jn 5:14–15; Jn 15:7–8; 2 Cor 10:6).

God has been “opening my ear” to the fact that I’m still living too much by the (tree of the) knowledge of right and wrong, rather than relationship – sensitivity to His Spirit and wisdom. This has become obvious lately as I hear myself wanting to challenge some of my friends for their wrong beliefs.

When I’m more concerned for their “error” than the relationship itself, and correct doctrine trumps fellowship and love, I’m the one with the problem, not them. Because when I flow in loving relationship, the correctness of their belief becomes a

matter of God's wisdom and timing, and whether it's even important enough to mention it. And sometimes God changes *my* thinking on the subject, that is, if I'm humble enough to listen! (Ps 25:9).

"Those who are wise will find a time and a way to do what is right, for there is a time and a way for everything" (Ecc 8:5b-6a NLT).

6. Not connected to the Body of Christ

When God chose Abraham, He called him to be a "great nation." When his descendants came out of Egypt into the wilderness, the Sinai Desert, God told Moses those people were "a special treasure" to Him, "a *kingdom* of priests and a holy nation" (Gen 12:2; Ex 19:5-6).

In that wilderness He taught Moses how to construct a "tabernacle," a "sanctuary, that I may dwell among them." Nearly a third of Exodus describes this Tabernacle, which is filled with symbolism about *how God's people relate and fellowship together in Christ* (Ex 25:8; chaps 25-40).

When Solomon dedicated the permanent structure of this Tabernacle, called the Temple, he asked God to hear and answer everyone who prayed "*toward this Temple*" from whatever distress or calamity he was in (1 Kgs 8:22ff; 2 Chr 6:12ff).

The Tabernacle of Moses and the Temple of Solomon correspond to the Church in the New Testament. And the Church is believers meeting and dwelling together in unity. It's "Mount Zion . . . the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem." There the Lord commands blessing, protects His people, and terrifies His enemies! (Ps 2; 27:1-6; 48:1-8; 50:1-6; 110; 133; Mic 4:1-4; Gal 4:25-26; Heb 12:22-23).

From Ephesians 4, Romans 12, and 1 Corinthians 12, it is obvious there's no way to grow to spiritual maturity outside of being closely and intimately related to the Body of Christ, the Church. Furthermore believers can get sick and even die prematurely when they don't rightly "discern" or recognize "the Lord's Body" - not just the spiritual meaning of "the Lord's supper," but also its meaning in His many-membered Body, our local church fellowship (Mt 16:18-19; 18:20; Eph 5:31-32; Heb 3:13; 12:24-25; compare 1 Cor 11:29-32 with 10:17).

As I said in point number four, Ephesians 6 concludes with how to fight against demons and fallen angels, "rulers of the darkness of this age." He lists the "armor of God," and sums it up with, "praying always with all prayer and supplication in the

Spirit – not against the powers of darkness he'd named, but "*for all the saints!*" (6:10–18).

Get intimately involved spiritually with God's people, and watch God begin to answer your prayers! (1 Kgs 8:28–53; Job 42:10; Acts 2:1f; 4:24–31; Is 56:7; Mk 11:17; Phil 2:1–4; Col 3:12–17; 1 Pet 3:7).

7. Giving up too soon

If God doesn't answer when the above conditions have been met, His delay is our opportunity to develop faith. If we get discouraged by His silence, it only means our faith is *too weak!* (Mt 8:26; 13:58; Mk 6:5–6; 8:17–21; 9:23).

Occasionally someone asks me whether it's wrong to keep praying about the same thing, or should we pray once and then believe it's done? The answer has to do with faith, because prayer is the exercise of faith, and it's faith that moves God. So pray until you genuinely believe God has heard, and then continue to thank God and anticipate the answer (Mk 11:23; 1 Jn 5:14–15).

Jesus gave two parables about not giving up. In Luke 11: 5–8, He compared God to a person who doesn't want to be disturbed in the middle of the night, but finally gives in to his friend's "persistence." In Luke 18:1–8 He compared God to an "unjust judge" who finally gave in to a widow who refused to give up.

These parables are not about God's uncaring hardness, but what it takes for our faith to reach "critical mass" as it were, the concentration of uranium it takes for a nuclear explosion. Because *faith*, our link to God and the spirit world, must be *tested* and *developed until it gets results*. In Luke 11:9–13, ask, seek, and knock mean, in the Greek, *keep asking, keep seeking, keep knocking*¹ (Jas 1:2–7, 12; 1 Pet 1:7; Rom 5:3–5).

Hebrews 11 is called "the hall of faith." It's about men and women of *faith* who "patiently endured" until they "obtained the promise." Jesus ignored, then racially insulted a foreign woman who only wanted her daughter to be healed. Then He compared her to a dog – outside of God's chosen, the Jews. But He did it to *cleanse her faith of the weakness that would have hindered the miracle* (Mt 15:21–28; Heb 6:15).

In that short period of insults, Jesus (1) dealt with any *root* of disobedience or unforgiveness (pride); (2) He humbled and crushed any remaining hardness in her heart; (3) He focused her attention to laser-beam intensity; (4) He challenged her knowledge of God's purpose to deliver; (5) He prevailed on her determination to lay hold of His will; (6) He dealt with her

rejection by His own children (the Jews) until she was willing to be only a “*little dog*” under their table licking up the crumbs.

(7) Through her refusal to give up even at Rock bottom, her faith reached *critical mass* and she wrenched the miracle out of the spirit realm into the natural, pulling from the Master of the Universe a rarely heard response, “*O woman, great is your faith! Let it be to you as you desire*” (Mt 15:28; see Lk 17:5–10).

If you are *serious* about prayer, learn this seven-fold lesson from an unnamed Canaanite mother, and don’t give up until you know God’s answer, even if it is only, “My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.” For then you have the secret to spiritual strength (2 Cor 12:9).

But make sure it’s your *hard heart* that is weak and broken, not your faith. For though He *waits*, “when He hears it [the *voice* of real, heart faith], He will answer you” (Is 30:18–19).

(Related scriptures: 1 Thes 5:17; Ps 139:1–4; Gen 32:24–28; Ps 16:8; 40:1–2; 139; 2 Kgs 2; 5:11–14; Dan 9:20–23; 10:2–12; Lk 11:5–13; 18:1–8; Eph 6:10–18; Heb 6:11–15; 10:35–39)

1. Wuest, Kenneth S., *The New Testament: An Expanded Translation* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1984) 163.

SECTION THREE

Navigating Heaven on Earth

I say then: Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh. For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. Galatians 5:16-18

CHAPTER 12

Eat Your Way to Royalty

This is the bread which came down from heaven – not as your fathers ate the manna, and are dead. He who eats this bread will live forever. John 6:58

Part I From Exodus to the Cross

Mystery Manna: Key to Spiritual Success

Did you know that queen bees grow from exactly the same kind of eggs and larvae which produce the worker bees? Queens are not born into royalty; they are *nourished* into it by a diet different than honey and pollen, which normal larvae feed on. Queen's food, called *royal jelly* – rich in vitamins and proteins, comes right from the mouths and glands of plain, humble worker bees. On this diet the larva not only grows faster, but lives (as a queen) 20 to 40 times longer (up to five years), and is the only female able to reproduce, laying up to a million eggs in her lifetime. No queen? No bee colony, and no honey!

In 1 Corinthians 10:1–5 Paul tells us that most of those who left Egypt were “scattered in the wilderness” without ever reaching Canaan. Yet God had made perfect provision for them. He “duralized” their clothing and shoes forty years, and fed them food for the body and spirit right from His mouth (Dt 8:3).

The manna was to God's future “royal priests” what royal jelly is to bee larvae. It contained all the spiritual vitamins and proteins needed to produce leaders like Moses and David, priest-kings who would *shepherd* the nations of the earth (Ex 19:6; Ps 78:72, Rev 2:27; here “rule” is *poimaino*, to tend as a shepherd).

What happened, then? What is the mystery behind Israel's greatest disaster until the Babylonian captivity?

First, manna is almost always mentioned in connection with complaining. It's bad enough to be hungry and without food. Combine that with two to three million people crammed into a “great and terrible wilderness,” the Sinai Desert, of all places (Dt 1:19), under a leader without provisions, and any of us would complain, and do complain in far easier circumstances (Ex 16; Num 11; Dt 1:19; Ps 78; Jn 6).

Second, it did not meet their mental or emotional (soulish) needs. "Our *soul* is dried up," they grumbled. Even Moses hit rock bottom over this murmuring, begging God to kill him (Num 11:6,15). Third, it was God's intent that the manna dry up their "soul." The manna was a "test" to *prove* the quality of their obedience "through adversity or hardship" (*Theological Word-book of the O.T.*).

To pass the test, God wanted them to handle tribulation the way Job did: "When He has tested me, I shall come forth as gold. . . . I have treasured the words of His mouth more than my necessary food" (Job 23:10-12).

Or David: "It is good for me that I have been afflicted, that I may learn your statutes." Or Jeremiah: "Know that for Your sake I have suffered rebuke. Your words were found and I ate them. And Your word was to me the joy and rejoicing of my heart" (Ps 119:71; Jer 15:15b-16a).

When Adam and Eve, in disobedience, ate of the tree of knowledge, his spirit died, cutting off their connection to God, as He had warned them. Their soul or self now ruled instead of God, through His Spirit in union with their spirit. The Hebrew word for soul also means "self" (*nephesh*), which explains why we grumble when ol' man Self gets frustrated (Gen 3:3-7; Lev 17:11).

So God ingeniously used the manna as a roadblock to this "outward man." He fed their bodies, but humbled and afflicted their soul. He wanted to resuscitate their *spirit* through His *revealed* Word, the Word from His mouth: intimate, personal communion again! (2 Cor 4:16; Dt 8:2, 3; 29:29; Lev 23:29). *Selah* (chew on that awhile).

When their complaining over the manna reached the breaking point, God reluctantly "gave them their request, but sent *leanness into their soul*." Spiritually empty, they reaped terrible judgment upon themselves (Ps 106:15; Num. 11:31-34, Ps 78:29-31).

Thus manna is spirit-food; it is weight-lifter's high-protein for angels. In Ps 78:25, "angel's food," can also be translated "bread of the mighty." Mighty ones in the spirit realm are rulers: "principalities and powers" (Eph 1:21; 6:12).

Had Lucifer's princes been content with "daily bread" at the mouth of their Creator, they could have conquered the temptation to rebel. The Israelites grumbled because they were blind to the daily *royal* banquet in front of them – spiritual delights that would have made them "more than conquerors" in the land of Canaan, and in fact, did exactly that to the two who'd obviously availed

themselves of it – Joshua and Caleb (Is 14:12–14; Ez 28:12–17; Mt 4:4; Josh 1:8–9; Num 14:6–9).

Spiritual blindness

“What is it?” they asked, “For they did not know what it was.” God brings up the question again twice, calling it “manna which *you did not know* nor did your fathers know.” The very name, manna, meaning “what,” or “what is it,” implies mystery and provokes inquiry (Ex 16:15; Dt 8:3, 16).

Jesus revealed the “mysteries of the Kingdom” in parables for the same reason – to conceal from the “natural man” what only “the spirit of man” can grasp (Mt 13:11–15; 1 Cor 2:14,11).

Solomon said this divine process of concealing and revealing is the glory of kings. In the last chapter of Proverbs, King Lemuel’s mother warns her son about “that which destroys kings”– things which satisfy the flesh but deaden the spirit’s sensitivity to God’s purposes (Prv 25:2; 31:1–9; Rom 8:7; 1 Cor 2:14).

In the New Testament, after a long and painful history of experience with God’s ways, one would think His “own” people would have solved the mystery and learned how to eat. Not so. From the first day that Living Manna stood before them in flesh and blood, their “what’s” began.

“Who are You?” “Who do You make Yourself out to be?” “We know where this Man is from; but when Christ comes, no one knows where He is from.” Like their forefathers in Sinai, they murmured and complained, judging “according to appearance” instead of “hearing” with ears of their “inner man,” their spirit (Jn 8:25; 6:53; 7:12, 24, 27, 32; Eph 3:16; 1 Pet 3:4).

Just as the mundane manna tested Israel, so God sent His Son encased in a plain, earthen vessel to test these Jews. “If any man desires to do His will . . . he will know – have the needed illumination to recognize” the Source of His Words. Instead they “tested” *Him*, as their fathers did over the manna. They wanted Messiah on *their* terms, and attempted to justify themselves and publicly humiliate Him in debate (Jn 7:17 AMP; Ps 78:18).

But it backfired. His rebuttals, counter questions and heart-splitting explanations of the law, “astonished” the multitudes and silenced His interrogators. “They dared not question Him anymore.” He shriveled their soul. No more what’s (Mt 22:33; Lk 20:40).

It separates men from boys, princes from paupers.

The turning point had occurred long before, at the feeding of the five thousand, when they tried to force Him to the throne. Here at last was their Messiah. His Kingdom had come.

"Let's get started; we've seen You do God's works; show *us* how." What they couldn't do with such power! "This is the work of God, that you *believe* in Him whom He sent," Jesus answered (Jn 6:28 paraphrased, 29).

"Fine; give us a *sign* and we'll believe. Like the manna Moses gave our fathers in the desert" (Jn 6:30 paraphrased).

Incredible! They'd had 1400 years to mature as God's "Kingdom of priests," set-apart and disciplined to be God's regal heirs. Yet they still could not grasp the basis of true royalty: *spiritual* nourishment, the mystery of the manna and now the multiplied bread! (Ex 19:5-9).

So Jesus explained, "Moses didn't give it to you; My Father did, and I am the *true* bread from heaven. If you eat My flesh and drink My blood, you'll not only be deeply satisfied, you'll live forever. You'll never die!" (Jn. 6:32, 51 paraphrased).

Greatly offended, they were listening with the wrong ears. "Having ears, do you not hear? . . . How is it you do not understand?" Even His disciples *complained*. "Does this offend you?" He asked them. "It is the Spirit who gives life. . . . The words that I speak to you are *spirit*. . . ." (Mt 8:18, 21; Jn. 6:61, 63).

Here was the very "word that proceeds from the *mouth* of the Lord," which Moses had plainly told them the manna represented. But sadly, *their very means of kingdom glory now became the point over which they rejected their long awaited King*. [Selah!] "From that time many of His disciples went back and walked with Him no more." His Life-giving Words, designed to make them spiritual giants, "dried up their soul" without touching their spirit (Dt 8:3; Jn 6:66).

Of the twelve, Judas was the most disappointed. Now for the first time Jesus exposed him as "a devil." Judas never grasped the *mystery* of Christ, the *what* of the manna. If the first mention of his treachery occurred when Jesus talked about eating His flesh and blood, what was it that prompted him, during the Last Supper, to go to the priest to betray Him? (Jn 6:70).

Judas "ate" (listened) physically, *but not spiritually*, the true Manna, the mystical body and blood of Christ. Spiritually anemic from an impoverished diet, though taught by the Ultimate Teacher, he succumbed to the ultimate temptation (Jn 13:21-30;

1 Cor 11:24–31; the “law of first mention” is a principle of Bible interpretation).

Part II The Church Age

A manual on war rations

Now, of course, we would never do such a thing. We've had two thousand more years of hindsight. The End is getting closer. The Body of Christ, His Bride, His blood-washed Church, should be mature and grown up by now. Yet the vast majority of believers are more preoccupied with the world than with the Kingdom of God.

We're supposed to be major players (well, warriors) in End-times events. Jesus connected “the end” not to “wars and rumors of wars,” or “famines, pestilences, and earthquakes,” but to the preaching of the gospel “as a witness to all nations, and *then* the end will come” (Mt. 24:7, 14).

If that's true, what's hindering us from “lay[ing] hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of [us]” so we can find our calling and walk in it with power? What keeps us from coming “to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ”? (Phil 3:12; Eph. 4:13).

I believe the answer lies in the mystery of the manna. And to unlock this mystery, God has given us one book of the Bible devoted entirely to its glorious secrets – Paul's letter to the believers at Ephesus. Ephesians is for royalty. The first two chapters tell of our enthronement in “heavenly places, far above all principality and power.” The last chapter tells us to “stand” in spiritual armor, maintaining authority over rulers of darkness (Eph 1:20-21; 2:6; 6:11-12).

Consequently our standing in prayer “for all saints” will open doors of ministry for them, even for great leaders like Paul. Thus we exercise dominion as “kings and priests to our God,” *reigning* on the earth. With “the key of David” we open and close doors in the Kingdom of heaven.

But between chapters two and six lies “a great mystery” – the mystery of the Church, the Body of Christ (ch 3). And at its epicenter (ch 4) is the mystery of its *nourishment!* (Eph 6:19; Rom 5:17; Rev 5:10; Mt 16:19; Rev 3:7).

Spiritual nourishment from clay pots.

God's Church, "the fullness of Him who fills all in all," the pillar and ground of truth, receives its nourishment from Christ, our heavenly "Treasure in earthen vessels" (Eph 1:23; 1 Tim 3:15; 2 Cor 4:7).

The Treasure I can handle. It's the "earthen vessels" that do to me what the manna and Jesus' flesh did to the Jews. I mean, these "clay pots" are chosen literally *because* they are *weak*! (1 Cor 1:28).

And that's not all: Some are even "rebellious" (Ps 68:18 KJV, NAS; Eph. 4:8). Most of us are self-preoccupied, man-centered, earth-focused, divisive "carnal babes"; yet God uses us with gifts of the Spirit to build up His own Body, the Church (1 Cor 1:7; 3:1; 14:4ff).

Adding insult to injury, God bestows "greater honor" on the "less presentable" parts of His Body. Not outward but *inward* deficiency. I used to think it meant an insignificant but pure, very humble saint. But I've witnessed God using with great effectiveness people I would, in my "natural thinking," have "written off" long ago (1 Cor 1:25–31; 2:14–15; 12:23).

One day it dawned on me that we criticize our brethren often for the very reason God chooses them. God does it to prevent their taking any glory for themselves, and He uses our pride and mistreatment to keep them humble: their gain, our tragic loss! Furthermore, I've come to realize that many of the "mighty prophets" God uses seem to be "blessed" with some glaring (but sometimes hidden) weakness (Mt 11:25; 1 Cor 1:29; 2 Cor 12:7–9).

Throughout Ephesians, written to disclose the mystery and purpose of the Church, I can't find any other way we grow to maturity than through the *interchange of nourishment among these weaklings!* Royal Bread for the mighty from the mouths of plain, humble "worker bees."

I'll admit, it's still often a mystery to me. As a youth my "what's" led me away from God to other religions, philosophies, and "psychological explanations" that made more sense. Anything made more sense than my having to sit at the feet of the "saints" (what?!) for my spiritual growth.

But I hadn't read between the lines. Read this slowly: "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. . ." (Eph 4:16).

I'd failed to recognize the "effective working," the spiritual *energia* (Greek) of the *Treasure* within these earthen vessels. I hadn't heeded God's command to "regard no one according to the flesh." And I'd failed to *understand* or *refused to believe* that every child of God really *is* a "new creation" in Christ Jesus! (2 Cor 5:16-17).

Partaking of Christ among the brethren

Look again at 1 Corinthians 10. From the hindsight of "spiritual food" in the Wilderness and insight on overcoming temptation, Paul goes on to discuss the Lord's supper. "The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ? *For we, though many, are one bread and one body; for we all partake of that one bread.*" (16,17).

In 1 Corinthians 11:27-34, "discerning the Lord's body" seems to be the New Testament "test" of obedience. Disobedience brings "chastening" like the "plagues" inflicted on those who failed to discern the manna (Num 11:33; Ps 78:31).

Can it be that Christ, the Living Manna, appears before us daily in our "earthen" brethren? And often we not only fail to *receive* the true Bread through them, we *complain* about it. And then we complain when we're "plagued" with judgment.

Think about it: God revealed Himself in flesh, eating and drinking with mortal humans, not a few minutes, but thirty-three years. Through His death and resurrection He conquered the root of sin and ripped away the veil that kept us from His Presence. And after His ascension He placed His glory right inside the Church, in men and women no different than we are – *when* they got in *one accord* through prayer (Rom 4:25; Heb 10:20; Eph 3:21; Acts 1:14; 2:1-4).

Not only that, but He has restored *worship* to the Church like we've never had it before, providing the "dew" that accompanied the manna in the desert. And we (well, some of us at times) still grumble! Over manna. Over God's ultimate, high-tech, quantum age, genetically pure, organic, real *heart* flesh-and-blood Manna – our Holy Communion – straight from His mouth!

Because He wants intimacy with us! Like those who forsook Jesus we question, "What?! Who are You? Who do You make Yourself out to be?" (Num 11:9; 1 Jn 3:9).

What *else* can God do? If He personally appeared in dazzling light and sat down to explain the mystery to us, we'd only grasp it with our *minds*, our natural man. *Do you realize He must speak to us through perplexity, in a mystery-parable, in order to rend the veil*

of our flesh, to weaken and confuse the natural man to open up the spiritual? (2 Cor 4:8; Eph 1:9; 3:3, 4, 9; 5:32; Col 1:26–27).

If He only appeared in perfect, flawless people, our whole Christian walk would boil down to a religion of performance and attainment. The “mystery of the faith” would dissolve in the muscle and sweat of dead works – the striving of the soul, not the power of the Spirit! (1 Tim 3:9; Ez 44:18; Rom 16:9).

At the Feast of Pentecost the Jews rejoiced over two loaves of *leavened bread* waved before the Lord. On the Day of Pentecost the Jews, “amazed and perplexed,” again confronted a mystery: Galileans speaking in the languages of visitors from the surrounding nations “the wonderful works of God.” These shocked foreigners expressed their amazement with precisely the Hebrew meaning of *manna*, “What?” “Whatever could this mean?” (Lev 23:17; Acts 2:12).

Manna was difficult, but *leavened* was too much for a Jewish mind. Unleavened bread was to the Jew “pure” bread, not defiled or contaminated with human error. Those apostles were not only clumsily human, they were “unlearned and ignorant,” socially inferior *laymen*. Absolute nobodies in the eyes of many (Acts 4:13 KJV; 1 Cor 1:27–28).

Suddenly the “leavenest” one of them, the one who had shamefully denied his Messiah, spoke. The sword of the Levites that once slew 3,000 at Sinai now became the Sword of the Spirit, the Word from God's mouth in the mouth of the Apostle Peter. That Word “cut to the heart” and instantly circumcised and purified 3,000 Jews in the deep, impenetrable interior of their being, transforming them from ritualistic, rationalistic Jews into true worshippers (Ex 32:28; Acts 2:37; Phil 3:3; Jn 4:23–24).

Part III My own manna struggle

When God opened my ears.

Years ago I was sitting under the ministry of a certain minister. He preached Sunday morning, Sunday night, and taught Wednesday night, and even led the worship service. There were others in the congregation I felt could do as well, including myself. And I had nothing to do but listen to him “drone” on week after week.

On this particular mid-week service he opened by saying, “I believe God has something special to say to someone.” I thought, *Yea, right*. Suddenly God rebuked me sharply: *You are doing exactly what the grumbling Israelites did in the wilderness when they failed to “hear” Me in the manna.*

Jolted by the Spirit, I bolted out of my “attitude,” and from then on began to recognize God's voice through this earthen vessel. I cannot count the times God spared me from all night prayer vigils to hear from God, when it was there all the time in the mouth of His servant.

You might ask, then, “What is the value of seeking God alone in prayer and Bible study?” The answer is that *intimacy with God illuminates and enlarges fellowship with His Body*. The two are inseparable (1 Jn 4:20).

I once pastored a small congregation in the tobacco belt, which bound our spiritual leaders. I had an awesome message against nicotine, but somehow couldn't preach it – probably because I had no idea what the addiction was like.

Then one of my members persuaded me to give a certain evangelist and his group a couple nights of meetings at our church. But I was totally unprepared for their style of music and ministry the first night. I felt angry and betrayed by my congregation for getting excited over “wild fire” after all I'd taught them. But I knew I had to wrestle it out with God like Jacob at Peniel. As soon as I “broke through,” I saw the situation with brand new eyes and couldn't wait for the second service (Gen 32; Hos 12:4; Hab 2:1).

That evening I was deeply in love with my people and the visiting evangelistic team. Their singing and guitar – amplified so loud I could not hear the words – didn't bother me. Nor did his wild, shouting-style preaching, which I'd previously felt “lacked substance.” But now I was simply caught up in the glory, when “brothers live together in harmony” (Ps 133; Jn 17:21-23; Eph 4:2-4).

Suddenly in the middle of his “wild-fire” message he shifted gears like a semi-truck negotiating a steep hill. And though I'd told him nothing of the problem, he preached my exact message against nicotine – the message I'd dreamed of preaching “some day.” Only he preached it with powerful authority and a compassion born of his own experience with the same addiction, and anointed by the Spirit, the “dew” from heaven.

You guessed it: God broke that bondage, doing in one night what I had struggled to accomplish for years. For God's Voice is more than Word or words; it is Spirit, and *it must unlock my spirit*. And far from limiting us to our private devotional life, God often entrusts His word to the “mouth” of a rough-hewn ex-commercial fisherman like Peter (Mt. 16:19; read Psalm 29 – the voice of the Lord!).

No doubt this accounts for some of the amazing revivals throughout church history and today as humble earthen vessels are moved by the Holy Spirit to be God's mouth-pieces. May God help us recognize them for who they are in Christ (Mk 6:3-4; 1 Cor 12:21-25; Gal 4:14; 1 Thes 5:20; 1 Tim 4:12; Tit 2:15).

In leading someone to Christ we usually quote Romans 10:9 & 10 about confessing with our mouth and believing with our heart. But the context of this passage is the key to our own personal revival, where Paul quotes Moses saying, "Don't look far off for someone [some great preacher] to bring your spiritual breakthrough. Don't even expect it to come down from heaven! For it is right there in your mouth and in your heart" (Dt. 30:11-14, paraphrased).

Oh for Balance!

I believe most of us fall into one of two categories when it comes to spiritual nourishment. Mature believers rely heavily on private communion with God as we learn to break down the written Word until it becomes the Word from God's mouth, our bread from heaven. There is no substitute for this, for our spiritual life depends on "every word that proceeds from the mouth of God" (Dt. 8:3).

Immature believers, however, thrive on what others break down for them. They are "spiritually dull." (v.11). Their digestive systems are too weak to convert many of the hard teachings, metaphors, examples, and mysteries of grace and truth into "spiritual understanding" and "Life in His Son." This is why the devotional *Daily Bread* is so popular among jail and prison inmates. For many it is their only "bread" (Heb 5:11-12; Col 1:9; 1 Jn 5:11).

But I've found that many so-called mature believers, including myself, have difficulty "eating" from less mature or immature believers. If it doesn't have "depth" or fit some other standard of ours, or we're not of the same "doctrinal persuasion," like those spiritually blind Jews, we simply don't "hear." Or even more subtle, we listen and analyze with our minds, but do not *receive with our hearts* a word from God's mouth that could meet a serious need in our lives.

For years I secretly took pride in the fact that though "my sheep" needed me, I didn't need them. Yet I wondered why I had no joy, struggled with depression, and deep down, hated the ministry. Eventually God led me to re-examine Romans 3-8 and Galatians 2-5, as I explained previously.

It took many months to absorb a new understanding of these revolutionary ideas about law and grace, but the end result is that I fell in love with Jesus and had my own personal laughing and joy-revival – my life’s turning point.

And the love spilled out to the sheep I pastored. They had been my “cross,” my nemesis, my “thorn in the flesh.” Now I saw them as a gold mine of endless blessing. I wanted to be with them all the time, to listen to them, to love and enjoy them at every opportunity. Even at the “unauthorized” home prayer meetings they’d started in opposition to our church services. I was literally “intoxicated” with love for them (2 Cor 12:7; Pr. 5:19, literal meaning).

It was the closest thing to heaven on earth I’d ever experienced, having finally grasped the meaning of “the communion of the body of Christ.” It is not intellectual but a *spiritual* sharing as we look beyond flesh and blood and see Christ in one another (1 Cor 2:9–10).

True, most of the Church has not come to the place where the members are “teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs.” Maybe it’s because *the dew of the night* has not fallen on the Western church as it has in countries closed to the Gospel – where the heat of persecution removes lukewarmness and intensifies dedication (Col 3:16; Num 11:8; Acts 4; Rom 5:3–5; 1 Cor 4:26; Eph 4:1–16; 1 Thes 1:5–6; Heb 10:32–34; Rv 3:15–18).

At times I’ve gotten impatient and critical – until the Holy Spirit again tunes my heart, usually through my personal devotions, to see the manna all around me, right in the *wilderness*. And once again I behold – and hear – His voice in my brothers and sisters in Christ, lifting me out of the mundane into the heavenly.

Part IV The End of the Age

The warnings of Hebrews

I consider the book of Hebrews to be the scariest book in the New Testament, like that section of the Old Testament between Numbers 11 and 20, where most of the Israelites lost their inheritance because of their unbelief, including Moses, and that, ironically, because of his reaction to their grumbling (Num 14, 20, 1 Cor 10:1–12).

Hebrews builds around five warnings concerning the danger of unbelief: 2:2–4; 4:1–3, 11–13; 5:11–6:20; 10:26–39; 12:25–29. In the final warning God contrasts the terror on Mount Sinai at

the giving of the Ten Commandments to the glory of Mount Zion under the New Covenant. Mount Zion is the *fulfillment* of the Ten Commandments – brethren, through their relationship with God, dwelling in loving unity, as in Psalm 133. It is the “heavenly Jerusalem . . . the general assembly and church of the firstborn . . . the spirits of just men made perfect” (Ex 20; Heb 12:23).

But when we get to verse 25 through the end of the chapter, we find it’s not just a contrast from terror to glory, but from terror on a small scale (Mt. Sinai) to major catastrophic events that “shake not only the earth, but also heaven” (Heb 12:26).

Why? Because it takes extreme measures to get many, if not most, of us close enough to God to *really* love and understand one another. You see, the glory of Mt. Zion was available to the Israelites under the Old Covenant. But the very terror God designed to open their ears (hearts) to hear His voice from the top of Mt. Sinai, caused them to reject His voice for fear of dying.

“So the people stood afar off, but Moses drew near the thick darkness *where God was.*” God was in the *darkness. That’s how and where Moses heard His voice!* We often can’t hear Him speak until it gets “dark” and scary enough to shut out everything but *God – if we endure long enough!* (Ex 19:19; 20:18–21, Dt 5:29–31, 1 Kgs. 8:12).

It’s so easy to read that account and marvel at the dullness of those “stiffnecked people” (Deut. 9:6). Yet the warnings in Hebrews concern the same problem. Three times in chapters three and four God warns, “Today, if you will *hear His voice*, do not harden your hearts” (3:8, 15; 4:7). And in chapter five as the writer (Paul?) attempts to explain the eternal priesthood of Melchizedek, he says it’s “hard to explain, since you have become *dull of hearing*” (Dt 9:6; Heb 3:8, 15; 5:11).

The Melchizedek priesthood is one of grace, not law. But it takes a hearing heart and the fear of God to walk in *true* grace. For when our hearts are hard, “grace” becomes an excuse to use our liberty to walk in the flesh, excusing *ourselves* for our failures while condemning *others* for theirs, or excusing them instead of praying for and helping them.

We allow pockets of resentment in place of “*fervent love*” that covers a “multitude of sins.” “For he shall have *judgment without mercy*, that hath showed no mercy; and mercy rejoiceth against judgment” (Gal 5:13; Jn 8:15; 1 Pet 4:8; Jas 2:12–13; Heb 12:15; Jas 2:13 KJV).

Key to the coming “shaking”

The ultimate and final warning in Hebrews boils down to having a heart tender enough to hear God speak “from heaven.” When He spoke from Mt. Sinai, the mountain shook. When He “speaks from heaven” the heavens will shake, removing everything that can be shaken, purging our foundation of “wood, hay, and straw,” until only “gold, silver, precious stones” are left (1 Cor 3:10-15; Zec 13:9; 1 Pet 1:7; 4:12).

But a major part of hearing God speak “from heaven” is to *hear* Him speak from “the heavenly Jerusalem,” Zion, the Church – through *His people*, royal jelly from *plain*, “*worker bees*,” as it were.

If our hearts are sensitive enough to hear God’s voice from the “weaker,” “less honorable,” and “unpresentable” members of His Body, God can “shake out” our impurities very gently in the quiet *transparency* of our hearts as we *humble* ourselves before Him in the fear of God (1 Cor 12:22–23; 1 Chr 7:14).

What a wealth of *grace* God imparts to us through “discerning the Lord’s body.” One who fails to “listen” in this area “drinks judgment to himself” because in failing to “discern” the full meaning of Christ’s sacrifice, symbolized by the bread and the blood, (1) he fails to recognize Christ in his brethren, and (2) he refuses to be accountable to the only representative God has on earth – His Church (1 Cor 11:29; 10:17; Col 1:18).

Why? Because God’s purpose for us is summed up in this one simple truth – learning to hear and know God so intimately that we love others exactly the way He loves us. And we’ll experience our share in “the fullness of God,” the joy of “the city of the living God” *now*, even “on earth as it is in heaven” (Mt 22:39–40; Rom 13:8–10; Gal 5:14; Eph 1:10, 22–23; 2:20–22; 3:17–19; Phil 2:1–4; 3:10; 1 Jn 4:7–21; Lk 11:2; 1 Cor 3:10–15; Eph 3:19; 1 Pet 4:17).

This is the long-range purpose of grace and the reason for the purifying fire: God wants to bring us together as His Temple, His House – *His Home* – and fill us with His glory! (Ex 40:34–35; 1 Kgs 8:10–61; 2 Chr 5:13–14; Acts 2:1ff; 4:31)

“*Therefore . . . let us have grace*, by which we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear. For our God is a consuming fire” (Heb 12:27–29; Ex 24:17; Dan 7:9; Ps 50:1–5).

Isaiah 30:25-26 reads, “There will be on every high mountain and on every high hill rivers and streams of waters, *in the day of the great slaughter, when the towers fall*. Moreover the light of the moon will be as the light of the sun”

And Isaiah 33:17–20, “Your eyes will see the King in His beauty Your heart will meditate on terror . . . where is he who

counts the towers? . . . Look upon Zion, the city of our appointed feasts; your eyes will see Jerusalem, a quiet home, a tabernacle that will not be taken down . . .”

If there is a connection between September 11, 2001 and these verses, as many believe, then perhaps the “shaking” has already begun and God longs to open our ears to hear Him, that “He might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven and which are on earth—in Him” (Eph 1:10).

The voice of the Lord breaks the cedars . . . the voice of the Lord shakes the Wilderness of Kadesh.¹ The voice of the Lord makes the deer give birth, and strips the forests bare! (Ps 29:5,8, 9).

His voice is “bread for the mighty,” spirit-food, “royal jelly” lifting us out of worker bee mentality into the glories of our true destiny in heavenly places.

Can you hear it in it's pre-glorified form, from bodies clothed in humiliation (Phil 3:21)? If so, welcome to God's royal banqueting table! What a feast!

What? A feast!

1. Kadesh is Hebrew (*qadesh*) for “holy.” It was the last stop before the entrance of the Israelites into Caanan after wandering in the wilderness forty years. But it was here that Moses encountered the “shaking” of God’s voice that disqualified him from entering. For he failed to “hallow” or “sanctify” the Lord when he spoke in anger to the grumbling Israelites instead of “speaking” to the rock as God had commanded him. *Sanctify* (*qadash*, to be holy, set apart to God) is the verb form of the noun, *qadesh – Kadesh*. (See Psalm 106:32–33)

There’s much more to this story in Numbers twenty, and I have at least two chapters dedicated to it in volume two of this two-volume series.

Why Reuben Lost His Inheritance

The award

What a shock must have come to Reuben on Awards Day. "Reuben, you are my firstborn, my might and the beginning of my strength, the excellency of dignity and the excellency of power" (Gen 49:3).

Can you see his chest swelling before his eleven brothers? Each one would in turn receive from Jacob the prophetic word setting the course of their future. Based on past performance and character, these prophecies went far deeper than astrology charts; they were God's foreknowledge of how their obedience or disobedience would influence and work its way out in the lives of their descendants – the twelve tribes of Israel.

For example (and please don't let the following examples discourage you, because there's more to it, which I'll explain), "Max Jukes, [an] atheist, lived a godless life. He married an ungodly [woman], and from this union there were 310 who died as paupers, 150 were criminals, 7 were murderers, 100 were drunkards, and more than half of the women were prostitutes. His 540 descendants cost the State one and a quarter million dollars [before inflation].

"Then there is a record of a great man of God, Jonathan Edwards. He lived at the same time as Max Jukes, but he married a godly [woman]. An investigation was made of 1,394 known descendants of Jonathan Edwards, of which 13 became college presidents, 65 college professors, 3 United States Senators, 30 judges, 100 lawyers, 60 physicians, 75 army and navy officers, 100 preachers and missionaries, 60 authors of prominence, one Vice-President of the United States, 80 public officials in other capacities, 295 college graduates, among whom were governors of states and ministers to foreign countries. Jonathan Edwards' descendants did not cost the state a penny."¹ And probably contributed enormously to the economy in ways impossible to measure.

This account doesn't record those in each genealogy who, in the first example, turned from sin to God and gained an eternal reward of infinite value, and in the second, those who forsook Him and started a negative chain of events through their

descendants. Nor does it deal with the *spiritual* quality of those who were *outwardly* successful, but inwardly lost. “For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul” (Mk 8:36)?

Nevertheless, it does confirm Exodus 34:7 (and Numbers 14:18): “I lavish unfailing love to a thousand generations. I forgive iniquity, rebellion, and sin. But I do not excuse the guilty. I lay the sins of the parents upon their children and grandchildren; the entire family is affected – even children in the third and fourth generations” (NLT).

Disqualified!

Doubtless, Reuben eagerly anticipated both the double portion of his inheritance as firstborn, and the dominion (authority), giving him the leadership among his siblings. And it would extend through his descendants, making “the tribe of Reuben” the dominant tribe in the nation of Israel to come.

But suddenly his father’s words changed direction: “Unstable as water, you shall not excel, because you went up to your father’s bed; then you defiled it – he went up to my couch” (Gen. 49:4).

Our nation follows this process of elimination in appointing and electing our leaders, from Supreme Court justices to governors and presidents. I’m writing this during the election year of 2016, while we watch major debates and word-battles over issues that “came out of the closet” to stalk the candidates running for the presidency. Things thought insignificant or forgotten have suddenly become character-revealing headlines.

But God makes no mistakes. This word “unstable” comes from a Hebrew word meaning “boiling up.” It points to the bubbly foam or froth as the liquid loses its solidity and turns to gas. In one word, Reuben’s character was exposed: froth! God could never entrust the glory and authority of His kingdom to a man whose character had a flimsy foundation.

The one act that revealed Reuben’s character

But what does his disqualification have to do with his father’s bed? On that point Scripture is just as brief: “And it happened, when Israel dwelt in that land, that Reuben went and lay with Bilhah his father’s concubine; and Israel heard” (Gen 35:22 KJV).

There are two significant things in this verse. First, we see the use of Israel – Jacob’s new name given by God when “he struggled with the Angel [God] and prevailed,” victorious over his weaker, carnal (fleshly) self. So it’s as though Jacob sees Reuben’s sin, not

through the eyes of the flesh, but through spiritual eyes as “Israel” (Gen 32; Hos 12:4; 1 Cor 2:9–16; Heb 5:14).

Second, in the Hebrew there’s a hiatus, a space, after this sentence. Quite unusual, the Author (God through Moses) may be pointing to *Israel’s* deep disappointment over this prized firstborn son with such great potential – the only one of the ten older boys who tried to rescue Joseph from his near murder at their hands (Gen 37).

For Reuben’s act of disobedience evidenced a more serious character flaw than sexual sin in and of itself. For Leviticus 18:8 says, “The nakedness of your father’s wife you shall not uncover; it is your father’s nakedness.” And in chapter 20 the punishment for this sex sin is death (20:11).

Marriage is a bond in which two people are meant to be so completely one, that when an outsider “uncovers” or exposes one of the mates, he uncovers the other. A “crime of passion,” where a person murders someone committing adultery with his/her spouse, illustrates the seriousness of this bond; it may be grounds to “mitigate” a first degree murder charge to second degree or less. (Don’t get any ideas: it’s still murder.) (Mt 19:5).

God Himself “yearns jealously” for us as His bride, warning us not to allow the adultery of the world to lure us away from our marriage relationship with Him (Jas 4:4– 5; Ez 16:36–42; 23:1ff; Hos 2:1ff; Eph 5:25– 33; Rev 2:4; 21:1ff).

Bilhah, in effect, not only belonged to Jacob through his wife Rachel, Bilhah’s maid-servant, but bonded to Jacob through the sexual union, at Rachel’s request, to have two sons (Dan and Naphtali). Reuben, therefore, disregarding both his father’s authority and his father’s relationship with these women, “uncovered his father’s nakedness” (Gen 30:3–8; 1 Cor 6:16).

When Noah’s son Ham looked at the nakedness of his father and told his brothers about it, Noah, on awakening and discovering the act, pronounced a curse on Ham’s descendants through his son Canaan. Now Reuben has done essentially the same thing, as far as its deeper meaning is concerned. And it will cost him his inheritance (Gen 9:22–26).

“Now the sons of Reuben the firstborn of Israel (for he was the firstborn; but, forasmuch as he defiled his father’s bed, his birthright was given unto the sons of Joseph the son of Israel: and the genealogy is not to be reckoned after the birthright. For Judah prevailed above his brethren, and of him came the chief ruler; but the birthright was Joseph’s)” (1 Chr 5:1-2 KJV).

Reuben, Joseph, Judah

Let's compare Reuben with Joseph and Judah in Genesis 49. After disqualifying Simeon and Levi also (another story of disregard for their father's authority), Jacob turned to Judah, the fourth-born son: "Judah, you are he whom your brothers shall praise; your hand shall be on the neck of your enemies; your father's children shall bow down before you" (Gen 49:8).

The only hint of just how he *prevailed* is given in verses 11 and 12. Veiled in symbolism, it is apparent Judah had met God in the same way his father Jacob had met Him during that famous wrestling match in Genesis 32, as I mentioned. It's where Jacob was entrusted with the scepter of authority as his name was changed to Israel, Prince (Gen 32:24-31; Hos 12:4; Phil 3:3).

This wrestling and triumph were repeated in the tribulation and testing of Joseph. His faithfulness and whole-hearted submission to the authority of his slave-master, followed by the same attitude as an *innocent* inmate toward the prison authorities, paved his way to Pharaoh's palace as governor of Egypt. With no formal education, his faithfulness and attitude are what God used to prepare and train him (Gen 37-44; Ps 105:16-22).

Both brothers, Joseph and Judah, had a profound respect for their father, as we see in Genesis 44. In this chapter, ten of the twelve brothers grapple with destiny. Their attitude toward their sometimes "heel" (the root meaning of the word Jacob) of a father had been called into question. Why is it so important? Two reasons:

First, their relationship with their father is reflected in their relationship with their brother, in this case Benjamin. After all, isn't the heart of the Kingdom of God right relationship with our brethren through relationship with our heavenly Father? (1 Jn 4:7-12, 20-21).

Second, the attitude we have toward our father usually shapes our concept of authority. Of twelve sons of Jacob, only Joseph and Judah really understood what their heavenly Father was after. For Joseph, as governor of Egypt, had tested his brothers to see if their attitude toward their father had changed since they'd sold him – Joseph – into slavery as a teenager. And how their relationship with their father affected their responsibility toward their little half-brother Benjamin, Joseph's full brother (1 Jn 4:7-8).

When the governor (Joseph) told his ten brothers they could not return to Egypt (for grain) unless they brought their youngest brother Benjamin with them, the request forced them to deal with the breach in their relationship with their father when they'd sold

Joseph into slavery twenty-two years earlier and had lied about what had happened to him (Gen 37).

Jacob's refusal to let Benjamin go, through fear of losing him also, made the brothers realize they faced starvation during the famine unless they found a way to regain their father's trust. At this point Reuben said to his father, "Kill my two sons if I do not bring him back to you; put him in my hands, and I will bring him back to you." This outlandish offer could only horrify Jacob at the thought of losing two of his grandsons, and confirmed the "unstable" froth of his firstborn son (Gen 42:37).

(It's parallel to the way some of us impatiently deal with our children before we get quiet enough to hear God's wisdom.)

Character verses froth

Then Judah spoke up: "Send the lad with me, and we will arise and go, that we may live and not die. . . . I myself will be surety for him; from my hand you shall require him. If I do not bring him back to you and set him before you, then let me bear the blame forever" (Gen 43:8-9).

Although it seems mild compared to Reuben's offer, the fact that Jacob released his favorite son, Benjamin, in response to it shows that "Israel" saw in Judah the heart to stand behind his commitment with his life instead of unrealistically offering up the lives of others as Reuben had done (Gen 43:11-14).

When they were once again in Egypt, now with Benjamin, and the governor was about to retain him as a slave there, Judah made good his "surety" and offered to give himself in order to release Benjamin in his place. The reason? *He understood his father's love for the lad.* In fact Judah's response was so compelling, that it brought Joseph to loud weeping and moved him to reveal himself to all his brothers (Gen 44:18-45:3; 45:1ff).

(What if Joseph's testing of his brothers is a picture of the judgements on the earth in *Revelation* – the revealing of Christ, of whom Joseph is one of the most perfect types in the Bible – and the key to whatever lies ahead as we near His return and the "restoration of all things"?) (Ps 27:4-6; 1 Jn 4:17; Acts 3:21)

Hebrews 1:8 and 9 shows us the root of authority and of Reuben's failure: "But to the Son He says: 'Your throne, O God, is forever and ever; a scepter of righteousness is the scepter of your kingdom. *You have loved righteousness and hated lawlessness.* Therefore God, your God, has anointed You with the oil of gladness more than your companions.'"

A man's respect for God and His Word will show up in his respect for his father. This is top-priority in a kingdom where

authority reigns through righteousness. Reuben's sin and lack of repentance evidenced a self-righteous and indifferent attitude toward God's authority (see Gen 42:22).

Three fourths of our Bible covering 1400 years of history displays God's dealings with His people on the basis of His law and statutes. Paul explains why: The law is our tutor, our schoolmaster, "to bring us to Christ," through exposing us as guilty of death through our flesh, that we might be "justified in the Spirit" through faith (Rom 3:19-23; 1 Cor 6:11; Gal. 3:24; 1 Tim 3:16).

Only in humble relationship with Christ through faith will our character endure the pressure of a world caught in conflict with authority (Mt. 7:23-27).

Korah's rebellion

The first mention of Reuben's descendants occurs in the rebellion of Korah against Moses and Aaron. It occurred during Israel's forty-years' wandering in the "wilderness," the Sinai Desert, after their escape from Pharaoh's enslavement in Egypt and the miraculous opening of the Red Sea. Korah, through envy against Moses and Aaron over their leadership, organized a conspiracy against them. Dathan and Abiram, descendants of Reuben, joined him (Num 16:1ff).

All three leaders had something in common: Korah's *younger* brother, Elizaphan, had been given the top position in the most important family of the Levites – the Kohathites, who were assigned the custody of the furniture of the Tabernacle in transit. Reuben, as we saw, the ancestor of Dathan and Abiram, had been replaced by his younger brother, Judah (Num 3:28-31; Gen 49:3-12).

I can relate. I'm the eldest of five children, the first and only one with a college degree for many years, until my kid brother, got a degree in theology in his fifties. And I've been the most competitive in my attempt to "be somebody" (Lk 16:15).

But worse, my pride showed up in my attitude toward my dad, whom I belittled in my mind, feeling I would go much farther in life than he did. By contrast, my brother, though wayward for a while in his early teens, always respected Dad. All through his adult years, while I continued to think of Dad as inferior to my ideals, he never saw him that way, but held him in high regard. That always made an impression on me, especially as I began to see it through the lens of biblical leadership and authority.

The end result of my ambition is best illustrated by what happened one evening years ago. I'd come home from emptying a

900 gallon septic tank of its sewage, using five gallon buckets, into a large hole I'd hand-dug next to it. After I showered and ate, I sat down, flipped on the TV (which I rarely did), just in time to see my "little" brother – once the "nobody" in the family, whom our mother couldn't even reach because of his "lost" condition.

There he was, standing in a three piece suit on a large stage in Africa interpreting Congolese French and/or Swahili for ministry leaders at a "Fire Conference" of Reinhard Bonnke, who has preached to the largest congregations in the world – as many as a million and a half in one service in Nigeria, Africa.

I can't even remember what Spanish and Latin I studied in high school. And I'm marooned in my hometown digging dirt and hammering nails, while he has traveled around the world as a veteran senior missionary leader, with *authority* over other missionaries in his missions organization. When he visits us, I sit on the edge of my seat listening to his stories . . . and wisdom.

But I love my brother and see in it the wisdom of God in humbling the proud and exalting (lifting up) the humble. And I sure don't want to be like Esau, who, when he saw he'd lost his birthright, hated his brother Jacob, who'd take it from him. Esau's bitterness clearly revealed why God could not use him at all, much less make him the leader of God's people, as Jacob became (1 Sam 2:8; Lk 1:51–53; 1 Cor 1:26–31; Heb 12:15–17).

So I hope I've learned and am still learning from the story of Reuben and his offspring. Read Numbers 16 to see what happened to the leaders of the rebellion – the most unusual and shocking display of God's judgment in the Bible, next to the Flood and the destruction of Pharaoh's army in the Red Sea (Gen 7; Ex 14).

Coincidentally, the day after writing the above, I ended up starting another septic tank job, doing almost the same thing as mentioned above. Tomorrow I have to clean the inside of it with a pressure washer – *under* most of the lid, then make extensive masonry repairs inside it, followed by major drain field work. At 80 years old!

Meanwhile my brother, only four years younger, travels around the U.S. and Europe as the North American representative of a missionary helicopter organization (Helimission). This is his "retirement" position, after teaching missions and other classes at Elim Bible Institute for many years.

Oh, his first and middle name – Benjamin James. Benjamin in Hebrew means "son of my right hand," and James is English for Jacob, in Greek (Gen 35:18; see any Bible dictionary).

Actually, I see this contrast as God's sense of humor, and picture Him smiling a *knowing* smile in my direction. But it really doesn't bother me, for by seeking Him in the humiliation instead of being bitter, He has rewarded me with the insights you are reading. And the resulting *meaning* thereby gained, more than makes up for the humbling (Ps 25:9; Mt 11:25-30).

So it all balances out, according to 1 Corinthians 12:4-26. Read it; you may need it.

The "easy" side of Jordan

The next mention of Reuben's descendants is at the end of Israel's forty-year period in the Sinai Desert upon their approach to the Promise Land. Israel had waited more than four centuries since the "promise" was given to Abraham (Gen 12:1-3; 15:13; Num 14:27-34).

"The tribes of Reuben and Gad owned vast numbers of livestock. So when they saw that the lands of Jazer and Gilead were ideally suited for their flocks and herds," they asked Moses and the leaders, "If we have found favor with you, please let us have this land as our property instead of giving us land across the Jordan River" (Num 32:1-5 NLT).

Although these lands, later referred to as Transjordan, were not part of the original Promise Land, Canaan, yet God "gave their land as a heritage, a heritage to Israel His people" after Israel's conquest of Sihon, king of the Amorites, and Og, King of Bashan on their way to Canaan. The whole area was called Gilead (Josh 24:8; Num 21:21-35; 32:1; Deut 2:32-37; 3:1-7; Neh 9:22; Ps 135:10-11; Ps 136:17-22).

The large mountainous area "was distinguished for the fertility of its soil and its adaptedness to the purpose of breeding and grazing cattle."² "But it was, in a sense, the fringe of the garment. It was not the heart and soul of the land."³ Like Abraham's nephew Lot, who chose the fertile plains of the Jordan near Sodom, then moved his family into that wicked city, only to be carried away captive by an invasion of the city (Gen 13-14).

Numbers 32 in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* begins with an accompanying map which shows the whole territory east and west of the Jordan with its cities east of it where the tribes of Reuben and Gad (and half the tribe of Manasseh) settled. While staring at that map a sadness came over me as I saw how these cities were separated from their brethren on the other side of the Jordan. It became a visible symbol of the care we give for earthly convenience and comfort at the expense of our eternal purpose - the Kingdom of God (Mt 6:33; Lk 10:40-42).

I have friends with wonderful natural gifts, but who are not a functioning part of the Body of Christ. One of them in particular has the potential to be a major church leader. I love to hear his wisdom as he deals with some of the most difficult situations on his job in a troubled youth facility. God once used him to save the life of a woman whose husband waited outside with a pistol to kill her. This friend felt led to start up a conversation with this stranger as he passed by, and talked him out of it. Later both the man and his wife paid him a visit to thank him for saving her life and their marriage.

But he grew up in a pastor's home and saw so much phyness and churches run with financial manipulation, aside from his parents' divorce through his mother's unfaithfulness, that it soured him. So he avoids church, and in so doing deprives them of the blessing he could be to them, and the blessing they could be to him. I have high hopes and pray for this dear brother, that God will yet use him mightily for His glory in the future. I can hardly wait!

Deborah's victory over Jabin and Sisera

Another telling sign characterizing the descendants of Reuben occurred after God "sold" [Israel] into the hand of Jabin king of Canaan" because "the children of Israel again did evil in the sight of the LORD" And they "cried out to the LORD; for Jabin had nine hundred chariots of iron, and for twenty years he had harshly oppressed the children of Israel" (Jgs 4:1-3).

God answered through "Deborah, a prophetess," the third of Israel's "judges" after Othniel and Ehud in the book of Judges. She summoned Barak to go with 10,000 men against Sisera, the commander of Jabin's army, and God miraculously gave them an overwhelming victory (Jgs 4:6-7).

Then Deborah composed a "song," a ballad, recounting some of the noteworthy aspects of the battle, including several behind-the-scenes elements of significance. Here's a portion:

"Among the divisions of Reuben there were great resolves of heart. Why did you sit among the sheepfolds, to hear the pipings for the flocks? The divisions of Reuben have great searchings of heart. Gilead stayed beyond the Jordan, and why did Dan remain on ships? Asher continued at the seashore, and stayed by his inlets. Zebulun is a people who jeopardized their lives to the point of death, Naphtali also, on the heights of the battlefield. The kings came and fought, then the kings of Canaan fought in Taanach, by the waters of Megiddo; they took no spoils of silver. They fought

from the heavens; the stars from their courses fought against Sisera" (Jgs 5:15–20).

The leaders of Reuben had "great resolves of heart." She mentions it again for its significance: "great searchings of heart." The comfort and convenience of their families and livelihood, the long distance from the scene of action ("out of sight, out of mind"), and the uncertain assurance of victory together with the possible retaliation and vengeance of the enemy, made it easier to investigate, ponder, and procrastinate than take action. As perhaps most of us do.

What an awesome opportunity they missed, when "the stars fought from heaven. The stars in their orbits fought against Sisera." More preoccupied with the temporal and earthly, *they missed their hour of glory, when "the army of the Lord" engaged the enemy of Israel* (Jgs 5:20). Selah!

Jacob, threatened by his brother Esau's 400 man army, knew his real problem was with God and crossed the brook Jabbok to deal with Him about it. God met him face to face as a Man and changed his name, history, and eternity. When Joshua prepared to face the violence of the Canaanite armies, he found he wasn't alone before the appearance of the pre-incarnate Son of God, "the Commander of the LORD's army" (Gen 32; Josh 5:13–15).

When Daniel set his face to seek God over Israel's sins, the archangel Gabriel appeared to him with prophetic revelation, much of it yet to be fulfilled. And during another period of seeking, another angel, possibly the Son Himself, revealed the battles taking place in the invisible heavens (spirit realm) in response to Daniel's intercession (Dan 9–10).

We have no idea how much we limit the powers of heaven to deal with God's enemies and effect dramatic change in the spirit realm when we fail to step out in faith and God's Word, beginning with prayer (2 Kgs 19:35; Is 37:36; Eph 1:15–23; 6:10–20; Heb 1:14).

The Promise Land is the Kingdom of God

The "Promise Land" is the land (Canaan) God "promised" Abraham because he "believed God," with corresponding action by leaving the comfort of his home town and headed off "to a land that I will show you," as God had instructed him. Genesis records the story of how his descendants ended up in Egypt; Exodus tells how nearly four hundred years later they got out miraculously through the Red Sea under the leadership of Moses; and the book of Joshua is the story of how they conquered Canaan by the same faith Abraham had (Gen 12:1–5; Ex 14; Rom 4:1–3, 16–22).

But according to Hebrews 3 and 4, the conquering of Canaan by Joshua actually represents a place of *rest* spiritually through that same faith. The “warfare” is not with “flesh and blood,” but with the giants of our own unbelief and bad attitudes, which “the rulers of the darkness of this age” (Satan’s angels and demons) use to manipulate our lives in their attempt to destroy us (2 Cor 10:3–6; Eph 6:10–18).

To “fight the good fight of faith” is to break through the barrier of unbelief, where demonic powers rule, into the realm of the Kingdom of God, where God rules. His kingdom is not a set of impossible demands; it’s a feast, a party! Not a physical banquet, but something infinitely better: “For the kingdom of God is not [rules about] eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (1 Tim 6:12; 2 Tim 4:7; Rom 14:17).

The joy of the Lord through “the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus” can at times be intoxicating, which is why when the 120 were filled with the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, some of the onlookers accused them of being drunk. Years later Paul wrote, “Don’t be drunk with wine, because that will ruin your life. Instead, be filled with the Holy Spirit, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, and making music to the Lord in your heart” (Rom 8:2; Acts 2:1–18; Eph 5:18–19 NLT).

Through “the riches of His glory,” you can “be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man, that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height – to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be *filled with all the fullness of God*” (Eph 3:16–19; cf Eph 1:17–19; 1 Kgs 8:10–11; Song 1:2; 2:4).

The Kingdom, the Church, and the authority

Kingdom refers to *authority*, which is why conquering the Canaanites was a matter of lining up with God’s authority, through faith, and taking dominion over the enemy as we do in “spiritual warfare” (2 Cor 10:3–6; Eph 6:10ff).

Church refers to *fellowship*, and fellowship includes “making allowance for each other’s faults because of your love,” which involves “forgiving one another.” Ephesians is a book entirely about the Church. It begins with relationship with God and the authority He’s given us through Christ (ch 1). It continues with unity and fellowship within the Church and the “fullness of God” that results from it (ch 2-5). It ends with spiritual warfare against

“the rulers of the darkness of this age” through *praying for one another!* (Eph 3:19; 4:2 NLT; 6:10–18; Col 3:12–13).

So the Church is the vehicle for God’s Kingdom authority. The Kingdom is King Jesus’ *rule* on earth, and the Church is His governmental Body: He governs earth through the authority invested in His Church. That’s because His government is authority rooted in *relationship* with one another through relationship with Christ (Mt 16:16–19; Jn 13:34; 15:12–13; 1 Jn 4:7–11, 21; 5:1).

This explains why when Jesus’ disciples were arguing about who would be the greatest, He told them they had the wrong concept of authority. It wasn’t about *ruling* people, but *servicing* them. Furthermore it would take the testing of their faith to produce the kind of character by which they would serve others with understanding and genuine concern (Lk 22:24–32).

The refining of their faith would also take place through faithfulness with the responsibilities and gifts they already had. Then – “Well done, good servant; because you were faithful in a very little, have authority over ten cities,” or five, or whatever corresponded to the gifts God had given them, as in the parables of the talents and the ten minas (Mt 25:14–30; Lk 19:12–27).

All of this “Kingdom” stuff sounds so easy, and writing about it probably makes me sound as though I’m walking in it. But my former attitude toward my dad has followed me in my relationships with others, both as a pastor and as a church member in submission to my pastor.

So my “spiritual warfare” involves, not just “praying” for them, but the genuine *desire* to pray for them, not as a religious duty, like King Saul, but according to “Promise Land,” New Covenant standards: “Love each other deeply with all your heart,” and “Above all things have intense and unfailing love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins [forgives and disregards the offenses of others]” (1 Pet 1:22 NLT; 4:8 AMP).

God finally “broke” my arrogance toward Dad, and when I humbled myself and took his advice to attend the college of *his* choice (South-Eastern Bible College, now Southeastern College of the Assemblies of God), God gave me a wife, whom I mentioned earlier. And four children and thirteen grandchildren followed. All through one simple step of obedience!

And slowly, but surely, I’m experiencing, with my brothers and sisters in Christ, 2 Corinthians 3:18, “And all of us, as with unveiled face, [because we] continued to behold [in the Word of God] as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are constantly being transfigured into His *very own* image in every increasing splendor

and from one degree of glory to another; [for this comes] from the Lord [Who is] the Spirit" (AMP).

Reuben's last war

The two and a half tribes in Gilead (east of Jordan) with a total of 44,760 men "made war with the Hagarites, Jetur, Naphish, and Nodab. And they were helped against them, and the Hagarites were delivered into their hand, and all who were with them, for they cried out to God in the battle. He heeded their prayer, because they put their trust in Him." Then follows a list of the large number of spoils. "Because the war was God's. And they dwelt in their place until the captivity" (1 Chr 5:18-22).

I don't look at this dramatic victory with joy, but pain. For these are Israelites; they belong to God's "holy nation," a "kingdom of priests," His "special treasure to [Him] above all people." No wonder God "heeded their prayer." Furthermore, two of Israel's twelve "judges" were Gileadites - Jair, and Jephthah, who won a great victory over the Ammonites, "judged Israel six years," and is listed among the heroes of faith in Hebrews 11 (v 32; Ex 19:5-6; Jgs 10:3; 11:1-12:7).

But Jerusalem was the spiritual center of Israel, with the Temple, the ministry and teaching of the priests, and the altar of burnt offering for the various daily sacrifices. It was the center of holiness for God's "holy nation" - *separated* unto Him, the meaning of *holy*. The more distant the tribes were from the "holy city," the sooner they fell into the idolatry of the nations God had driven out because of their wickedness (Dt 9:4-5).

When Jeroboam, the King of Israel, came with 800,000 men against King Abijah, who had half that number, Abijah stood on a mountain and loudly rebuked him for setting up false priests and idol worship when they, Judah, had genuine priests along with the true worship and sacrifices of the Temple, as well as God Himself leading them into battle.

But Jeroboam, ignoring him, confidently planned a secret ambush from Judah's rear. And "it happened that God struck Jeroboam and all Israel before Abijah and Judah. . . . So five hundred thousand choice men of Israel fell slain." Incredible! (2 Chr 13:1-17).

Furthermore, because Israel had forsaken the Lord, "the God of Israel stirred up the spirit of Pul king of Assyria . . . He carried the Reubenites, the Gadites, and the half-tribe of Manasseh into captivity." They, along with territory in the far north in the western side of the Jordan, were the first of God's inheritance to fall to the enemy (1 Chr 5:25-26).

Around ten years later (722 BC) the rest of Israel, which under Jeroboam had split from Judah (which included Benjamin) after the death of Solomon (975 BC), fell to the Assyrians. Judah and Jerusalem lasted until Nebuchadnezzar's Babylonian invasions in 605, 598, and in 586 BC, with the destruction of Jerusalem. Only Judah continues on to this day as "Israel." The "ten lost tribes" to the north, and east of the Jordan, were mixed in with the nations Assyria had conquered (2 Kgs 17).

But Judah remained as a people because they still had the priests and prophets – Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel during and after the Babylonian invasions, and Haggai, Zachariah, and Malachi after the Jews returned to Jerusalem during the Medo-Persian empire (2 Kgs 25; Ez 1; Dan 1; Ezra 1; 5:1; Mal 1:1).

God had mercifully given former Israel (to the north) prophets also – Hosea (to both Israel and Judah), and especially Elijah, *who lived in Gilead* (where Reuben's descendants had settled), and Elisha, two of the greatest in the Bible: They provide us with the most amazing stories of the miraculous power of God (1 Kgs 17:1ff; 19:16–21).

But with not one godly king, and without the Temple and priesthood, it was not enough to spare them from the complete loss of their identity as a nation "under God."

The beginning and the end

So here we have the whole story of how Reuben's choices affected his offspring. His "strength, dignity, and power" are evident hundreds of years later as they helped their brethren defeat the Canaanites, and again more than a thousand years later through this war with the Hagarites (who are Ishmaelites – Gen 25:12–16). But the same lack of serious commitment to godliness, evident in Reuben's violating "his father's bed," followed his descendants for the next thousand years.

It corresponds with the contrasting offspring of a godly man and an ungodly one and the profound effect it has on society and the Kingdom of God many generations later. It's a perfect example of "the butterfly effect," where the faint wisp of air stirred by the wings of a butterfly can theoretically cause a hurricane on the other side of the earth: and that phenomenon has been proven mathematically (though perhaps impossible to demonstrate experimentally).

No wonder Jesus said, "Just say a simple, 'Yes, I will,' or 'No, I won't.' Anything beyond this is from the evil one." "And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity. The tongue is so set among our members that it defiles the whole body, and sets on fire the

course of nature; and it is set on fire by hell” (Mt 5:37 NLT; Jas 3:6).

And, of course, our words are the product of our heart and the influences that surround it. “A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good; and an evil man out of the evil treasure of his heart brings forth evil. For out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks.” Therefore “Guard your heart above all else, for it determines the course of your life,” as well as that of your offspring (Lk 6:45; Prv 4:23 NLT).

The two different outcomes between Reuben’s lesser sin and Judah’s much greater sin hangs on just a few words, which Judah uttered when his daughter-in-law exposed his wickedness and hypocrisy: Instead of excusing himself or outright denial, he “acknowledged” the truth of her accusation and added, “She has been more righteous than I” (Gen 38:26a).

It was his willingness to take responsibility for his evil deeds that opened his eyes to his condition and drove him to seek God until his breakthrough – as his Father Jacob had done. It’s something Reuben may have had “searchings of heart” over, but it never led to anything more. Our right response, however, will change not only our lives, but many thousands who follow in our footsteps (Gen 32; 49:11–12; 1 Cor 5:6; Prv 9:6; 13:20; 2 Tim 2:16–17; Heb 12:15; 2 Pet 2:2).

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CHAPTER 14

Lion of the Tribe of Who?

*For Judah prevailed above his brethren,
and of him came the chief ruler;
but the birthright was Joseph's.*

1 Chr 5:2 KJV

Don't worry about the grammar (of whom). I'm more concerned about this character God chose to represent Jesus in his ultimate role as the mighty Conqueror of our rebellious planet: Judah!

Judah means praise, we say; and through praise we conquer. But how could God get any praise out such a sorry rascal as Judah? I would have chosen Joseph: "The Lion of the Tribe of Joseph."

Joseph's integrity was flawless. Somewhere I saw a long list of parallels between him and Jesus, pointing out that Joseph's character and powerful destiny represent Christ more clearly than any other man in the Bible.

While Judah *left his brothers* and "went down" into a life of disgrace, Joseph "was *taken down to Egypt*" as a slave. He'd been sold by his brothers, specifically Judah, "for twenty shekels of silver" (Gen 38:1 KJV; 39:1; 37:28).

If therefore Judah more accurately represents, not Jesus, but his New Testament namesake, Judas, Greek for Judah, the following story tells what could also have been the outcome of Judas, if only. . . .

Bad roots

But let's start from the beginning. Among the most dysfunctional families in the Bible, like King David's family, was Jacob and his two primary wives, two secondary wives ("concubines"), twelve sons, and one daughter.

The names of the children depict the agony and envy of his wives in their struggle to win their husband's favor. Rejected and "unloved" (*hated*, KJV) by him, Leah envied Rachel, the object of Jacob's affections. But Rachel envied Leah because Leah bore so many of Jacob's children before she, Rachel, had any.

Many of the world's conflicts, especially in the Middle East, go back to ancestral intra-family jealousy, such as Ishmael and Isaac,

Esau and Jacob, and the descendants of Abraham and Lot. Jacob's kids grew up amid such bitterness and strife, and their lives reflect this emotional abuse and rejection.

Simeon and Levi treacherously murdered all the men in the town of Shechem, instead of evangelizing them (34:25). And nine of the ten sons not born of Jacob's "soul-mate" (Rachel) took revenge against her son Joseph by selling him into slavery as an alternative to assassinating him (37:28).

Reuben intended to save him, but God later identifies this prized firstborn son of Jacob as emotionally unstable because he'd committed incest with Rachel's maid-servant – one of his dad's concubines (35:21; 49:4; Lev 20:11; 1 Chr 5:1).

Leaving his old father with a broken heart, Judah, Leah's fourth son, went *down* and married one of the forbidden, ungodly Canaanites. His uncle Esau had done the same thing, to the sorrow of his parents, Isaac and Rebekah (Gen 27:46). No doubt Judah had a lot of anger and bitterness, and decided to wash his hands of the whole family mess, including God.

But it sure didn't win him the Father-of-the-Year award. God "killed" his first two sons for their wickedness (38:7,10). His twice-widowed daughter-in-law, Tamar, waited patiently for Shelah, the third son, to reach adulthood and marry her, as Judah had promised, according to custom (Gen 38:1–11; cf Dt. 25:5–10).

When the time came and Tamar saw her father-in-law had no intention of keeping his promise, she took matters into her own hands. Disguising herself as a prostitute in the path of Judah, she intended to get pregnant by him and at last have a child of her own. Counting on Judah's character – or lack of it – her plan worked (Gen 38:12ff).

Judah's disgrace

In Egypt, meanwhile, Joseph has torn himself away from Potiphar's wife's lustful grip, spent years in prison because of her false rape charge, and probably by now is in Pharaoh's palace reaping the fruit of persevering obedience and storing up grain to feed the world in the approaching famine (Gen 39–41).

Three months later Judah hears the terrible news; his name has been disgraced: "Tamar, your daughter-in-law, has played the harlot; furthermore she is with child by harlotry." Instead of putting her name on the church prayer chain, Judah suddenly reverts to his fundamentalist roots and commands, "Bring her out and have her burned to death" (38:24 NIV).

Later Moses would put this severe punishment into writing: "If a priest's daughter defiles herself by becoming a prostitute, she

disgraces her father; she must be burned in the fire" (Lev 21:9 NIV), no doubt after death by stoning, as in Josh 7:25.

The Hammurabi Code, typical of Canaanite and Sumerian law during this era, allowed burning for incest with no mention of stoning. Since Judah lived a Canaanite lifestyle and the law of Moses, with its safeguards against abuse, came more than 200 years later, Tamar was probably about to be burned alive like the Christian martyrs of past centuries, "burned at the stake."

Down the road I see a procession coming – the prisoner, terror stricken, bound and stumbling between those who'd apprehended her at Judah's command. Perhaps her family has heard and is following, clinging to their daughter and sister, weeping.

A messenger runs ahead, asks for Judah, then displays a staff and a signet on a cord. Judah immediately recognizes them as his, left with and lost to the prostitute he'd visited three months earlier. But the words of the messenger paralyze him: "Tamar says, 'By the man to whom these belong, I am with child'" (38:25).

His great awakening

Verse 26 reveals the heart of Judah. It is his moment of truth. Faced with shocking public humiliation, most others would have sought for a face-saving way out. Like a typical man of the Middle East, he could have accused Tamar of lying and compounded her guilt in the eyes of the onlookers. Or he could have blamed his family background – especially his dad; he could, with good cause, have cursed his rotten environment or circumstances; or he could simply have shut his mouth and walked off, as a lot of us men do when caught red-handed.

But in one short phrase he shifted the guilt from Tamar to himself: "She has been more righteous than I"

It always awes me how much God packs into tiny statements that indicate the direction and bent of one's *character*. Hidden deep beneath the seeming worthlessness of Judah's exterior lay the very germ of greatness. It began with *acknowledging*, not *excusing*, his sin, as Simeon and Levi did (Gen 34:30–31). Instead of *saving face*, he *faced* his responsibility; he became morally *accountable*.

But something more must develop this germ into its full potential and clearly manifest the nature, calling, and purpose of "the seed of Abraham," "father of many nations" (17:4f).

I see it as the nearest parallel to Peniel, where Judah's father Jacob, threatened by a small army under his vengeful brother, Esau, could no longer hide his conniving, manipulating,

misdirected, "heel-grasping" (the meaning behind his name, *Yaqob*) personality. Instead of taking his family and fleeing on camels, Jacob got alone to *face* God.

He'd finally come to the end of *himself*. "He struggled with God. He struggled with the Angel and prevailed; he wept and sought favor from Him." There he received a new name, Israel, *prince, conqueror* (Hos 12:3-4; Gen 32:28).

This same Jacob would later speak, by the Spirit, of his son Judah: "Binding his donkey to the vine, and his donkey's colt to the choice vine, he washed his garments in wine, and his clothes in the blood of grapes. His eyes are darker than wine, and his teeth whither than milk" (49:11-12).

The intended burning to death of Tamar may well have been the occasion which moved Judah to meet the God of his grieving father face to face. Getting away from the gaze of his friends, from the lifetime of pain in Tamar's eyes, he must have sought for his Peniel, a place to get alone before God and wrestle this thing through once and for all.

For there he would fasten his callous, donkey-nature to the Choice Vine. And, as with a future offspring, also caught in the web of moral and character failure, he might have sobbed the same words, "Blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin" (David, Ps 51:1b-2)

At last he would take time to remember and ponder the truths and stories of God's faithfulness handed down to him, perhaps by his mother Leah: the faith and intercession of his great-grandfather Abraham (Gen 12-22), the trials of his grandfather Isaac in famine and hostile enemies (Gen 26), and of the mercies and visitations of God to his undeserving father Jacob (Gen 29-35).

Whether he spent hours, days, or months in deep repentance and renewing his mind, the Bible doesn't say. But God does tell us in that brief symbolism of the donkey, the blood, and the milk, that Judah was transformed, his conscience totally cleansed and his vision and outlook revolutionized. It compares to the renewed mind of Romans 12:1-2 and the New Man in Christ of Ephesians 4:22-24. (cf 2 Cor 3:18; 5:17).

His brother's keeper

And none too soon, for "what goes around comes around": it was "time to reap" the wild oats he and his brothers had sown (Gal 6:7-8). Famine stalked the land (Ps 105:16). Jacob rounded up his ten adult sons and sent this caravan of rebels to Egypt for

grain. Pharaoh's prime minister treated them as spies, then retained Simeon as a prisoner. He also demanded the appearance of their youngest half-brother, Benjamin, Joseph's only full brother, son of the prized, loved, and deceased, Rachel (Gen 42).

Jacob, who'd never recovered from the loss of his favorite son, refused to give up his only remaining memorial of Rachel. Until Judah offered himself as "surety" for Benjamin, guaranteeing his safety. What this meant was not immediately apparent until they again stood before the austere prime minister (Gen 43).

Benjamin had ended up with the despot's silver cup (as a test planted by the prime minister himself) and now faced *life* in Egyptian slave labor camps. Eleven sons of Jacob lay prostrate before this dictator. God's entire Church program was at stake.

What was on their minds? The ten older ones could actually go free without this pampered and probably spoiled kid, this time by *God's* will, not their own deception. No doubt the rigors of slavery would mellow and mature Benjamin, doing what their father should have done through discipline. God Himself was meting out justice!

No! What's this? I see Judah pleading with the prime minister, offering his own life in the place of Benjamin. What? He is telling of his father's love for the lad. Incredible! The old wounds have been healed, cleansed white. He sees his father through new eyes filled with mercy and forgiveness . . . and *understanding* (Gen 44:18ff).

Look again! That ruthless dictator is embracing these men, weeping so loudly, the Egyptians he sent out of the room hear him. He is Joseph! What an unveiling, what a *revelation*! [Jn 15:13-15!!] Jacob's dysfunctional, tormented, traumatized, embittered family is at last being healed!

His heavenly counterpart

The scene has changed. I see in heaven a brilliant throne of indescribable colors. A Being of light and glory sits there in the midst of other beings of blazing light and many other thrones. It is the Control Center, the *Heart* Center of the universe (Rv 4).

Now the attention shifts to a scroll. In it is written the *destiny* of planet earth and *all creation* (Rom. 8:19-23). A Lamb reaches for the scroll. He is the only one found worthy to open it and release its terrible - but redemptive - judgments. He is worthy because he was slain, because He gave His life for us, lost in sin, like Jacob's renegade sons (Rv 5:1ff).

But the Lamb is also a triumphant *lion*. He is the Lion of the Tribe of whom? "Judah, the root of David," Judah's royal offspring.

He is the perfect *Representative* of Adam's fallen race, the Only One who in His *becoming sin conquered sin* and its consequence, death! (1 Cor 15:42–57; Heb 2:14–15).

When Judah, fearing God (Heb. 1:9), wrestled his way to *sin's root – the loss of his father's fellowship*, he became a forerunner of the One who would conquer the root of Adam's sin, restoring us to the Father. No wonder God spoke through Jacob, "The scepter will not depart from Judah until he comes to whom it belongs," namely, Jesus the Messiah (Gen 49:10 NIV).

"Judah, you are he whom your brothers shall praise; your hand shall be on the neck of your enemies; your father's children shall bow down before you" (v 8). *Very similar to the dreams God gave young Joseph.*

Fruitful is good, but there's more

What about Joseph's offspring, then? God promised them "blessings of heaven above . . . of the deep . . . of the breasts and of the womb" (Gen 49:25). His name, and that of his son, Ephraim, became attached to the *fruitful* land of Israel, north of the territory of Judah (Jer 31:9,18; Ez 37:16, 19, etc).

His deep security in God transmitted through the love of his father, Jacob, had given him the strength of a king, but "*separate*" from his brothers (49:24, 26b). For he had never experienced the depths of personal human depravity. He could train Pharaoh's elders (Ps 105:22) and deal with his treacherous brothers in godly authority and wisdom, but would he really comprehend the *depth* of their wickedness, their abandonment and alienation from God?

It is one thing to reach out in compassion to sinners from a place of security in God's love, but quite another to have wallowed in that same sin and disgrace: to *identify* completely with the sinner, taking his place before God's throne of mercy, pleading for them. This is the meaning of *intercession*, our calling as a *royal priesthood* (1 Pet 2:9).

Of course the Holy Spirit can *empty* us of self-righteousness (Jer. 48:11) and reveal our hideous depravity (Rom. 3:10–18) without our having to experience the depths of sin; Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Paul are a few examples. But woe be to those of us who discount the potential of rank sinners, prison inmates, drug addicts, and prostitutes to find the exalted place of transformation Judah found, and then run way ahead of us spiritually.

Why? Because they more fully *understand* "the width and length and depth and height" of God's love (Eph. 3:18). For "to whom little has been *forgiven*, the same loves little," Jesus told

Simon the Pharisee in reference to the woman, broken by sin, who had just washed His feet with her tears and anointed Him with fragrant oil (Lu 7:36–50).

The sin offering and altar of incense

Judah's most famous (natural) descendant was David. David also fell into great sin. Like Judah, he issued a death sentence on the man whose wife he had impregnated through adultery, hoping to cover his sin. When Nathan the prophet finally exposed him, David, like Judah, "acknowledged" his sin and brought his wretched "donkey" to the Choice Vine in deep remorse and repentance (2 Sam 11–12; Ps 51).

[If only Judas had made "choice" of that *Vine* instead of the tree (?) he hanged himself from! Mt 27:5; Acts 1:18]

David's repentance was not a one-time thing; his Psalms read like Jacob's encounter with God extended over a lifetime. The suffering and sorrow he reaped because of his sin kept him before God's face continually and His throne relentlessly: "Lord, I cry out to you; make haste to me. . . . Let my prayer be set before you as incense" (141:1–2a; 2 Sam 12:10; Ps 16:8; 25:15; 40:1ff).

That *incense*, made up of "the prayers of the saints," becomes the *legal basis* for the releasing of the plagues of judgment in the book of Revelation (5:8; 8:3–6). The incense ascends from the golden altar before God's throne in the same sense that appeals "ascend" before a judge in a court of law by a legal representative (attorney). And God *longs* to hear these prayers *in order to act* on them.

Only the blood of the *sin* offering reached the golden altar within the Temple; no blood from any other sacrifice ever entered the Temple – whether burnt offering, fellowship offering, guilt offering, or even the Passover (Lev 1–7; Ex 12).

Furthermore, on the Day of Atonement once a year, it was the blood of the *sin* offering that went *behind* the veil to the mercy seat – the earthly counterpart to God's heavenly throne (Lev 16; Heb 9:7).

The Perfect Judge

The Lion of the tribe Judah, will prevail to conclude this age with perfect judgment and justice. With authority and wisdom He will deal with every class of sinners from terrorists to lukewarm Christians, from the ignorant to the arrogant.

How? Not by the priestly credentials of the tribe of Levi, or because He is, in truth, the King of kings. But because, as a son of

Judah and David, He experienced the awful depths of sin and weakness (yet without sin).

"Therefore in *all* things He has to be made like His brethren, that He might be a merciful and faithful High Priest in things pertaining to God. . . " (Heb 2:17).

Previously He could have been stoned quickly and gotten it over with. But no. To *fully partake of flesh and blood* that He might "sympathize with our weaknesses"; to display himself before fallen angels, demons, and the world as God's final answer to the fall of man; and to fully absorb our sin and punishment as the final Sin Offering, He avoided an easy death. As a human lightning rod exposed to the wrath of God, He submitted Himself to the ultimate horror, "the death of the cross" (Jn 10:31; Heb 4:15; 5:7; Phil 2:8; Col 2:14-15).

The foreboding dread of facing the world's sin approached. And as He "who is holy, harmless, undefiled, *separate from sinners*, and . . . higher than the heavens" perceived the price He'd have to pay as God's final, fully contaminated Sin Offering and Sin Bearer, He laid hold of the horns of the golden altar, as it were, like Joab cleaving to the horns of the brazen altar before his executioner (Heb 7:26; Lev 4:12; 2 Cor 5:21; 1 Kgs 2:28; Num 18; Is 53).

In Gethsemane, "with vehement cries and tears" He sweat blood in agony and poured out His soul unto death. Pleading before "the Judge of all the earth," He fixed his vision and surrendered His will to be the final Sacrifice. For during those dreadful hours on the Cross, suspended in eternity, He faced, as a curse in our place, total alienation from His Father (Mt 26:38; Heb 5:7; Gen 18:25; Is 53:12; Ps 22:1; Mt 27:46; Gal 3:13).

After His death "to sin," as the High Priest of the "true Tabernacle" in heaven, He entered through the veil of His own flesh, "torn in two" like the veil of the Temple. There He presented His blood in the real "Most Holy Place" before God Himself (Rom 6:10; Mt 27:51; Heb 10:20; 8:2; 9:24-25).

Now death could no longer hold Him. Suddenly other graves around Jerusalem burst open and saints walked out alive in resurrected bodies, immune to death (Mt 27:52, 53).

His blood had thoroughly, completely, perfectly, powerfully, and eternally dealt with our sin problem: He was "raised *because of our justification*"! (Rom 4:25).

If His *Sin Offering* had not been sufficient to cover the profound and inexhaustible depths of human depravity and perversity, *He would not have been raised!* Death would have been victorious and His agony all for nothing (1 Cor 15:55).

How to obey; that is the question.

If Jesus had prevailed as a representative of the tribe of Joseph, the root of Joshua (another nearly flawless type of Christ and descendent of Joseph), how different my response would be.

Instead of worshiping Him in brokenness and repentance, I would find myself constantly attempting to live up to the high character standards these men portrayed. Because when I hear the story of Joseph and his unflinching endurance against all odds, I find myself trying again to be faithful to the hilt. *Maybe God will reward me as He did Joseph if I endure to the bitter end.*

And that is true, for "if we endure, we shall also reign with Him." But God has a *much more perfect* plan than mere endurance through self-discipline and will-power (1 Tim 2:11; Ecc 9:11; Rom 9:16).

My endurance, patience, or whatever God requires, has already been done *for me in the only "Body" capable of perfect obedience*. Now I can endure because He is *in* me (Heb 10:5-10; Col 1:27-28).

And I'm sin free: "Whoever abides in Him does not sin." Why? Because he "has been born of God." Christ is in him, in me (1 Jn 3:6, 9; 2 Cor 5:17; Gal 2:20; Col 1:27-28, etc).

What an amazing paradox: "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves." On the other hand, we *cannot sin* for "His seed remains in" us; and of course *He, His seed in us*, cannot sin (1 Jn 1:8; 3:9).

So where shall we "abide"? What do we value as *worth* our time and attention? Worship means worth-ship. What is the object of our affections? Where do we *focus* our attention, our praise? In what do we glory? If we "abide in Him" we are "free from sin" (Col 3:1-2; Rom 6:18, 22; 7:17-20; 1 Jn 5:18). Amazing grace!

I think of poor Leah, "hated" by her "heel" of a husband, Jacob. As long as she kept looking to him, she remained locked in the *performance* ritual, producing "fruit" for the *wrong reason*. By the fourth child, she'd had enough. "Now I will praise the Lord," she sighed, surrendered at last (Gen 29:35). What relief! What a burden lifted! From now on, *God* was her *true* husband.

In some spiritual and emotional way, she marked this child, Judah. Judah must have seen it in her eyes, or felt it in her motherly embrace. For after all the years of waywardness and wickedness, Judah would finally discover the secret of his mother's triumph . . . and his dad's.

Staring in shock at the evidence of his sin and deception, Tamar anxiously waiting, Judah slowly turned his eyes away from the utter futility of human flesh. His anger and resentment had not only led to his own public disgrace, but nearly destroyed his family – his two eldest sons, and now, almost, his daughter-in-law, along with her unborn twins; they will be Judah's youngest sons, one of whom will become an ancestor of Jesus! (Gen 38:27ff; Ruth 4:12; Lk 3:33).

At the end of his rope finally, like his dad, "he struggled with God. Yes, he struggled with the Angel [the Choice Vine] and *prevailed*"! He found – for himself and *for us* – the only One worthy of his worship (Hos 12:3b, 4a; Gen 49:11).

And with no room to glory in himself, he would become his "brother's keeper" and serve as our example – not of human strength, but of brokenness and love.

"Do not weep!" Don't weep, saint or sinner, over past or present failure or pain. Or weep deeply, if necessary, in repentance and "godly sorrow" (2 Cor 7:10). And then turn away from failure and look to your Redeemer. "Behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has prevailed."

CHAPTER 15

The Transformation of Elijah and Elisha

2 Kings 2

So he said, "You have asked a hard thing. Nevertheless, if you see me when I am taken from you, it shall be so for you; but if not, it shall not be so." 2 Kings 2:10

The test of a lifetime and a lifestyle

In 1970 Walter Mischel conducted the now famous experiment which involved testing the self-control of four-year-olds. Each child was promised one marshmallow as soon as he or she rang a bell. However two marshmallows would be given to each child who would wait until the experimenter returned.

"While waiting, some children covered their eyes with their hands or arms, squirmed, talked to themselves, sang, created games with their hands and feet, and even tried to sleep. . . . Some children rang the bell in a minute, others toughed it out for up to twenty minutes before the researcher returned." Their secret? *They got their attention off the temptation and on something else because it would yield a better reward.*

After more years of similar testing Mischel and his associates kept track of many of the children into their adult years. The ones who'd waited longer adapted better socially as teens, excelled in communication and reasoning, "scored substantially higher on the SATs and got higher educational degrees."

Those who couldn't wait "were more likely to become bullies, get lower parent and teacher evaluation as teens, and abuse drugs as adults. Even seconds difference in wait times made a difference" years later, writes Maggie Jackson, in *Distracted: the Erosion of Attention and the Coming Dark Age*.¹

What drew me to her book was what I too had found works better than self-discipline: "*Attention control is the driver behind willpower and the means of successfully resisting gratification.*"²

Our distractions are "eroding our capacity for deep, sustained, perceptive attention – the building block of intimacy, wisdom, and cultural progress." We are *defined by attention*; it "is the bedrock of society."³

When a mother discovers her baby has a razor blade in its mouth, she has two options: she can attempt to retrieve the blade at the risk of cutting her baby's mouth, or she can tenderly offer the child a cookie to replace the blade.

Self-discipline is God demanding that I give up my fun for a life of hard work and self-sacrifice. Attention is *seeing* that God offers me something far more wonderful and awesome than what I'm holding on to that would eventually either harm me or keep me from God's best.

The Christian life is not about *trying*, but *trusting*, about being who I really *am*, through letting God be who He really is – in me! When I can't do it right, it's not because I haven't *tried* hard enough, but because I've failed to *see* the *glory* He offers in place of the "razor blade" I'm sucking on (1 Kgs 10-11; Mk 10:23-7).

There's only one catch: He usually hides His glory in darkness, difficulty, and humility. If He didn't, His glory would destroy us the way excessive wealth or power ruins those unprepared to handle it responsibly (Prv 20:21; 25:2-3, 28:20, 22; Is 8:17; 45:15; Ez 28:12ff; 1Tim. 6:9).

Why did God choose Elisha over the others?

The story of how Elijah transferred his anointing to his successor, Elisha, provides a clear picture of how any of us can learn to "walk in the Spirit," not "the flesh," and *cooperate with Him through prayer*. It's the biblical match to Jackson's book on the dramatic power of attention.

And it brings together the problem of *offenses* and the *distractions* which keep us from overcoming the offenses. (An offense is an issue or problem which causes a person to *stumble* because of resentment, hurt, or disappointment.) (Is 8:14; Mt 11:6; 13:41, 57; 24:10; Mk 6:3; Lk 7:23)

Elijah first found Elisha "plowing with 12 yoke of oxen before him." Apparently faithfulness "in what is another man's" is of more value than a Bible school education without this rare quality. For there were several prophetic schools for "sons of the prophets," but Elijah passed them all for this farm boy (1 Sam 9:19-20; 1 Kgs 19:19-21; 2 Kgs 2:2, 5, 7; 4:38; 6:1; Lk 16:10-12).

"Then, and for many years afterwards, Elisha did but 'pour water on the hands of Elijah.'"⁴ Knowing the abrupt character of Elijah, the forerunner of the outspoken John the Baptist, Elisha's education was no doubt the school of *humiliation* (1 Kgs 17:1; 21:20ff; 2 Kgs 1; 3:11; 2 Chr 21:12-15, Mat 3:7-12).

Jesus passed by hundreds of trained priests, Bible scholars (scribes), and experts in biblical law (“lawyers”), and picked “uneducated and untrained” men, faithfully engaged in their line of work. They were men who would endure “for many years afterwards” the persecution, stumbling stones, and martyrdom common to their calling. Except for Judas (Lk 6:12–16; 19:13; Acts 4:13).

Their secret? Like Elisha, they had “left all” – the “cares, riches, and pleasures of life,” because “one thing is needed:” With Mary, they had “chosen that good part, which will not be taken away from [them].” (Lk 5:28; 8:14; 10:42; 18:28, Jn. 6:66–68)

The answer for us is not necessarily to quit our jobs and go “full time” into “the ministry.” For the ministry has its own set of distractions. Jesus pinpointed the problem when He talked about a *single eye* and our *attitude* toward money, material things, and serving others: “For where your treasure is, there your *heart* will be also” (Mt 6:19– 34; Lk 12:13– 40).

The “law of first mention” is a principle in Bible interpretation. In Elisha’s case it is also mentioned last, adding to its importance. When Elijah “appointed” him by throwing his mantle over him, Elisha asked if he could say good-bye to his parents. And Elijah, *testing* him, said “Go back again, for what have I done to you?” (1 Kgs 19:21).

You can be sure Elijah tested, offended, and humiliated Elisha regularly to toughen his skin for the ministry he would have some day, which is why he’d picked *this* young man.

On the day Elijah began to *descend* from Gilgal down to the Jordan River where he would be “translated” (go to heaven without dying), he again *tested* Elisha, telling him, “Stay here, please, for the Lord has sent me on to Bethel.” He did it again at Bethel, and again at Jericho.

But Elisha didn’t swallow the bait this time either. Each time, as in the beginning, Elisha responded with absolute determination: “As the Lord lives, and as your soul lives, *I will not leave you!*” (2 Kgs 2:1–6).

When Naomi set out to return to Israel from Moab after her husband and two sons had died, her two Moabite daughters-in-law wept when she kissed them goodbye and said, “Surely we will return with you to your people.” Like Elijah giving Elisha an easy out, Naomi pleaded with them to go back home, where they could re-marry and live happily ever after (Ru 1:9– 3).

Orpah and Ruth both shed tears, but Orpah returned to her home in Moab while Ruth *saw something deeper* and determined to follow her mother-in-law back to Israel.

God gave Ruth a husband there, Boaz, and they became the great-grandparents of King David. Boaz *and Ruth* are listed in the genealogy of Jesus. Orpah is known only because she was the sister of Ruth (Ru 1:16; 4:13–2; Mt 1:5).

Good, better, best!

Elijah kept giving Elisha a wide open door to back out of hard, offensive situations. Jesus said that *offenses must come*, they are a normal part of life because they build character and strength by exposing our weaknesses. Failing to deal with them leaves us unprepared and undeveloped spiritually (Mt 18:7; Jas 1:2–4).

But at Bethel and again at Jericho Elisha ran into a different test, perhaps more subtle than the first. The “sons of the prophets” asked Elisha, “Do you know that the lord will take away your master from over you today?” If it hadn’t been for Elisha’s blunt response, I’m sure we would not grasp the significance of it: “Yes, I know; keep silent!” (2 Kgs 2:3, 5).

These young men had learned to hear the voice of God. Their education was paying off. They were on their way to a “gifted” prophetic ministry. But their question also reveals why *they* weren’t chosen instead of Elisha.

Learning to walk in the gifts of the Spirit is one small part of spiritual growth. The gifts can ruin a person if his *character* is left undeveloped. And character develops through the testing of one’s faith, as we’ve seen (Jas 1:2–4; Rom 5:3–5; Heb 12:10–11; 1 Pet 1:7).

But it is impossible to overcome many offenses without the grace and faith that come through listening to God. “So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.” Not physical but *spiritual* hearing, the *attention of the heart!* “Guard your heart above all else, for it determines the course of your life” (Prv 4:23, NLT; Rom. 10:17; Mt 4:4, 1 Cor 2:9ff; Heb 5:11).

These students didn’t have the *faith* to obey because they were too *distracted* with knowing *about* God rather than *knowing God Himself!* (Lk 4:4; 14:16–35)

Esau ended up poisoned by *resentment* when Jacob stole his firstborn-inheritance through trickery. He too could have experienced the breakthrough his brother Jacob had at Peniel when he wrestled with the Angel (God) and “prevailed” over his selfish nature. But Esau was too distracted by earthly pursuits

and the wrong kind of women to pay attention to life's deeper issues. God calls him *profane*, which simply means *earthly* instead of *spiritually* minded (Gen 26, 27, 32; Hos 12:3-4; Heb 12:15-17; Rom 8:5-8; Col 3:1ff).

Jesus gave a "parable of the great supper." The invited guests excused themselves to attend to their business, work, and family. So an invitation was made to "the poor and the maimed and the lame and the blind" (Lk 14:16-24).

They are like the "babes" to whom Jesus revealed Himself, hiding "these things from the wise and prudent." To those who are "wise in their own eyes," Jesus and His kingdom are a "stone of stumbling and a rock of offense . . . a trap and a snare" (Prv 3:7; 26:12; Is 8:14; Lk 10:21; Rom 9:32-33; 11:9-11; 12:16; 1 Pet 2:8; 1 Cor 1:26-31).

When Deborah summoned the tribes of Israel to war, the tribe of Reuben was among those who failed to respond. They had "great resolves of heart," but never *acted* on them. Like the sons of the prophets, their "resolve" never went beyond theological discussion. Distracted by their immediate needs like the invited guests, they settled for the temporary and stumbled over the eternal. "For I say to you that none of those men who were invited shall taste my supper" (Judg 5:15; 6:15b-16; Mt 7:24-27; Lk 14:24).

God does choose the educated, wise, and wealthy, however, *if* they will avoid distractions long enough to *endure* the offenses, the humbling, correction, and refining process, as with Moses, David, and Paul (Ex 2:12; 3:1-4; Num 20:10-12; 2 Sam 11; Ps 40:1-2; 78:70-72; 106:32; Mk 10:21-31, 38-45; Gal 1:17-2:1; 1 Tim 1:12-13).

The secret of overcoming offenses

Often we're tempted to take the *permissive* will of God rather than His *perfect* will. Even Jesus was tempted to avoid the Cross and knew he did not have the strength to endure it without seeking help through prayer (Lk 22:40-46; Jn 5:19; Rom 12:1-2; Phil 3:10ff).

The difference between Him and His disciples in the Garden that night is the same difference as that between Elisha and the sons of the prophets. *Neither group grasped the importance of what lay ahead and how to prepare for it* (Prv 22:3).

When Elijah and Elisha reached the Jordan River, Elijah rolled up his mantle and struck the water. It parted "so that the two of them crossed over on dry ground" while fifty "Bible college

students” watched “at a distance” (Job 40:23; Jer 12:5; 2 Kgs 2:7-8).

Then “Elijah said to Elisha, ‘Ask! What may I do for you, before I am taken away from you.’ Elisha said, ‘Please let a double portion of your spirit be upon me.’ So he said, ‘You have asked a hard thing. Nevertheless, if you *see me* when I am taken from you, it shall be so for you; but if not, it shall not be so” (2 Kgs 2:9-10).

Elisha’s previous faithfulness to God through humbly serving Elijah now came to a climax. The whole “emptying process” would have been in vain if he had lost his focus at the end (Ps 40:1ff; Ecc 7:8; Jer 48:11; Dan 12:12; Mt 24:13; Lk 21:19; Heb 3:6,14; 10:39; Rv 2:10).

What did Elisha see?

Why must Elisha “see” Elijah the moment he is taken from him? It’s the meeting of two opposites – maintaining a focused faith on the *spiritual* when the *natural* reaches the *lowest* point, when it hits *bottom!*

The fifty sons of the prophets “stood facing them *at a distance*,” watching for the same thing, but they stood on the *wrong side of the Jordan*.” They stayed in the comfort zone where “seeing is believing,” not “believing is seeing!” (Is 6:3; Rom 8:24-25; 2 Cor 4:18; 5:7; Gal 2:20; Heb 11:1, 27; 1 Pet 1:8 5:9).

These prophetic students had not changed their attitude from when they wanted to draw Elisha into a *discussion* about what would happen instead of following Elijah *down, down, down* until they could *experience* it (Jn 12:24–26; Rev 14:4).

Elijah told Elisha, “You have asked a hard [difficult, severe] thing.” It’s difficult because our lowest point is normally when we can’t handle it any more and end up doing something to relieve the anguish. Isaiah said, “Who among you fears the Lord? Who obeys the voice of His Servant? Who walks in *darkness* and has no light? Let him trust in the name of the Lord and rely upon his God.” Otherwise he’ll be very, very sorry (Is 50:10-11).

Elisha fit this category perfectly: he walked in the fear of God, had lived in humble obedience to Elijah, and now reached the point at which his previous investment in God would be transferred *from the natural to the spiritual* – like a caterpillar dead in its chrysalis, awaiting a metamorphosis, its resurrection as a butterfly (1 Cor 15:51-52; 2 Cor 3:18).

The Jordan is lower in elevation than any other river in the world, emptying into the Dead Sea at more than 1300 feet below sea level. The Jordan marked the beginning and rebirth of Israel

through the obedience of Abraham, Jacob, Moses, and Joshua when they crossed it into Canaan, the Land of *Promise*. It marked the beginning of the Kingdom of God through the ministry of John the Baptist and the baptism of Jesus. Therefore it also speaks of death – passing from one state to another, as in water baptism. Or “pressing in” with “violence” and “through many tribulations” to “enter the kingdom of God” (Gen 12; 32:10; Num 35; Josh 3-4; Job 40:23; Ps 114:3-5; Jer 12:5; 49:19; Zech 11:3; Mt 3:1ff; 11:12; Mk 1:5; Lk 4:1; 11:5-13; 18:1-8; 16:16; Acts 14:22).

“Then it happened, as they continued on and talked, that suddenly a chariot of fire appeared with horses of fire, and separated the two of them; and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven. And Elisha *saw it*” (2 Kgs 2:11-12a).

The fifty young men watching Elijah and Elisha standing by the Jordan should have easily seen from the other side of the river this blazing spectacle “launch” toward heaven, propelled by a fire-storm in a tornado. But they were looking for something *physical, not spiritual* (Ex 3:2; 19:18; 20:18-21; 24:15-18; Ps 18:4ff; Heb 12:29).

When later the king of Syria sent “a great army” to capture Elisha, his servant looked in horror to see the city surrounded by horses and chariots. But Elisha saw something else and prayed that his servant would see it. “Then the Lord *opened the eyes* of the young man, and he saw. And behold the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha” (2 Kgs 6:17).

When Jesus asked His disciples who they thought He was, Peter broke through the “flesh and blood” barrier and *saw* by the *Spirit* that Jesus was their long awaited Messiah, God in flesh, “Son of the living God.” As with Elisha, it marked a turning point in their understanding, a Foundation on which His church would be built (Mt. 16:16ff).

Quantum leap vision

When we can’t “see” or hear Him, it’s never His fault. Isaiah 30:18 says, “Therefore the Lord will wait, that He may be gracious to you, and therefore will he be exalted, that he may have mercy upon you: for the LORD is a God of judgment: blessed are all they that wait for him.”

The Lord longs to empower us (“gracious”), even in our weakness (“mercy”), but His “judgment” won’t allow it until we are humble and focused, rather than “dull of hearing,”

So both of us wait: He for us to look *whole-heartedly* to Him, and we wait because it's not that easy when we're so *distracted* (Mt 13:14-15; Heb 5:11).

Verse 19 says, "He will be very gracious to you at the sound of your cry; when He hears it [true, childlike faith that has broken through the darkness, like Abraham in Genesis 15], *He will answer you.*" Wow! That simple! (Ps 34:18; 51:17; Is 57:15; 66:2).

Waiting is so important it takes many Hebrew and Greek words in the Bible to bring out the various rich meanings of hope/wait, from total silence to intense concentration, like a woman in travail to give birth. It's all about expectancy, focus: where is our *attention*? (Ps 37:7; 40:1, 62:5; Is 40:31; Lam 3:26; Rom 4:18; 5:2-5; 8:20-25).

Why was David "a man after God's own heart?" I believe the main reason is that he *set the Lord always before him*. When God chastised him terribly for his sin of adultery and murder, he was not offended by God's severity, but drew close to God in repentance and intimacy.

"Because He is at my right hand I shall not be moved," was the secret of His success. "*You will show me the path of life; In Your presence is fullness of joy; At Your right hand are pleasures forevermore*" [not pills, people, power, prestige, or popularity] (1 Sam 13:14; Acts 7:46; 2 Sam 11-12; Ps 16:8, 11; 22:1ff; 38:1ff; 40:1ff; 78:70-72; Rev 5:5).

Paul gives us the secret to how to "walk in the Spirit" and not "fulfill the lust of the flesh." It is what we give our *attention* to: "For those who live according to the flesh set their *minds* on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. For to be carnally *minded* is death, but to be spiritually *minded* is life and peace (Gal 5:16; Rom 8:1-6; Col 3:1; Phil 3:19).

When the apostle John ended up a prisoner on the Isle of Patmos working on the "chain gang," it was his *Jordan*. Yet he "was in the Spirit" and found himself peering into God's throne-room, where God gave him the *Revelation* of events that will bring this age to a close (Rv 1, 4-5).

God will meet in some way every man or woman of God who endures through offenses and difficulties with *expectancy* (*hope, wait*). For faith is not faith unless it *stands* in the face of the *unseen* – something from God we need but *can't* see in the natural (Is 50:10; Heb 11:1).

Virtually all the supernatural acts and miracles in the Bible occurred through the *testing* of someone's faith. Hebrews 11 is

called “the Hall of Faith” because it records a long list of men and women who stood by *faith* against impossible odds until they broke past the physical into the spiritual. But they all had one thing in common: they kept their *attention* on God, fighting against *distractions* and *discouragement* until the answer came (Gen 49:18; Ps 16:8–11; 38:1–15; 40:1; Lk 8:14; Phil 3:10–15).

This may explain why some believers conclude that “signs and wonders” and the supernatural gifts of the Spirit ceased after the New Testament was written. Like the sons of the prophets they discuss it theologically while God reveals to “*babes*” how to do it! (Mt 12:28; 21:21–22; Lk 10:21–24; 18:6–7; 1 Cor 2:9–6; 4:20; 12:1ff; Mk 16:17–20; Jn 14:12–14).

I learn the hard way too.

I can identify with these students, for my life often hangs on how I deal with distractions. God delivered me from suicidal depression and insane rage when, through His grace, I finally got desperate enough to eliminate every distraction (spit out my razor blade) and “seek” Him “with all [my] heart” (Jer 29:12–14).

After six months of God’s silence (my deafness), I suddenly heard His voice. As I listened daily, He led me to the scriptures that eventually set me free. That took another year during which the misunderstanding of friends and other fears kept me in God’s face until He showed me “the path of life” and set me free (Rom 12:2–3; 1 Cor. 10:12).

But I often wasted what He taught me (from Romans and Galatians) when I didn’t stay focused and listen. Five years later, in 1981, I decided I could pray while I worked and eliminate my “daily devotions.” Working 14 to 16 hours a day, I left for work before our kids got up for school, and returned home long after they’d gone to bed. And praying while I worked ended with “good intentions.”

When my wife would find me at work (home repair and maintenance) she’d beg me to come home at least for supper. I always had only one answer: *tomorrow*. I meant well, but “tomorrow” never seemed to come.

Meanwhile an *offense* at church began to bother me. Normally I would have taken extra time to seek God until faith and love overcame my resentment and the “joy of the Lord” “turned my mourning into dancing,” sometimes literally (Neh 8:10; Ps 30:11).

But now I had no time to listen to God or my wife. After three months of this schedule, I was high up in a tree cutting limbs with a chain saw. The last thing I remember that day is looking at my

watch and seeing it was 7:00 o'clock. My nine-year-old son was collecting the limbs down below. But the rest of the family, I knew, was eating supper – without me. I sighed, and thought, *tomorrow!*

I woke up at 7:00 the next morning to find myself lying on the living room sofa and my wife on the carpet beside me. When I moved, a sharp pain shot through me. She explained that I had fallen from the tree, cracked my pelvic bone, had been to the hospital, and the doctor said I had to stay off my feet for six weeks. God had me under “house arrest”; my “tomorrow” had finally arrived (Dt 32:29; Ps 39:4; 90:10–12; Eccl 9:10; Lk 12:35–40; Jn 9:4; Eph 5:16-17).

Two weeks into my recovery I turned on the radio just as a pastor said these words: “If you’d been listening to God, you wouldn’t be in the mess you’re in.” Later I realized the tree I fell from was an *ear* tree with a thousand ear-shaped seed-pods. *Yes, Lord; I got the message!* (Job. 33:14-18; 36:10,15, Ps. 40:6, Mt. 7:24, Mk. 4:20)

That lesson permanently changed my priorities. If it had not, I would certainly have lost my four wonderful children in some way, but who now have their own wonderful children – thirteen, so far. And horrors; I would also have lost my dear, faithful wife (Gen 18:19, Prv 1:2-3, 7-8; Eph 6:4; Col 4:17).

Stuck in a New Orleans parking lot!

It’s easy to quit praying when we don’t get an answer and conclude, “It just wasn’t God’s will,” when the problem might be our ignorance of *how* to pray. Jesus gave two illustrations teaching that *persistence* – prolonged attention – in prayer gets results when it builds *faith* (Lk 11:5–13; 18:1-8).

In 1979 Andrew, a distant relative, wanted to tour parts of the U.S. before he returned to his home in Switzerland. He outfitted our old Dodge pickup into a camper and headed for New Orleans. A couple days later he called from a New Orleans parking lot and pleaded with me to drive my 1971 VW “bus” there and tow him home, because after trying everything, the pickup would not start.

I told him, “No, Andrew; my VW engine is too small for the size of the van, much less towing a heavy pickup 700 miles. I’ll pray!” I hung up, prayed sincerely for about a minute, and felt God would answer. But about the time I expected him to pull into our driveway, he called again from the same parking lot, *begging me* to tow him home. Realizing my prayer had not gotten through, I

answered, "Andrew, there's absolutely no way I'm going to tow you home with my VW bus. I *will* get through in prayer this time."

I got alone with God and leveled all the scriptures I could think of at God, reminding Him of His promises to hear us when we call, to provide for our needs, and of His faithfulness as our heavenly Father. After one hour of non-stop, defense-attorney style, intensely focused face-to-face "violence" as I "pressed in" before the "judge of all the earth," I *knew* I had *real faith* that God heard and Andrew would drive home in that pickup (Jer 33:3; Mt 7:7-8; 21:21-22; 1 Jn 5:14-15).

When he did drive in, he told me, "Vic, an hour after I called you, the lot attendant came to me with a new idea to try. It worked, and here I am!"

Long distance sniper: dead hit!

While God hears *faith*, not mere words, sometimes, however, that faith comes *immediately*. Some years ago, during the Gulf War, I felt guilty that my level of faith was not strong enough to affect a large number of our soldiers in Iraq the way others prayed for the whole army or the entire war. So I asked myself what I *did* have faith for regarding the war. I concluded I had faith to pray for only *one* soldier. But at least it was *real faith* (Mk 11:23-24).

I figured if it would be only one, it should be an officer, and it should be one that had influence over many men. So I prayed this simple, short prayer: "Father, give an American officer in Iraq the wisdom he needs to make an important decision affecting many people. In Jesus' name, Amen" (Mt 6:7).

The next morning immediately following the 7:00 o' clock news I heard a news flash that went something like this: "A serious crisis [that could have led to a reaction across the Muslim world] was averted by an American officer. Thousands of Muslims were gathered at a mosque in Iraq and hundreds of US troops surrounded them. The tension was about to reach the breaking point when one of our officers turned to his men and shouted, 'Everybody put down your guns and smile.' The men obeyed and the tension was broken."

I sat there in wonder that God might have taken my tiny, *focused* prayer and combined it with hundreds of others with greater faith, and *boom!* – the answer (Jas 5:17).

There's a postscript to this story. I wrote the above article in 2010 and regretted I had not recorded the date of the ABC News flash or any other source I could have used to document it.

Because it was so unusual an answer to prayer, I felt some might wonder whether I exaggerated or bent the facts. I searched the Web, but found nothing remotely related to it.

Meanwhile a few years ago (2018) our youngest daughter, Grace, who lives in Pennsylvania, invited a family to come to Florida and spend their week's vacation with us. She had done it twice before with another large family; my wife didn't mind cooking all week, and Grace was thankful her dad was "so self-sacrificing and ministry-oriented" – an extension of her own love of serving. And now she called to ask if we wouldn't mind another family to do the same.

This time my flesh rose out of its grave and I declared that it was wrong to take advantage of our home as a vacation resort for her friends. So I told her no, and she relayed the message to them.

If you are shocked at my childish behavior, so was I, with deep conviction. I realized my heart needed softening enough to know God's will in the matter. So I got alone to have a good heart-to-heart talk with "Daddy," the American equivalent of the Hebrew "Abba," as in *Father* (Mk 14:36; Rom 8:15; Gal 4:6).

In less than twenty minutes, my resentment turned to excitement and joy. Now I saw it as a priceless opportunity to have this dear pastor and his family – all musicians – spend a week with us. It was one of our best weeks in memory, the way Christian fellow-ship should be, as it was in the Bible.

As they were leaving and already in the car, based on our parting conversation I happened to quickly tell them the story of my fifteen second prayer for that one unknown officer in Iraq. To my surprise, she not only remembered it, but told me the name of the book in which she'd read it. When they left I looked up the book, *Social Intelligence*, by Daniel Goleman (2006), on Amazon.com and read the account in the *prologue* through Amazon's "look inside" feature. It was pretty close to what I had written, except that I'd forgotten the officer told his men, "Take a knee [kneel on one knee]. He ordered them to point their rifles toward the ground. Then his order was: 'Smile.'" The end-noted source was *All Things Considered*, National Public Radio, April 4, 2003.

"What goes around comes around" may take awhile, but God keeps good records and waits until our prayers line up with His will (Is 30:18; 1 Jn 5:14).

A listening ear saved the ball game!

I wish all my prayers had that kind of results. But like the average person, I'm so easily distracted. In 2001 my youngest son played his last game in Little League. It was the "playoffs" against the best of the opposing teams, and I sat in the bleachers reading a book so I wouldn't waste hours, except when my son was in the action.

Suddenly I heard a Voice inside me say, "How can I use you when your head is in a book?" I felt honored that God would speak so clearly (a rare experience), so I put down the book and watched the game with a *tuned heart*. Since I've never prayed for special favors for my son in a game but only that he be a good sport, I was surprised when the same Voice said, "I want you to be your team's Elisha."

I knew what that meant: Elisha kept telling the King of Israel where the Syrians would attack next, allowing Israel to prepare. It exasperated the king of Syria so he sent to capture Elisha, as I've mentioned earlier. So I knew that for some reason God wanted me to pray that my son's team would win (2 Kgs 6:8ff).

The score was seven to one, our team's favor, when the opposing team put in its best pitcher. Soon the tide turned and the score was seven to six; I knew it was time to obey God and stop their team's hitting streak and pray. So when their next batter got up, I prayed barely under my breath, "Lord, don't let him hit the ball; in Jesus' name." He struck out. Next batter, same prayer, same result. Third batter up: "Lord, don't let him get on base; in Jesus' name!" He hit a pop-up to my son in right field and the game was over (see Is. 45:11 KJV / NKJV).

Never give up!

From these experiences I've learned there is a *time* not only for intense and persevering prayer, but for short, faith-focused prayers. For me the key is expectant *listening* to a God who waits to hear us and loves to answer – in *His* time! Which may surprise us (Eccl 3:1ff).

Like Elijah and Elisha, people like us have changed history, nations, and kings through prayer. They did it when instead of escaping or avoiding the problems, they *faced* them and focused their attention on the problem Solver until *faith* came. Because *faith* is the *substance*, the *underlying reality in the spirit world*, of what we're praying for (Josh 10; Dan 9-10; Ps 2; Heb 11:1ff; 1 Kgs 17-19; Jas 5:17-18).

Jesus concluded the parable of the "unjust judge" with these words: "And shall God not avenge His own elect who cry out day

and night to Him, though He bears *long* with them? I tell you that He will avenge them *speedily*. [*His time!*] Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will He really find *faith* on the earth?" (Lk 18:7-8).

He's looking for the kind of faith that perseveres past the barriers of fear and doubt – even unanswered prayer – until they see the fiery chariot of God's glory and power "to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us" (Eph 3:20).

"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?" (Rom 8:31-32).

He paid for it, it's ours, it's free! Let's do it!

1. Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 2008. p.126-7
2. Ibid p. 231, emphasis hers
3. Ibid p.13, emphasis hers
4. Alfred Edersheim, *Bible History* (Wilmington: Associated Publishers and Authors, 1890)

CHAPTER 16

Use It or Lose It.

*How Faithful Are You as a Steward
in the Eight Areas of Opportunity
Available to You?*

Learning under the yoke

While I was waiting in a dental office years ago I picked up volume one of *The Bible Story* by William S. Maxwell and read the chapter about Enoch walking with God. (Enoch was “translated” to heaven without dying.) The chapter ended by revealing Enoch’s secret: he kept “in step” with God (Gen 5:24; Heb 11:5).

Jesus gave us the secret to walking with or keeping in step with Him in Matthew 11:28–30, “Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.”

The yoke was a small beam of wood carved to fit over the necks of two oxen plowing or pulling together. When a young, inexperienced ox was yoked to an experienced one, the yoke became a teaching instrument, transferring, as it were, the maturity of the older one to the younger.

God’s normal way of instruction is through *revelation*, which occurs when a particular thought or truth from the Bible comes alive to our “inner man,” our spirit – a *word from the mouth of God*, giving us life, direction, insight, and motivation to do His will. Moses said there are secrets only God knows, but “those things which are *revealed* [revelation] *belong* to us . . . that we may *do* all the words of this law” (Dt 8:3; 29:29; Eph 1:17–19; 3:16; 4:23).

Our ability to do His will does not come from will-power but *revelation*. The reason God said His revealed Word belongs to us is that we can’t do His will without it. In fact we can’t *live* spiritually without it, and Jesus used this point against Satan, quoting Deuteronomy 8:3, when he tempted Jesus to make bread out of stones (Rom 9:16; Mt 4:4).

Whether a burden is difficult or easy, therefore, depends on *how we see it*. Playing your favorite sport may take a huge amount of energy, but we call it *fun* compared to doing a little task we

don't want to do. *Revelation* is seeing things in our *spirit* from God's viewpoint, which, in cooperation with His Spirit, makes hard things *easy* and burdens *light*.

Just before Jesus mentioned taking His yoke to learn (revelation), He said He *reveals* things, not to the wise and prudent, but "to babes." In that simple sentence Jesus gave us the key to revelation and to His *own* ability to do His Father's will. For He told us "the Son can do *nothing* of Himself but what He *sees* the Father do" (Mt 11:25–27; Jn 5:19).

So the question is, how can I become like a babe, "as little children," so I can *live* and *do* by the revelation of His Word? Remember, "it is not of him who wills nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy." There's no way we can impress or influence God into giving us what we need other than to *position ourselves for His mercy* (Mt 18:3; Rom 9:16).

And God mercifully shows us how to do it: take *His yoke* with a "gentle and lowly" heart, listen and learn, and we'll find *rest* instead of exhaustion, frustration, fear, anger, bondage, and burnout.

The problem with being *wise and prudent* is that we become *unteachable* when we think *we've* got it together. Plus it's more difficult for us to *stoop under* the yoke and take on a humiliating or exasperating job or assignment, especially if there's no recognition, compensation, gratification, or visible reward.

Yet a *humble attitude and a pure motive with faith and love provide the best learning environment for "the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him."* "The humble He guides in justice, and the humble He teaches His way." And "whoever humbles himself as this little *child* is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven" (Eph 1:15–18; Col 1:9; Ps 25:9; Mt 18:4).

If this isn't clear enough, read Luke 17:5–10, where our role model for developing faith is not the master, but the *servant* (Greek, *doulas*, #1401, slave). God's intent is not to give us a loser mentality, but rather to develop our *motive* and *attitude* as "bondservants [*doulas*] of *Christ*, doing the will of God from the *heart*." Humility lightens the load! Pride – trying to impress and win approval from others – adds unnecessary stress (Eph 6:6; Lk 16:15; Ps 39:11).

The attitude of every believer, according to Paul, should be Philippians 2:5–8, known as the "self-emptying of Christ." It was through His motive and attitude that He through the Spirit overcame Satan, who did the opposite (Is 14:12–14; Ez 28:11–19).

Jesus took five steps *down*: (1) no reputation, (2) became a servant (*doulas*), (3) became just like us, “subject to weakness,” (4) constantly humbled Himself until it led to His death, (5) died the death of a slave and criminal, rejected by man and under a curse before God because of *our* sin (Ps 22; Is 53; 2 Cor 5:21; Gal 3:13; Heb 2:10–18; 5:2-8).

He did the hard part and then gave us the Holy Spirit to learn of Him under the *easy* side of the yoke (Jn 14:16–18; 16:13–15).

How to rest while working.

So keeping in step with Him is about maintaining a humble, teachable, listening attitude without lagging behind or running ahead of Him. But as the self-emptying passage might suggest, it’s not as simple as it sounds. As a young pastor reading about great men of God who learned to rest in God by waiting for His timing, I struggled with how to “wait on God” and do “nothing of myself” without doing nothing at all (Jn 5:19; 15:5).

One day as I read Psalm 123 I suddenly saw in my heart what God was after. “Unto You I lift up my eyes, O You who dwell in the heavens.” That’s seeking God and waiting for His direction. But the second verse revealed *how* it takes place: “Behold, as the eyes of servants look to the hand of their masters, as the eyes of a maid to the hand of her mistress, so our eyes look to the Lord our God, until He has mercy on us.”

As I thought about this, I saw in my mind a man who hires a servant. The servant waits around, doing only what his boss tells him to do, who must stay constantly on top of him to keep him busy.

Finally, in exasperation, he fires him and hires a man with a lot of ambition. This guy really gets things done on his own without supervision. The boss feels great. Then he gives him a specific job to do and discovers a problem as frustrating as it was with the one he fired. This ambitious employee is too head-strong. First, it’s difficult to stop him for a different task if he’s hard at work on something he’s not finished with yet. And second, he wants to do things *his* way and argues with the boss over *how* it should be done.

After several attempts to work with him, the boss lets him go and finally hires someone with a true *servant’s heart*. It is someone who senses the *obvious* needs around him and *occupies* himself with them, but keeps a sensitive ear to any *specific* need his boss has (Lk 19:13; Eph 6:6–7).

I see this servant rising higher and higher in the company because he has found the secret of *keeping in step* with its purpose

and with a sensitive ear for His boss's voice, his *master's heart and will, not his own* (Col 3:22–24).

I've observed those wrong attitudes in myself and others. Sometimes we neglect *obvious* needs through lack of vision. Sometimes we just get "weary in well doing." Sometimes we're driven by ambition beyond the *rest* of "abiding in the Vine," insensitive to the inner prompting of the Holy Spirit. Like the church at Ephesus in Revelation 2, which had gotten so busy working *for* God, they lost their "first love" for God Himself (Gal 6:9; Heb 4; Jn 15; Rv 2:1–4).

Through Palm 123 it finally dawned on me that *life is all about stewardship*. A steward is a person *in charge of something or someone assigned to him and for which or whom he is responsible*. And responsibility is about *faithfulness to the one who gave him the assignment*.

Jesus said, "Who then is that *faithful* and wise steward, whom his master will make ruler over his household [stewardship], to give them their portion of food in due season? Blessed is that servant [*doulas*] whom his master will find *so doing* when he comes. Truly, I say to you that he will make him ruler over all that he has" (Lk 12:42–44).

It's all about the kingdom of heaven, where each of us has been entrusted a "measure of faith" and grace "according to the measure of Christ's gift." Jesus compared it to servants issued varying amounts of money to invest. They were rewarded with *authority* to the degree of their *faithfulness* with what *they'd* been given, not what other servants were given (Rom 12:3; Eph 4:7).

The most shocking thing about these parables in Matthew 25:14–29 and Luke 19:11–27 is what Jesus said about the servant who *failed to make use of this stewardship entrusted him*. The terms Jesus used are *wicked, lazy, and unprofitable!* Furthermore, he was cast into "outer darkness" with "weeping and gnashing of teeth"!

It's hard to imagine such a severe punishment meted out to someone who simply *neglected* the gifts and opportunities given him. I finally concluded it had to do with the servant's attitude toward his master. He thought of him (representing God) as *hard and unmerciful* (Mt 25:24).

So in *fear* he failed to *step out in faith*, believing God to follow him with "goodness and mercy." His "faith without works" revealed he didn't have *genuine* faith in a loving, merciful God who carries the heavy end of the yoke while we learn of Him in childlike trust through success and failure (Ps 23:6; Jas 2:14–26).

Because I've also struggled with fear of failure and yet have watched God's unfailing faithfulness even *through* my failures, I've listed eight areas where God has given us an *obvious* stewardship *while we wait* for *more specific* instructions.

Together they constitute God's *training center* where our *faithfulness* in little things is *tested and developed* for *greater things*. This is the form of waiting that keeps us in touch and in tune with God's voice when He speaks – if we keep in step (Lk 16:10).

1. Relationships: family, marriage, friends, enemies, people.

The family is God's primary proving ground for our joint heir-ship with Christ. The family is the womb or wellspring of the "issues" that drive us through our adult years until they are dealt with, reconciled, and healed through Christ.

If children honor their parents, they are promised long life. If parents love and train their children, they generally reap the benefits in later years. But few families are that ideal, and most of us are left with relationship challenges and inner problems, like good and bad fruit from *family roots* (Eph 6:2–4; Prv 22:6).

If we see every relationship as a stewardship, an *opportunity* to see the restoring power of *grace* at work, we're guaranteed the help of the Holy Spirit for guidance and *revelation* (Jn 14:15–18).

Marriage is one of life's most important stewardships, for it is a prototype of the Church, of our relationship to Christ as His Bride. To live together unmarried is sin because sin is "missing the mark" (Greek, G264, *hamartano*). And the bull's eye in that relationship is a life-time commitment to responsibility, "for better, for worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, till death do us part" (Mk 10:5–9; 1 Cor 7:1–16; Eph 5:3–6, 22–33; Heb 13:4; 1 Pet 3:1–7).

If it is difficult, remember God is training us as sons to reign with His Son, to judge the world – even fallen angels. No wonder this job is reserved for *overcomers*, those who "do not become sluggish," but "through faith and patience inherit the promises" (Heb 6:12; 2:3; 1 Cor 6:2–3; 2 Tim 2:12; Heb 6:9–12; Rv 2:26).

Another important stewardship of relationship is the responsibility we have toward both our friends and our enemies. Our friends not only need our encouragement, but our honesty with them, correcting them in love as the Spirit leads (Prv 27:5–6; Mt 7:5; Gal 6:1).

Our enemies need to see our love and wisdom in the face of their evil, and God needs to hear our prayers for them so He can deal with them appropriately (Prv 24:17–18; Mt 5:43–47; Rom 12:18–21).

C.S. Lewis wrote, “The dullest and most uninteresting person you can talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption [you would meet] only in a nightmare.

“All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or other of these destinations. It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities . . . that we should conduct all our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics.”¹

2. The local church.

This stewardship is as primary as marriage and family, for it is *God’s* family. It takes the place of marriage for the unmarried, and it’s the beginning of the only “marriage” that will continue in eternity, *for it provides a place of intimacy with God and one another*. “Blessed are those who are called to the marriage supper of the Lamb!” (Rv 19:9).

Our physical health depends to a great extent on it, much like honoring one’s parents provides long life. Because “discerning the Lord’s Body” goes beyond discerning (recognizing, perceiving, seeing) Christ in the Lord’s Supper (Holy Communion). It also applies to *discerning Christ in the members of His Body, the Church – our brothers and sisters in Christ* (1 Cor 10:6–17; 11:29–30, Jas 5:16).

When Paul speaks of “the fellowship of the *mystery*” regarding the Church in Ephesians 3, he refers to it as perhaps the most valuable thing ever revealed, “which from the beginning of the ages has been hidden in God” (v.9). In this chapter, he relates it to the Gentiles becoming one with the Jews – opposites in the flesh, but one in the Spirit.

But in Colossians, the *mystery* is no less than “Christ in you, the hope of glory,” uniting *all* of us into “one Body” in Christ (Col 1:26–27, 2 Cor 5:17, Eph 1:9–10; 3:3–10; 4:3–5).

He speaks of marriage as a *great mystery* “concerning Christ and the church” (Eph. 5:32). Most believers can quote 2 Corinthians 5:17 (“. . . if any man be in Christ he is a new creature . . .”), but few of us, including me, *understand* its full meaning – that “from now on, we regard no one according to the flesh” (v. 16).

When Mary emptied the flask of very expensive perfume on the feet of Jesus, anointing Him for His burial, Jesus placed this act on the highest level and connected it with the preaching of the Gospel throughout the world (Mk 14:3–9).

How could this be? Because it is the mystery of the Kingdom – seeing the King in His *humiliation*, at a time when nobody else, including His own disciples, could see anything but “waste.” And it

relates to the most difficult aspect of the Church today – beholding Christ in our weak brethren, the “uncomely” or “less honorable” members of His Body, the Church (1 Cor 12:22–24).

How shocking it will be when we see them in their glorified bodies to realize how lightly we esteemed them in their “lowly body,” “the body of [their] humiliation” (Phil 3:21, J.B. Phillips).

As stewards of this mystery we are responsible to esteem our Christian brothers and sisters *highly*, “better than” ourselves, not through inferiority, but through genuine humility, the mind of Christ (1 Thes 5:13, Phil 2:3–8).

What an assignment!

3. The needy around us.

From time to time someone tells me he feels called to the ministry and wants to know how to get started. My usual answer is to begin by developing faithfulness (as a steward) in his or her local church. Out of that his *character* will be tried and tested and his *vision* will develop until he begins to sense God’s further direction for his life.

I’ve found there are enough needs available through the local church to be “full time” in ministry *without a ministry title*. From nursing homes and hospitals to jails and prisons, even college campuses, to going door to door, the needs are abundant and increasing. These are some of the richest mission fields right here within a few miles of most homes and churches.

Most of us may not end up in jail, but almost all of us will end up in a nursing home or living under the care of one of our children, and with nothing left but memories and pictures. Yet these are real people like us in the final stage before promotion to glory or *terror*. If we understood the mystery I’ve referred to, we might realize they are perhaps in the most important stage of their lives – the point of their *deepest humiliation and need*.

It is possible that during these lonely days when most forms of pleasure have long ceased, and all that’s left is *waiting*, our ministry might be more meaningful to them than ever before. *Yet it is sadly ironic that though we’re all headed there, it is probably the least valued of all ministry opportunities* (Ecc 12:1–7).

Another desperate need is our “at-risk youth” in juvenile detention centers and in our neighborhoods. We live at a time when irresponsible kids are raising their own renegade kids. And the vicious cycle continues, producing crime and violence. We can criticize and worry, or we can look for opportunities for outreach and involvement, beginning with prayer.

Teaching a class in Sunday school is a good way to help, plus it can give you a Bible college education, if you take it seriously. Or on Saturdays gather the kids in your neighborhood to your home for stories and rap sessions or games. When you see these kids later as young adults, you'll be glad you invested in their lives.

The needy all around us provide another of life's awesome opportunities for stewardship, especially through the help of the local church. Jesus will separate the sheep from the goats on judgment day by *how we responded to those in need*. I find it one of the scariest things Jesus ever said, and it took me years to deal with the problem, since most believers are not involved to any significant extent in ministry to the needy (Mt. 25:31-46).

I finally resolved the problem through Luke 12:47-48, where Jesus said all of us will be held accountable for how we respond to the knowledge we have and will be judged accordingly. "For everyone to whom much is given, from him much will be required; and to whom much has been committed, of him they will ask the more" (Lk 12:48b; cf Jas 3:1).

4. Our job.

Here is another stewardship through which God proves and develops us. Jesus spoke *specifically* about how our responsibility here relates to our reward later. And since He always emphasized the spiritual, it behooves us to see our secular employment in light of eternity (Mt 25:14ff; Lk 19:11ff; 16:10).

Studies have found that people who go to the top in their profession or trade, as in athletic competition, put more time into it than they have to. Those who stay at the bottom, go from job to job, or are jobless, are those who attempt to get the most money out of their job while putting the least effort into it (Eph 6:5-7; Col3:22-25; 1Tim 6:1-3; Tit 2:9-10; 1 Pet 2:18).

Some spend a lifetime trying to "milk the system" for every government handout available, from lawsuits to exaggerated "disability" pensions. It's like a weight lifter cheating on the weights during his practice to make it easier, not realizing he's only cheating himself from winning in real competition. What an *obvious* stewardship "making a living" is, as well as a significant *test of our integrity*.

Joseph learned the authority to "bind" Pharaoh's princes and "teach his elders wisdom" while humbly serving Potiphar as a slave and then serving the warden in a dungeon on a false rape charge. For many years. "Until the time that his word came to pass, the word of the Lord tested him" (Ps 105:19-22, Gen 39-41).

Moses, “learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians . . . mighty in words and deeds” at age 40, spent his next 40 years faithfully caring for a hard-headed wife and her father’s sheep. There in that desert, not in Pharaoh’s palace, followed by yet a third 40 years shepherding “stiff-necked” and “rebellious” people, God groomed him into one of the greatest spiritual leaders the world has ever known (Ex 3:1; 4:26; Mt 17:1–4; Lk 9:30–31; Acts 7:22).

David learned the lessons he’d need for ruling a nation not at Hebrew University, but faithfully tending his dad’s sheep (a job for the *least* among his brothers), then serving under a demon-oppressed, jealous king who wanted to kill him, and finally, tending 600 dysfunctional human sheep and training them into a mighty army. And one time even *they* wanted to kill him (1 Sam 16:14; 18:7–10; 22:2; 30:6).

When Jesus prayed all night before selecting his disciples, God led him away from religious experts whose integrity had boiled down to fleecing instead of feeding the sheep, to simple hard-working men who did their jobs with honesty and integrity. With one exception – Judas (Jn 6:70–71; 12:6).

But like the servants in Psalm 123 who looked to the hand of their masters and didn’t make an idol out of their careers, they dropped everything and changed their loyalty to the ultimate Master. Through this little band of teachable and faithful men with a heart like David, God “turned the world upside down” (Acts 17:6).

And to a host of saints who are learning integrity and diligence doing that which is “another man’s,” God will “give power over the nations” to “rule them with a rod of iron.” And through them make known His wisdom to the angelic realm, including Satan and his angels now attempting to destroy this planet (Lk 16:12; Rev. 2:26–27; Eph. 3:10).

Is it worth cutting corners and shoddy workmanship?

5. Personal assets – knowledge, education, money, talents, spiritual gifts.

Another sad irony is that while knowledge and wealth are crucial for the Kingdom of God, He can’t use the majority of people who have a lot of it. “For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called” (1 Cor 1:26).

Jesus told His disciples that it was virtually impossible “for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God”. But He added, “With men it is impossible, but not with God; for with God all things are possible” (Mk 10:24).

Most of us have a stewardship in these two areas, whether we accept it or not. We have accumulated some education and a few material assets. To convert the assets God has given us on earth into heavenly assets, we need to simply yield it all to Him and allow Him to both direct us in the use of it and to test us in the stewardship of it (Lk 16:11–12; 19:17; Mt 25:21; Heb. 3:2).

The same with knowledge. Paul and Peter, two opposites when it came to education, both wrote that knowledge is basic to spiritual fruitfulness, obedience, strength, maturity, grace, and in fact “all things that pertain to life and godliness.” How do we get this knowledge? By *taking His yoke and learning of Him*. Mere head-knowledge won’t cut it. It takes heart-revelation from a position of *servicing* (Eph 1:17ff; Col 1:9–11; 2 Pet 1:2–4; Mt 11:29).

Hosea said, “My people are destroyed for *lack of knowledge*.” The whole world is rising or falling based on the kind of knowledge they have. And we – God’s people – are *stewards* of this priceless commodity. What are we doing to get it, and what are we doing with what we have of it? (Hos. 4:6a).

But many believers have, in addition, gifts of the Spirit and other ministry-related gifts and abilities. Yet it’s easy to neglect this stewardship through being offended, discouraged, or most commonly, lack of motivation and passion, or simply a negative attitude, like the servant in Matthew 25 above.

Even Pastor Timothy needed to be reminded twice to “not neglect” but “stir up the gift” that had been given him, and to “meditate” on and “give [himself] entirely to” the various areas of his ministry, that his “progress may be evident to all.” “For in doing this you will save *both* yourself and those who hear you.” What a responsibility! (1 Tim 4:14–16; 2 Tim 1:6; Lk 12:43).

6. Our bodies. My dad was a health nut and the rest of us kids, led by our mother, made a big joke of his “crazy” eating rules, which simply eliminated junk food. But Mother died at 47 and I suffered unbearably with sinus trouble through my teen years until I decided to experiment with Dad’s health ideas. They worked! My sinus agony ended. But what began as faithful stewardship of my body became an obsession with health books and fads. Eventually I began to experience health problems as a direct result of my health idolatry and failure to depend on God. I had gotten *out of step* with my Creator.

Diet and health have finally made it to network news and are now a common subject in many or most Christian magazines and TV programs. There’s no more excuse for abusing our bodies for sheer pleasure, living to eat instead of eating to live. But the other

extreme is just as dangerous, replacing simple trust in God for healing and health with “the tree of knowledge” about “good and evil” foods. God’s view on health and diet is *not what you eat, but what eats you*, which is confirmed abundantly by medical science (1 Cor 9:25–27; Mt 15:17–20).

The fear of the Lord, the written Word, wisely spoken words, humility, caring for the needy and for one another, and God’s many promises for healing are spiritual remedies for health that carry us into eternity (Prv 3:8; 4:4, 10; 4:22; 12:18; 15:4; 16:24; 18:21; 22:4; Is 58:7–8; 1 Cor 10:16–17; 11:29–32; Jas 5:13–16; Ex 15:26; Dt 7:15; Ps 103:3; Mt 10:7–8; Lk 9:1–2; 10:9; Acts 4:9; 5:16; 8:7; 19:12; 1 Pet 2:24).

Actually, the only *biblical* emphasis on the physical body is to discipline it – keep it under subjection to my spirit *by the power of the Holy Spirit*, which may definitely include a change in eating habits *when our motive is for the glory of God* (1 Cor 6:20; 9:27; Gal 5:16–25; 1 Tim 4:8).

If we keep in step with this simple stewardship of our bodies, which are actually *His* property, “the temple[s] of the Holy Spirit,” the reward is obvious. Like the lady who said, “If I’d known I was going to live this long, I would have taken better care of my health,” our *earthen vessels* can be long-lasting and durable vehicles for *the Treasure* we bring to the hungry and needy God sends us to (1 Cor 6:19).

For I find that men and women of God with healing ministries, but who abuse their bodies, often suffer the consequences without the miracles of healing they minister to others. Faithfulness in stewardship in one area doesn’t exempt us from faithfulness in another.

7. Our daily cross, liabilities, and disadvantages

Jesus said, “If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me.” In the physical world, weakness, tribulation, and affliction are seen as liabilities, a curse instead of a blessing. In the world of sports handicaps are assigned to equalize the competition and challenge superior athletes (Lk 9:23).

In the spirit world they are the path to God’s strength and victory. God’s purpose in them is to deliver us from reliance on the confines of the physical world and challenge us in the realm of faith, where “*all things are possible* to him who believes” (Rom 8:35–37; 1 Cor 1:26–31; 4:9–13; 2 Cor 1:8–10; 4:7–18; 6:4–10;

11:24–30; 12:7–10; 13:4, 1 Pet 4:1–2; Rv 3:7–10; Mk 9:23; 10:27).

One day we'll give account of how we handled them, especially when we see the vast multitudes of people with every conceivable hardship – imprisonment, fire, sword, beatings, torture, stonings, abandonment, homelessness, persecution, dishonor, weakness, rejection, sickness, sleeplessness, hunger, thirst, and death – and how they *overcame* them through the blood of Jesus, their faith-filled testimony, and their surrender to God (1 Cor 4:9–13; 15:30–32; 2 Cor 6:4–10; 11:23–30; Phil 2:25–28; Heb 11:33–39; Rv 12:11).

Our faith, through His grace, connects the Cross of Christ with *our* cross, our light affliction, and fills it with purpose, power, and resurrection life through us to others (2 Cor 4:7–18; 13; 4; Phil 3:10).

Paul established it as a *way of life*, for God had told him His grace was all he needed, and that His strength is made perfect *in weakness*. Paul learned to boast, *not in his successes*, but in his *weaknesses*, because through *them* the *power of Christ* rested upon him. “That’s why I take pleasure in my weaknesses, and in the insults, hardships, persecutions, and troubles that I suffer for Christ. For when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor 12:9–10 NLT).

“But God forbid that I should boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.” How many of us actually *walk* in the revelation of this privilege? (Gal. 6:14).

8. Our time. Time, like relationships, is the other end of the stewardship spectrum. Everything in between is about these two. And time is the bottom line, for there’s no way to hear God’s voice and keep in step with Him in all these opportunities unless we spend *time* in His Presence and Word (Ps 39:4–6).

Most of us feel endless time pressure and never have enough to go around. But Jesus said if we seek *Him* first, all these *things* will be added to us. More than one great man of God has said, “I’m too busy *not* to spend quality time with God” (Mt 6:33).

After 2000 years we remember Martha for being “worried and troubled about many things,” and Mary for having “chosen that good part, which will not be taken away from her” (Lk 10:41–42).

The footnote under Psalm 90:11 of my *Spirit Filled Life Bible* says, “[God’s] anger is a divine response to the irresponsible use of time by men.” Wow! Moses’ response is, “So teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom” (v.12).

If “wisdom is the principal thing,” “is more precious than rubies, and all the things [we] may desire cannot compare with her,” then I can understand God’s anger toward us when we fail to take the time it takes to *hear* His wisdom (Prv 3:15; 4:7).

“Blessed is the man who listens to me, watching daily at my gates, waiting at the posts of my doors. For whoever finds me finds life, and obtains favor from the Lord. But he who sins against me wrongs his own soul; all those who hate me love death” (Prv 8:34–36).

If the value of a gem stone is determined by its rarity, as with the ruby, then consider the value of time – one infinitesimal “vapor” in an endless, infinite eternity. With this comparison, *one moment in time* is absolutely *priceless*.

Jail and prison inmates have through the amazing grace of God ended up in one of the most favorable opportunities of a lifetime: they have *time* to work on their issues and relationships and watch God convert them into compassion and wisdom.

Most of them are squandering this priceless advantage, creating more stress for the sincere around them. But those with “ears to hear” are taking advantage of it and seeing even this frustration as a *stewardship* from God to learn of Him, lead others to Christ, disciple them, and learn relationship skills in the process (Mal 2:7; Mt 13:52; 28:19–20; 2 Tim 2:2; 24–25; Tit 1:19).

What a surprise when we see many of these hidden but faithful men and women tower above us in their eternal reward. Instead of criticizing them, let’s be good stewards of *our* time and *pray* for them, as being “heirs together of the grace of life” (1 Pet 3:7).

Enoch

Though we know very little about Enoch, the most important thing we know about him is that in the tiny speck of his allotted time, *he made the best possible use of it*. He *laid hold* of that for which God had *laid hold of him* (Phil. 3:12).

Only the seventh from Adam, he walked right out of Adam’s fall back into Paradise, without the abundant assets we have today: the Bible, the Finished Work of Christ, the Church – the Body of Christ, and the gift of the Holy Spirit. But he’d found the secret: he kept in step with God.

1. C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (UK: Harper Collins), p.28. Print

CHAPTER 17

Buy Real Estate in Heaven: Cheap Now; Priceless Later

*Understanding True Wealth: How to Convert Your Pain on Earth
into Riches and Glory in Heaven*

Steve (names have been changed), a few years ago – early 2000s, had a regular job replacing polybutylene tubing in homes. After work he did “swing trading” on the stock market. When his job ended he went full time on the stock market. Within a year or two he had a new truck, a new boat, and finally a new house with another tall building for his now bigger boat.

He had me in awe and I told my engineer friend, Bill, about it. Bill decided to try his skill with the stock market and in a few days lost more than he had the nerve to tell me, but I suspect it was his entire investment of a thousand dollars.

In the meantime the stock market began its roller-coaster ride and many investors lost huge profits. I called Steve and he admitted it had lost its glitter, but he still plugged away. In the meantime Bill found real estate less volatile, more dependable, and finally experienced “real” and “appreciable” profit.

Real estate is so named because it has an actual and fixed or stationary existence. Investing in real estate may not bring quick profits, but they don’t “evaporate” with marketing whims and bad news because the property is still there when the dust settles. And people always need a place to live. Sounds true in theory, but not always in real-ity.

After the real estate bubble busted a few years ago and Bill lost *two hundred times more* in it than he’d lost in his attempt at the stock market, land and homes have again begun to appreciate (increase in value). In view of the world’s political instability, however, anything can happen, and *will* happen finally, according to the book of Revelation (Rv 6, 13, 18).

So to be on the safe side, I see “real estate” from another angle. But it frightens me even more than a world-wide economic collapse.

If only!

Maybe *if only* will be wiped away with tears in heaven, but before it is, it may well be the cry of multitudes of saints one day when the stamp of eternity is imprinted on our value system. *If only we had invested in “true riches” while on earth!* (Lk 16:11).

Picture yourself in heaven. Those frustrating years of life in flesh and blood are now almost a forgotten memory. You are now in the *real* world of permanent, solid, absolute existence, where life is not measured by how much you own. You have hardly begun to absorb its magnitude, beauty, and glory, when you notice certain saints with a depth of character beyond anything you’d ever known. For in heaven you *know* just as you also are *known* (Lk 12:15 NLT; Jas 4:14; Heb 11:1; 2 Cor 4:17; 1 Cor. 13:12).

They appear to be more closely related to the Lamb on the throne than others. They have an *intimacy* with Him which is very special, as though it’s the goal for which everything else reaches (Jn 15:1–5; Phil 3:10; Rv 2:4).

What is it, you ask? Have they been here much longer? Yet you notice several new arrivals with the same glow. On the other hand, some of the saints who seemed to do more for God on earth are now among those without this heart-to-heart relationship with the Lamb, and worship Him at a distance, as it were.

Suddenly you know the answer, but it’s too late to do anything about it. In that tiny speck of life called *time*, you’d misunderstood your goal. And now even some you thought were “baby Christians” are also among those closer to the Lamb (Mt 11:25; 18:2).

How could I have missed it? you sigh. Your mind fights to pull out of the realm of time those lost opportunities, like bargain real estate, in which you could have more deeply “inherited the promises.” Right in your own “back yard” was a diamond mine (Heb 6:12; 2 Pet 1:4).

A diamond mine in my back yard?

There’s an amazing story, *Acres of Diamonds*, told by Russell Conwell, founder of Temple University in 1888. Snopes.com, which checks the authenticity of stories and rumors, says “it is true,”¹ but whether true or not in every detail and name, it is “true to life,” as my dad would preface his stories to us kids.

The story concerns a “contented and wealthy” Persian “not far from the River Indus” (in India) who “owned a very large farm with orchards, grain fields, and gardens,” but was told by a

Buddhist priest that there were diamonds in the white sand in rivers between high mountains everywhere in the world. He “told Al Hafed that if he had a handful of diamonds he could purchase a whole country, and with a mine of diamonds he could place his children upon thrones through the influence of their great wealth.”

So Hafed sold his farm, left his family behind, and traveled far and wide in search of diamonds until his money was gone, and in deep depression, he threw himself “in the bay in Barcelona, Spain” and died.

Meanwhile, the new owner of Hafed’s farm discovered diamonds on it, which eventually became “the diamond mines of Golconda, the most magnificent diamond mines in all the history of mankind, exceeding the Kimberley in its value. The great Kohinoor diamond in England’s crown jewels and the largest crown diamond on earth in Russia’s crown jewels . . . came from that mine.” And Wikipedia lists many more famous diamonds under the spelling, “Golkonda.”

Conwell goes on in this famous lecture to tell of several other men who quit their jobs and sold their land in pursuit of riches in another area, only to hear that on the land they sold, gold, oil, or silver was found in great abundance.²

But Hafed and these men, including Conwell, are long dead, as well as those who became extremely wealthy off the land they’d bought. Solomon, perhaps the richest king in his time, said, “Then I looked on all the works that my hands had done and on the labor in which I had toiled; and indeed all was vanity and grasping for the wind. There was no profit under the sun” (1 Kgs 3, 10–11; Eccl 2:11).

But Solomon did find something more valuable than gold, rubies, or “all the things one may desire.” Without it, Hafed’s children, as kings and queens, would not have had the most important and vital ingredient necessary for the throne: wisdom (Prv 3:14–15; 8:10–11).

“Counsel is mine, and sound wisdom; I am understanding, I have strength. By me kings reign, and rulers decree justice. By me princes rule, and nobles, all the judges of the earth” (Prv 8:14–16).

Hefed’s problem to begin with was that his wealth and contentment blinded him to the deeper values of life, which is why Conwell goes on to explain that those who start with no money become the inventors and achievers rather than children of millionaires who too easily value their wealth as an end in itself, again agreeing with Solomon:

“Will you set your eyes on that which is not? For riches certainly make themselves wings; they fly away like an eagle toward heaven.” “A faithful man will abound with blessings, but he who hastens to be rich will not go unpunished.” “A man with an evil eye hastens after riches, and does not consider that poverty will come upon him” (Prv 23:5; 28:20, 22).

Where is wisdom found?

Biblical wisdom is a product of character, and character is formed, not in the comfort zone, but through difficulties, trials, tribulations, and affliction, because it can work in us “the fear of the Lord” – a deep reverence, awe, and desire to be in His presence rather than in the superficial pleasures and temptations of the flesh. That’s why “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom,” because it leads to our “bluetooth” (close) communication with Him (Ps 34:10–11; 111:10; Pr 1:7,29; 2:1–12; 9:10; 14:26–27; 16:6; 19:23;22:4; Is 11:2–3; 33:6; Rom 5:1–5)

Job found it through his afflictions, as though in the deep and dangerous pit of a mine. Solomon related it to humility and receiving correction, and he learned it *the hard way* long after he wrote about it. For he wrote Ecclesiastes in his old age after he’d come back to God: his wealth and women had lured him away from “the fear of the Lord” he’d once taught (Dt 8:10–20; 17:16–17; Job 28, 42; 1 Kgs 10–11; Prv 9:8–9; 15:31–33; Eccl 2, 12).

Since wisdom, therefore, is the most important and valuable attribute for a human, made in God’s image and created specifically for fellowship with Him and to be His extension in government now and in the ages to come, and since wisdom is formed through the trial and testing of our faith in order to produce the kind of character essential for these two qualities – fellowship and rulership, then it is obvious that anything and everything in life that will *test* our faith is far more valuable than any other kind of wealth. For it’s the one kind of wealth we can take with us into eternity.

That’s why I see it as the true “real estate.” And it’s available abundantly to anyone who engages in most any human activity, especially in the area of relationships, beginning with family (Gen 2:26, 28; Ex 19:5–6; Ps 2:8–9; 8:4–8; 115:16; Lk 10:18–19; Rom 8:16–22; 1 Cor 6:1–8; Eph 1:17–23; 3:10,16–19; Heb 2:8–11, 14–18; 5:1–8; 2 Tim 2:12; 1 Pet 3:22; Rev 2:26–27; 20:4).

We all have friends or friends of friends who are going through agony over a bad marriage, bad children, or some other horrible family situation. It’s common to advise the “innocent”

one to leave, if possible. “You don’t have to put up with that!” What we fail to realize is that these problems are not *liabilities* meant to bring us down, but *opportunities* to teach us God’s ways, exercise our faith, and sensitize our “inner man,” our spirit. When the problem drives us wholeheartedly to God, He will give us the *wisdom* we need to deal with it (Ps 103:7; 1 Cor 13:12; Eph 4:23; Heb 3:10; Jas 1:2–6).

“Now no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but painful; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it” (Heb 12:11).

A different set of values.

But at least you made it to heaven, you say. And your earthly life is now a dim vapor of history, gone forever. And you behold the Lamb who “made himself of no reputation,” who *emptied* Himself, “who was made in the likeness of men,” who “humbled himself” even to “the death of the cross” (Phil 2:5–8).

So that was “the mind of Christ” He told us to have, you realize regretfully; my value system was all backwards. His plan was to empty me of myself so He could fill me with Himself. No wonder I don’t “know” Him in the way these others do.

God has not furnished us with many details of the coming age of glory. But he has given us definite clues to help us prepare, warning us to “get wisdom, get understanding. . . . Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom, and in all your getting, get understanding.” The repetition implies strong emphasis. And if Christ is our wisdom, then wisdom comes through *knowing* Him – His voice and His character (Prv 4:5, 7; 1 Cor 1:30; Phil 3:10; Col 1:9–11).

In Matthew 13:44 Jesus compares the Kingdom of Heaven to a parcel of real estate containing a treasure so valuable it’s worth giving up everything else for. Abraham left his home in prosperous Babylonia for an unknown land he would never own, except for a grave plot. Today it is the most contested and coveted land in the world, and “the end of the age” will climax there in the “plain of Megiddo” – Armageddon (Gen 12:1–3; 23:4–20; 2 Chr 35:22; Zech 12:11; Rv 16:16).

But spiritually this land (Israel) symbolizes the Kingdom of God, our inheritance in Christ. And, incredibly, the New Testament links the glory of this heirship with Christ to a faith tested and refined by *suffering* (Rom 9:8; Gal 4:26; Heb 12:22; 1 Pet 1:7).

This corresponds with Deuteronomy 8:2–3, where Moses told Israel how God had prepared them to “possess the land” He had sworn to their fathers to give them. He reminded them, “Your God led you all the way these forty years in the wilderness to humble you and test you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not.” He afflicted them to *expose the condition of their hearts*, the weakness of their flesh in order to create spiritual hunger (Gen 12:1–3; Mt. 5:6; Ps 63:1–2).

To add to the affliction, He fed them a diet of *manna*, which is like living on pancakes or corn-bread without butter and syrup – forty years! Check out these passages before you conclude they had their animals to eat also: Ex 16:14–35, Num 11:4–10; Ps 78:20–31; Neh 9:15.

The last Adam

When the Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil, after He’d fasted forty days, Satan said, “If You are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread.” It was a replay of the temptation of Adam in Eden, when Adam chose to live by his own decisions (the tree of the knowledge of good and evil) instead of by complete dependence on God (Gen 3:1ff; Mt 4:3).

In other words, our affliction provides an opportunity to hear from God – *if we’ll wait and listen* (Prv 8:34–35)

The “last Adam” (Jesus) understood the full meaning of this choice: He could turn the stones into bread by the power He had as the “Son of God,” or He could “do nothing of Himself, but what He *sees the Father do*.” If He had acted on the power of His deity as the Son of God, He would have acted *independently* of His Father, which is what the first Adam did. Instead He answered Satan by quoting Deuteronomy 8:3, “It is written, ‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God’” (1 Cor 15:45; Jn 5:19).

This decision reset the human race back to the path of obedience. “For as by one man’s disobedience many were made sinners, so also *by one Man’s obedience* many will be made righteous. Moreover the law entered that the offense might abound. But where sin abounded, grace abounded much more” (Rom 5:19–20).

God afflicted Israel in the wilderness to bring them to the end of themselves, to expose the complaining, sinful condition of their hearts, that “the offense might abound” so they’d learn to live by “every word that proceeds from the mouth of the Lord.”

That's the only purpose for suffering. It's not to develop our tolerance for pain or keep us weak and beaten down, but quite the opposite: to weaken our dependence on the *flesh* in order that we might live by His strength, by the *Spirit*, by *faith*, by the Word from the mouth of God. Not by self-discipline or will-power: "So then it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy" (Rom. 9:16).

My entire twenty-year history of depression hinged on this verse, trying to live by my "will-power," rather than His power. But look at the next two verses, the *context* of God's mercy:

"For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, 'For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.' So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills' (Rom 9:17-18 ESV).

Some see this only in a "predestination" sense, but I see it as a major key to receiving His mercy – *expecting* it, especially in a context of need, the "trying" of our faith. For the manna God gave them in the desert daily reminded the Israelites that God was right there with them if they would only listen for a word *from His mouth*. *What intimacy!* (Dt 8:2-3).

God "led you through that great and terrible wilderness, in which were fiery serpents and scorpions and thirsty land where there was no water; who brought water for you out of the flinty rock; who fed you in the wilderness with manna, which your fathers did not know, that He might humble you and that He might test you, *to do you good in the end*" (Dt 8:15-16).

"So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the *word* of God." The same Greek word (*rhema*) is used here that Jesus used against Satan, the "word [*rhema*] from the mouth of God." It's God's Spirit-breathed, faith-creating, revealed word (revelation) that enables us to "live in the Spirit" and "walk in the Spirit." "I say then: Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh" (Mt 4:4; 11:25; Lk 10:21; Rom 8:1-5; 10:17; Gal 5:16,25).

The Lord's Gym

Difficulties, testing, and trials are like *weight lifting* to strengthen our spiritual muscles to keep us from living like wimps, after the flesh, the carnal mind. "For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. For to be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace" (Rom. 8:5-6).

The ten “spies” Moses sent out brought back a “bad report” of the Promise Land because they saw giants there and felt like “grasshoppers” in their sight. It was pain and suffering to them. But two of the spies, Caleb and Joshua, saw the same giants as “bread,” a challenge that energized their spirit—man, because they had already been living by that faith—creating heavenly manna from God (Num 13:27–14:9; Jn 6:30–36; Heb 12:1–2).

To be brought to the end of our selves is actually a blessing, because living by “the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus” sets us “free from the law of sin and death.” Paul taught his converts that “we must through many *tribulations* enter the kingdom of God,” that being a “joint heir” with Christ in His glory depended on *suffering with Him*, and that “if we *endure*, we shall also *reign* with Him” (Rom. 8:2, 15; Acts 14:22; Rom 8:17; 2 Tim 2:12).

Amazingly, Paul considered his “gains,” his assets and profits, as *liabilities* and *losses* “compared to the surpassing greatness of *knowing Christ*.” And as if that reversal of values was not enough, he desired to *know Him* through “sharing in His sufferings” (Phil 3:7–10 NIV; see Col 1:24).

If this is hard for us to accept, it did not come easy for Paul either. For he “begged” the Lord on three occasions to remove the “thorn” in his flesh. God answered, “My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness.”

That changed his outlook entirely: “So now I am glad to boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ can work through me. That's why I take pleasure in my weaknesses, and in the insults, hardships, persecutions, and troubles that I suffer [his thorn] for Christ. For when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor 12:9–10 NLT).

It's like “thermal depolymerization,” where garbage of all kinds is ground to fine powder and converted to oil through heat and pressure (look it up in Wikipedia). Or “solar power”—“life in the Son.” Our trials have tremendous value with God in them (1 Jn 5:11).

Paul saw them as momentary “light affliction” which works “for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory.” What the natural eye can't see, he saw – amazing wonders through the eyes of faith by the Spirit (2 Cor 4:17; 12:4, Heb. 11).

“But, as it is written, ‘What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him’— these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God” (1 Cor 2:9 ESV).

Currency Conversion

According to Hebrews 2:9–18, even Jesus was perfected through suffering. Through partaking of flesh and blood “in all points tempted as we are,” He *identified with us* “in all things . . . that He might be a merciful and faithful high priest.” “He can have compassion on those who are ignorant and going astray, since he himself is also subject to weakness.” This was the “obedience” He “learned” through “suffering,” the “compassion” He gained through being “subject to weakness” (Heb 2:17; 4:15; 5:2,8; Is 53:3).

It is what qualifies “the Lion of the tribe of Judah” to open the seals of judgment and take possession of – “reign” over – our fallen planet, for He had suffered as a “Lamb as though it had been slain.” Furthermore, Jesus offered His disciples positions of rulership because they “have continued with Me in My trials” (Rv 5:1–7; Mt 22:28–31).

I hate suffering, obviously more than many people do, because I plan well ahead to minimize or eliminate it by avoiding junk food, careless spending, risky living, wrong relationships, and by feeding on the Word, listening to the Holy Spirit, and living in right relationship with others (Prv 3:8; 4:20–23; Gal 6:8; 1 Cor 11:29–32).

But as careful as I am, I’ve ended up in many prolonged periods of darkness and confusion, sometimes through disobedience or *not* listening, wondering if God knows where I am and why He doesn’t answer. So it’s not *physical pain and sickness* that is meant in these passages on “suffering,” but the mental anguish and perplexity of the *soul*, which may, in fact, be *triggered* by physical illness (Ps 22, 38, 88; Lam 3; Job 3; 2 Cor 4:7–11).

Yet when I turn wholeheartedly to Him in these pits and experience a breakthrough – a *word from His mouth* – I literally *beg* God *not* to stop His loving chastisement or spare me from the pain. Because in that “light affliction” *He deals with various attachments of the flesh that keep me from greater intimacy with Him*. No wonder it results in deeper insights into His glory and the mystery of my *purpose* on earth: to know *Him*, and in knowing Him, to connect to others with more understanding and compassion (Ps 40:1–10; 119: 67, 76; Col 1:24; Job 33:23–26; Heb 12:10–12; Rv 3:19).

The pleasure, inner strength, and joy that result from these breakthroughs is beyond anything I’ve ever experienced from any other kind of pleasure. They are my lifetime “highs”! That’s why I see facing these difficulties as *real* estate. In this way I can invest

in and build on, a permanent foundation – the Rock–instead of sand (Ps 30:5; 40:1ff; Jn 11:40; Mt 7:24–27).

And as dismal national and world news, economic pressure, and family conflict drive more people to antidepressants and other medications, this “real estate” is “appreciating” at a phenomenal rate: it’s becoming *more difficult, challenging, and valuable than ever!* (Lk. 21:25–26).

One day as I struggled over the abuse by someone of one of my cherished possessions, it suddenly occurred to me (perhaps a word from His mouth) that there *is* a way to take our earthly treasures to heaven: convert them to heavenly currency the way we exchange our US dollars into foreign currency when traveling abroad. How? By allowing God to “test” us with them.

For example, when I yielded the “thing” I loved, giving it back to God, trusting Him with the whole problem, it yielded a wealth of heavenly “currency” back to me in the form of *patience, understanding, insight* into human nature, and a revelation of my own weakness and humanity, resulting in more *brokenness* and *compassion* for others, causing me to draw more heavily on God’s wisdom (Rom 5:1–5).

The hardships of flesh and blood contain priceless gems of eternal significance. All we need is to absorb them in the light of the Cross and to cooperate with Him in childlike *faith* instead of looking for a quick way of escape (Is 50:10–11; Jer 48:11–12).

What about faith and prosperity?

Many have over-used the faith scriptures in the Bible, such as Mark 11:23 and 3 John 1:2, for material gain. There is a time for this, for poverty is often a result of *disobedience* rather than obedience. And God’s blessings abound to those who speak faith and *act* on it, *especially when we bless others as God blesses us*. In fact giving to others is so powerful a sowing and reaping principle, it’s tempting to give just to receive (Prv 3:9; 18:20–21; Mal 3:10; Lk 6:38; 2 Cor 8:14–15; 9:6–8; Phil 4:17–19).

But the prosperity God means as normal and good must not become the *goal*, for a wrong emphasis will keep us from the goal – *knowing Him*. And if I have faith strong enough to move a mountain or gain wealth, but without love motivating it, “I am nothing.” Which explains why Jesus called riches “deceitful” (1 Cor 13:2; Mt 13:22; Mk 4:19).

The first eight verses of Psalm 44 review God’s faithfulness to Israel in the past. But the rest of the psalm describes God’s

apparent abandonment of His people before their enemies. It ends on a depressing note:

“Yet for Your sake we are killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter. Awake! Why do You sleep, O Lord? Arise! Do not cast us off forever. Why do You hide Your face, and forget our affliction and our oppression? For our soul is bowed down to the dust; our body clings to the ground. Arise for our help, and redeem us for Your mercies' sake” (44:22–26).

The reason the Jews could not identify Jesus as their long-expected Messiah is that He came as a *servant* who suffered and died as a curse, even though their own scriptures describe this accurately in Isaiah 53. We, the Church, also expect Jesus to return as “King of kings and Lord of lords,” to “strike the nations” and “rule them with a rod of iron,” no longer “the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world” (Gal 3:13; Rv 13:8; 19:11–16; also 5:6).

However, He will “rule them with a rod [Greek, *scepter*] of iron” *through His Church*, specifically “he who overcomes, and keeps My works until the end.” And to “overcome” means walking by the same kind of faith God attempted to teach His people when He brought them into that “great and terrible wilderness, in which were fiery serpents and scorpions and thirsty land where there was no water” (Rv 2:26–27; Dt 8:15).

But their grumbling and complaining disqualified them, arousing God’s anger, so He let all the adults die there without going into the “Promise Land” they’d come out of Egypt to enter (Num 13–14).

“Today, if you will hear His voice, do not harden your hearts, as in the rebellion, in the day of trial in the wilderness where your fathers tested me, tried me, and saw my works forty years. Therefore I was angry with that generation and said, ‘They always go astray in their heart, and they have not known my ways.’ So I swore in my wrath, ‘They shall not enter my rest’” (Heb 3:7–11).

So Paul takes the most devastating verse from Psalm 44 and applies it to *overcoming* the flesh through walking after the Spirit in Romans eight. “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written: ‘For Your sake we are killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter.’ *Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us.*”

What an example of the difference between the Old and the New Testament, where “the kingdom of God” is no longer a *physical* “Promise Land,” but a place of “rest” through faith, *especially*

in the midst of trials and tribulation! (Rom 8:35–37; Mt 11:11–12; Heb 3–4).

This partly explains why Jesus said, “Assuredly, I say to you, among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist; but he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force.”

Sometimes it takes “violence” in prayer and perseverance to break through the “veil” of flesh and blood, the physical realm, into the spiritual, through faith (Mt 11:11–12; Lk 11:1–13; 16:16; 18:1–8; Rom 8:18–27; Gen 32:24–31).

The real goal: life in the Son (1 Jn 5:11)

So the emphasis in the Bible is not in *material* but in *spiritual* prosperity – to be “more than conquerors” through the training of our faith. “My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience.” “That the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ” (Jas 1:2–3; 1 Pet 1:7).

These verses have often changed my discouragement into faith in the midst of a trial, as I realize the *testing* is far more valuable than the loss.

Take the Son is a story on the Web and popularized by email, of a wealthy man who had a collection of famous art masterpieces. His son had died saving the life of another soldier in the Vietnam war. This soldier, an artist, had returned and given the father a portrait he had painted of his son in gratitude for saving his life. The art collector prized this painting more than all the others.

After he died, his entire art collection was to be auctioned off. Many gathered for this rare opportunity, but the auctioneer affirmed that none of the other paintings would be offered until the portrait of the owner’s son was sold. “The son! The son! Who’ll take the Son,” he persisted.

Nobody wanted it and people began to shout their impatience and irritation over the hold-up. Finally an offer of \$10 was made by a poor man who’d been the gardener of the owner. When nobody offered a higher bid, the painting was sold to him for \$10.

The auctioneer then told the crowd, now eager with anticipation, that the auction was over. The will had provided that

whoever bought the portrait of the son would inherit not only the rest of the paintings, but the entire estate.

The story is a beautiful picture of the Kingdom of God – the buried treasure nobody notices, as seen in the Acres of Diamonds story. The Jews missed it because it didn't meet their political expectations; I wonder how many Christians are missing it because we choose the *outward* blessings of the Kingdom rather than the *heart* of it – the Son! (Mt 13:44–46).

“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.*” “He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life” (Jn 6:27; 1 Jn 5:12).

Why is He called the *Son of Man*? Because in fully identifying with our humanity, He made God available to us in our weakness. That's why knowing Him “in the fellowship of His sufferings” is so crucial to *knowing God*. It is knowing God *intimately*, in our brokenness – vulnerable, transparent, empty, unveiled, real – the way we often secretly wish others would relate to us . . . or we could relate to them (Mt 12:20; Lk 4:18; Song 1:6–7; Is 57:15; 1 Cor 1:26–31; 4:9–16; 2 Cor 3:18; 11:23–30; 12:1–10).

Buy now at Rock bottom prices (Rev. 3:18).

Think of it: all this cheap real estate is available for almost nothing, like the \$10 portrait of the son. Imagine the anguish, the horror of regret as those treasure seekers realized how easily the whole estate with its entire art collection could have been theirs. They'd missed it because their *heart* was in the wrong place.

But the *real* Treasure is *still* available: a little time here, a little patience there, a heart listening for *His voice*, digging a little deeper in the Word, and grace to endure with *joy* instead of complaining. It's giving God permission to replace our layers of self-reliance with His unconditional love, enabling us to love others the same way (Col 1:11; 1 Thes 1:6; 1 Pet 1:8; 4:13).

“Keep *and* guard your heart with all vigilance *and* above all that you guard, for out of it flow the springs of life” (Prv 4:23 AMP).

God wants us to *freely receive* so we may “*freely give.*” What a deal! “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?” (Mt 10:8; Rom 8:32).

“Fear not, little flock; for it is your Father's *good pleasure to give you the Kingdom.*” The next two verses show us what God

thinks of our earthly real estate when our heart is in *it* and not *Him*: “Sell what you have and give alms; provide yourselves money bags which do not grow old, a treasure in the heavens that does not fail . . . For where your *treasure* is, there your *heart* will be also” (Lk 12:32; also Mt 6:19–21; Rom. 8:32).

The “rich young ruler” could have kept his wealth if his *heart* had not been so attached to it, for his materialism had taken the place of God. To the disciples, “astonished at His words,” Jesus said, “Children, how *hard* it is for those who *trust in riches* to enter the kingdom of God!” (Mk 10:24).

How does “the deceitfulness of riches” take the place of God? When they replace the comfort and satisfaction God alone gives. And when they take *time* away from intimacy with Him through a listening, hungry heart (Mt 13:22; 5:6).

Ezekiel, when exposing the sin of Sodom, dealt first with the *cause* of her “abominations.” “Look, this was the iniquity of your sister Sodom: She and her daughter had pride, fullness of food, and abundance of idleness; neither did she strengthen the hand of the poor and needy.”

The *true* purpose of wealth beyond “having food and clothing” is to “have something to give him who has need” and have “an *abundance* for every good work” (Ez 16:49; 1 Tim 6:8; Eph 4:28; 2 Cor 9:8).

Jesus rebuked Martha for being “worried and troubled about many things,” telling her “*one thing* is needed, and Mary has chosen that good part which *will not be taken away from her.*” Earthly cares, along with “houses and . . . land” will soon “pass away” (Lk 10:42; Mk 10:30; Mt 24:35).

Why not invest in heaven’s *real* estate – an opportunity of a lifetime. One may wonder why he or she is “cursed” with a particular disadvantage, trial, weakness, physical looks, deformity, emotional/mental hang-up, circumstances, addiction, incarceration, husband or wife or children or lack of them.

These temporary problems are a *challenge* to digging deeper into a life of faith as an *overcomer* in Christ, filled with wisdom and glory through “an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you” (Heb 12:1; 1 Pet 1:4; 1 Jn 5:4–5; Rv 2:7).

1. <http://www.snopes.com/glurge/57cents.asp> (Accessed Aug 22, 2016)

2. <https://www.temple.edu/about/history/acres-diamonds> (accessed Aug 22, 2016)).