

A Call to the Remnant Church: Rebuild the House of the Lord

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Introduction

“And the Lord stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and the spirit of Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and the spirit of all the remnant of the people; and they came and worked on the house of the Lord of hosts, their God,” Haggai 1:14

God’s house is not a building, it is not an organization, nor a denomination, but rather it is His people that make up His true church. It is time for the remnant of God’s people to strengthen their hearts and minds, to be built up into the true, spiritual house of God.

“Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God’s sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.” 1 Peter 2:4-5

God is calling out to a remnant of Christians that He will use in these last days. These remnant Christians are hungry for the truth. Many of them have experienced pain and hardship in recent years, and some are confused, wondering why God has allowed so many so-called Christians to drift away from the truth of the Scriptures. They may have even lost hope and have felt cut off from God.

It is a time much like the time that was recorded in Ezekiel 37, where the prophet Ezekiel experienced a vision of a valley of dry bones. The Lord said this:

“Then He said to me, ‘Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They indeed say, “Our bones are dry, our hope is lost, and we ourselves are cut off!”’” Ezekiel 37: 11

God was doing a work in their lives, and He will do this same work in us today:

“I will put My Spirit in you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land. Then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken *it* and performed *it*,” says the Lord.” Ezekiel 37: 14

The work that the Holy Spirit is doing is in the hearts of individuals. Each one of us individually needs to be changed on the inside. The work that God is doing is not to change current church organizations, or the current methods that are being used in these churches. It is highly unlikely that the men who are in control of these organizations are going to change the way they operate. Most of them are not going to embrace the truths that are needed to make these internal changes.

God’s purpose in this call to His remnant church is to prepare the Bride of Christ. The Bride, His True Church, must be spotless, without blemish.

“Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish.” Ephesians 5: 25-27

God’s remnant church must also be prepared for the difficult times that are about to come upon us. How can we endure if our foundation is weak?

My hope is that the information that follows will enlighten the reader to give them firm Biblical direction for repairing any weakness in their foundation, leading to a complete internal transformation that leads to spiritual maturity. Not only will they be enlightened, but they will also be encouraged and exhorted. I am certain that this book will give the reader a new and brighter view of the Biblical text, with a renewed desire to absorb its truths.

Ultimately, my intention is to point you to Jesus, and to strengthen your relationship with Him. Also, this book is intended to be used as a tool, in conjunction with the Scriptures and the Holy Spirit, to direct you onto a path towards a renewed spiritual maturity and to increase your spiritual productivity and effectiveness as a disciple. The change that is needed is internal and spiritual, not external and physical. This book will direct you towards the truths needed for a spiritual transformation resulting in a renewal of your mind.

“And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind...” Romans 12:2

After seeking the Lord for many years to understand His truths for myself, the Lord has now called me to share these truths to aid others. You will find that these truths will encourage you in your walk, confirm the hard decision that you have made in the past to follow the truth, and will strengthen your commitment to continue patiently and to endure to the end.

Note that this is not a scholarly discourse, but rather is intended for the common person. My main purpose is to bring about a positive change in each person who reads this book, to increase their understanding of the things of God, that they would become more like Christ. My hope is to make these truths from God’s Word extremely simple and crystal clear to the reader.

I am told that any good teacher repeats the core truths to the student so that they are deeply absorbed, thus you will find much repetition in my writing. I try to emphasize the important, core truths in various ways and from different angles.

I want to explicitly state that this book is not a substitute for God’s Word and the Holy Spirit, but rather it should support and enable you to better understand the Scriptures and to better hear the Holy Spirit’s communication to you. Reading the Bible and praying should be the highest priority in your life, for they are the ultimate authority and tool for communicating with God.

It is my observation that the entire house of God must be rebuilt, starting with the foundation. The first section of this book will examine some of the major errors that are being promoted in the western

Christian churches of today. We need to understand the problems first before offering the solution. The next section will focus on the solution to these errors, that is, the foundational truths of Christianity as put forth in the Bible. First, it will explain the basis of the Christian's world view or the Christian philosophy of life. Also, this section will include a complete explanation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ for salvation, since I see this as a critical foundation that must be laid first and then built upon. The final section will cover fundamental Christian attributes needed for maturity and spirituality, including a deeper look at faith, hope and love, followed by a summary that will pull all the sections together. Although much of what is discussed in this final section has already been covered in the previous sections, I feel it is worth going deeper to bring complete clarity to these critically important topics.

Prayerfully read what follows and take the time to examine the Scriptures yourself to confirm its validity.

Section 1 – Weaknesses in the Foundation – Errors in the Western Church

The Foundation of Modern Western Christianity is Weak!

“But why do you call Me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and not do the things which I say? Whoever comes to Me, and hears My sayings and does them, I will show you whom he is like: He is like a man building a house, who dug deep and laid the foundation on the rock. And when the flood arose, the stream beat vehemently against that house, and could not shake it, for it was founded on the rock. But he who heard and did nothing is like a man who built a house on the earth without a foundation, against which the stream beat vehemently; and immediately it fell. And the ruin of that house was great.” Luke 6:46-49

Anyone who has been a convert to Christianity in this western culture is very likely to have a foundation that is weak and that will not stand firm when the storm and flooding comes, but will collapse. We have been spoiled in our society for a long time now, but it will not last forever and it could change quickly. The storm could come in the form of persecution, or maybe war, or economic hardship.

I am not referring to the foundation of the Christian organizations. I am talking about the foundation of individual Christians who have been influenced or raised by modern western Christianity.

In the verse quoted above from Luke 6, Jesus offers the solution for having a weak foundation that I want to emphasize from the start, and that is, to go to Him, hear the truth that He has established, and then align your life and put into practice these truths. This requires that Christians must spend the time to go to Him and hear what He has spoken. We must take the time to seek His face and know His voice. We must read and study the Bible, His words, and meditate on their meaning, and work to establish the associated truths in our life in the way that we act and the way that we think. This work of studying the

Scriptures must be done prayerfully, communicating with the Holy Spirit, and looking to Him for clarity and guidance.

It is my observation that this work of studying the Scriptures is not being done by Christians. Instead, they want someone else to spoon feed them. Not that it is wrong to listen to Christian teachers or preachers, but it is wrong if this is all that we listen to, to the exclusion of directly hearing from the Lord and studying the Bible. It is obvious that Christians don't know the truths of God's word because, if they did, the western Christian churches would not be in the state that they are in.

Let's look at some of the fruits of today's western Christianity to see if you agree with my observation of its current state. Regarding individual Christians and their fruit, remember that in order for Christians to continue in their Christian organizations and activities they must clean up their exterior actions to be acceptable, it is the interior, unseen sins that they allow to continue in their lives. Therefore, we won't see as much of those readily apparent sins like alcohol or drug abuse, rape, theft, murder, profanity, verbal abuse, etc., being an issue, but it is the hidden, or less visible and more socially acceptable sins that are the real proof. Jesus pointed out this same condition in the religious sect of His time called the Pharisees:

“Woe to you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cleanse the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of extortion and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee, first cleanse the inside of the cup and dish, that the outside of them may be clean also. Woe to you Scribes and Pharisees, Hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness. Even so you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.” Matt. 23:25-28

I have read that the percentage of Christian men who are involved in pornography is very high, even among ministers and church leaders. With the simple access and privacy of the internet, this sin is too easy for Christians to participate in under the radar, undetected by other Christians. I have come across a number of Christians with this problem, enough to confirm that the high percentage suggested is true. In a similar area of sexual immorality, there is apparently a large number of Christians involved in adulterous relationships. I wonder too, since so many people in our society are involved in extra marital sex, how much of this has infiltrated the Christian community. Regardless, I see a large “red flag” indicating bad fruit in this area of sexual immorality and promiscuity, indicating that there are deeper issues with the foundation that are the source of the problem.

Another area of concern and clear indication of the existence of bad fruit in the Christian churches of the west is the rampant occurrences of divisions and strife that are rooted in envy, jealousy and other carnal causes. Chances are high that if you have been a member of a Western church for any length of time that you experienced a church split or a serious problem with the pastor or church leadership. I recently overheard a conversation between a few evangelical Christians who were commenting on the high frequency of changes in the leadership, that is, the number of new pastors that have been at their church in the past decade, stating that they had a new one approximately every year, and typically the change of pastor was due to some serious problems or issues with them. Of course, these Christians say

that these types of divisions and leadership problems are a part of life and a part of living in the real world, but this is not true; these displays of carnal fruits should not be part of the Christian church.

I believe that some church splits have righteous roots based on a need to correct or leave a bad ministry that becomes apparent after some time of involvement – that’s not what I am referring to. I am speaking about the contentious and strife riddled situations that are obviously carnal/fleshly in nature and driven by pride, envy, jealousy, etc., and the carnal and moral deficiency of pastors and church leaders that appears to be rampant. If my suspicion is correct, then these church splits and leadership issues are a definite indication of bad fruit.

I am also concerned about what I see as an unhealthy number of Christians who are depressed or disillusioned with their life in Christ. Many are on anti-depression medication to deal with it. I can understand that these situations may exist if individuals have developed conditions while in the world, before coming to Christ, that requires medication to remedy. As Christians though, we have the means to be anxiety free, and should be displaying the fruits of the Spirit that will eliminate the root cause of these negative conditions that require medication. I am convinced that the high number of depressed and disillusioned Christians is a result of a root foundation problem with modern western Christianity.

I must also mention the display of bad fruit in these modern western churches who are applying worldly methods to their ministries. They are measuring success by the number of people who are involved in their ministry, apparently not considering the quality of these people. I see a clear indication in the Scriptures that the Lord desires quality and does not see success as a result of increases in quantity. Yes, the Scriptures have stated that it is God’s desire to have all men come to the knowledge of the truth, but success is not measured by the number of people that come to a Sunday meeting. Success should be measured by the number of “fruit bearing”, mature Christians that a ministry has produced. Instead, I am seeing the use of worldly methods that sacrifice maturity to achieve numbers. Is this not the main reason that churches are focused on entertainment to attract people to their services? Or the mega church approach that uses large, fancy buildings with coffee café’s and large campuses to attract people? Churches seem to be more concerned about appearances, i.e. looking “cool”, than the quality of their message and the effectiveness of their discipleship. They seem to go out of their way to not offend anyone by telling them the whole Gospel message as revealed in the Scriptures. Instead they candy coat the message with emphasizing the “positive” and “blessing” part, and not mentioning judgment, dying to the flesh, taking up the cross, or any other negative, but necessary parts of the message.

I am appalled that some ministries are focused on material gain, wealth, prosperity and worldly possessions. These ministries suggest that your life should be free of hardship and problems, and if it is not, there must be something wrong with your faith. This view is not scriptural, but is erroneous, again, using parts of the truth and omitting other critical parts. I am convinced that if Christians were reading and studying God's word and in tune with the Holy Spirit, these types of ministries would not survive.

Likewise, the message of Christian “dominance in our society” or “Kingdom Now” is erroneous and not in line with the Word of God. Any approach that places a Christian’s focus on this world and not on our

future place in heaven is fatally flawed and will cause the foundation to collapse when the flood waters rise.

I must also question the motive and wisdom of those Christian ministries who have placed their focus on manifestations of the Spirit, i.e., on miracles, or healings, or angels appearing, or whatever else is considered a physical display of the Spirit. I am very supportive of miracles and healings, but I do not think that it should be the focus of a ministry, but rather, it should be a matter of course as a ministry is going about doing the work of spreading the truth of the Gospel message and making fruit bearing disciples. If the motive and goal of the ministry is to build a strong “house” of “gold, silver and precious stones” rather than “wood, hay and stubble” on a solid foundation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, than the focus on miracles is not the best approach. Consider that of the ten lepers that Jesus healed, only one returned to thank Him, and that all the miracles that were shown to the children of Israel when departing Egypt were ineffective in giving them the faith they needed; instead they fell in the desert due to unbelief.

I will admit that my exposure to western Christian churches is limited and I have not conducted any formal widespread examination of the conditions of the churches. Having been a Biblical Christian since the 1970's, I have seen much and have been exposed to enough to feel confident in drawing these conclusions. If you are blessed with being a part of a solid, Bible based church with leadership that is focused on advancing the maturity of the congregation, I am happy for you. I am confident, though, that you have been exposed to some other churches or ministries that exhibit these issues and you will find the solutions offered beneficial in dealing with others who are exposed to these conditions and may need your help.

My main point here is that if you look at the general condition of most of the modern western Christian churches you know in your heart that most of them will not fare well when the flood waters rise and put pressure on their foundation. If increased persecution would come to the west, like there is in many other parts of the world, many would be overcome, with their foundation failing and their building collapsing.

I recently read a letter written by Corrie Ten Boom, who was a survivor of the Nazi concentration camp. She and her sister were Christians who had helped a Jewish family and therefore were sent to the camp. Her sister died there but Corrie persevered as the only Christian in the camp and survived, and continued afterwards as a Christian minister preaching the Gospel around the world. The letter was written in 1974 and was a warning to Western Christianity at that time that they were not prepared for the persecution that was coming and had already started in many parts of the world that she had experienced firsthand. If anything, our circumstances have worsened with regards to our preparedness. Corrie had related how Christian leaders in the areas where persecution had begun, like in Asia and Africa, were remorseful that they had not prepared their congregations for the hardships that awaited them. Instead, they were telling them that no hardship would come to them, and that Jesus would come and take them up in the rapture before any tribulation would come upon them.

I will say again that we have been very much protected and spoiled in our materialistic and pampered society. Many of us do not know real suffering or persecution. All of this can change drastically very quickly. We need to be prepared. As I said earlier, the main part of the solution is to get into the Bible and find out for ourselves the powerful message of the Gospel and use it to find strength now in preparation for the needs of the future. Please heed these words.

Here is a portion of Corrie Ten Boom's letter, with her advice to remedy our unpreparedness:

"How can we get ready for the persecution? First we need to feed on the word of God, digest it, make it a part of our being. This will mean disciplined Bible study each day as we not only memorize long passages of scripture, but put the principles to work in our lives. Next we need to develop a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Not just the Jesus of yesterday, the Jesus of History, but the life-changing Jesus of today who is still alive and sitting at the right hand of God.

We must be filled with the Holy Spirit. This is no optional command of the Bible, it is absolutely necessary. Those earthly disciples could never have stood up under the persecution of the Jews and Romans had they not waited for Pentecost. Each of us needs our own personal Pentecost, the baptism of the Holy Spirit. We will never be able to stand in the tribulation without it.

In the coming persecution we must be ready to help each other and encourage each other. But we must not wait until the tribulation comes before starting. The fruit of the Spirit should be the dominant force of every Christian's life.

Many are fearful of the coming tribulation, they want to run. I, too, am a little bit afraid when I think that after all my eighty years, including the horrible Nazi concentration camp, that I might have to go through the tribulation also. But then I read the Bible and I am glad.

When I am weak, then I shall be strong, the Bible says. Betsy and I were prisoners for the Lord, we were so weak, but we got power because the Holy Spirit was on us. That mighty inner strengthening of the Holy Spirit helped us through. No, you will not be strong in yourself when the tribulation comes.

Rather, you will be strong in the power of Him who will not forsake you. For seventy-six years I have known the Lord Jesus and not once has He ever left me, or let me down.

"Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him", for I know that to all who overcome, He shall give the crown of life. Hallelujah!" From "ESCAPE TRIBULATION? -WRONG!"-Corrie Ten Boom 1974

To reiterate, I am suggesting that the weakness of the foundation of modern western Christians will result in a vulnerability to future pressures that may come upon them either as individual conflicts or large scale catastrophes such as religious persecution, economic collapse, or global war. It is abundantly clear that the symptoms of this weakness are manifested in today's western Christians in the form of sin and worldliness.

I would like to mention here that I am not going to discuss in this book the infilling or baptism of the Holy Spirit, although I agree with Corrie Ten Boom that having the power of the Holy Spirit is important to our Christian maturity. My feeling is that God is the one who pours out His Spirit upon believers. It is totally up to Him, although the Scriptures do instruct us that the laying on of hands is part of the enablement. I would encourage you to seek the Holy Spirit if you have not already. I also believe that having a solid foundation is, if not a prerequisite, it should accompany the infilling of the Holy Spirit.

The Bible is clear that there is a special infilling of the Holy Spirit for believers as noted in Acts chapter 2, on the day of Pentecost, as well as in Acts chapter 10 when the Holy Spirit fell on the Gentile believers when Peter visited them. On both occasions they spoke in tongues, and therefore, I believe tongues to be an occurrence that is supported by the Scriptures. I support and encourage anyone who has experienced the gift of tongues with the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

I now want to look at the source of the problem.

In a broad sense, this weak foundation is the result of Christians not knowing and understanding the truth. All the truth that we need can be found in God's word, the Bible, but like a precious metal that must be dug out from deep in the earth, it takes work to mine out the truths of God's word. Time is required to read, study and meditate. We must also learn how to receive guidance from the Holy Spirit, who can lead us into this truth.

As Christians, our acceptance of truth should **not** be based on our use of logic and reason, but rather should be based on what is clearly revealed and stated in the Bible. Biblical truths can be logical and reasonable, but many times they may not at first make sense to us. In other words, when Christians are presented with a suggested truth, they should not accept it by saying "Yes that makes sense so it must be true." Rather, they should say, "That is clearly stated in the Scriptures and therefore it must be true." We must realize that our Creator God has all knowledge and therefore knows absolute truth. We can completely trust that His revelation of truth is accurate. In contrast, the logical speculation of a man is error prone due to their limited perspective. More on this later.

The main source of the problem facing western Christians is their inability to discern between truth and lies. The critical and valuable truths of the Gospel have been either substituted with or over shadowed by lies. These falsehoods and lies have been presented for years, and eventually have been accepted as truth, and then they have been further propagated. Whether wolves in sheep's clothing or misinformed Christian teachers with good intentions, the results are the same, and correcting the root problem by exposing the falsehoods and presenting the truth is my goal.

Satan is the father of all liars and his goal is to propagate these lies in whatever means possible. I think it is important that we are aware of his tactics. Understanding the nature of lies will help us to better detect the truth. I want to take some time to examine the tactics of the enemy as they apply to discernment of the truth and exposing lies.

"You are from your father the devil, and you choose to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies." John 8:44 (Jesus speaking to the unbelieving Jews and Pharisees)

I see a similarity between the tactics of lying politicians and the deceptive tactics that the enemy (Satan) uses to deceive people to make progress on an agenda that would not be acceptable if shown in the light of the truth. Seeing how a politician works will make it easier to see the similar ploys that the enemy uses on Christians.

Lying and deception are major tools of the trade for many politicians. Of course, they have to be skilled with these tools and very shrewd in order to be acceptable to the masses. Therefore, they use what is known as prevarication or equivocation, which is a means of purposely misleading or manipulating the listener by speaking mostly truth, but leaving out important facts, or by using words that could have multiple meaning or a meaning that is slightly changed or shifted to purposely deceive or mislead. In other words, they will not blatantly and directly lie, but they will speak what is mostly true, and then add what may be technically true, but purposely misleading. An example of this would be ex-president Bill Clinton's response to the media's questioning about his relationship with Monica Lewinski (an intern that he had sexual contact with). His famous statement was, "I did not have sexual relations with that woman." The key word here is "relations". Technically, he could say, if pressured regarding this statement, that by "relations" he meant intercourse, but he knew that many Americans would or could take the word "relations" to mean any sexual contact with this woman. Of course it came out that he had very intimate sexual contact with her, but just short of intercourse. Technically, this statement was not a blatant lie, but obviously it was an equivocation, or purposely misleading.

The word equivocate means to use a word or phrase that has two or more interpretations in order to mislead. The lesson here is for us to be extremely accurate with our definition of words, looking closely at their Biblical definition and their context in order to fully understand the truth and then compare it to the message being presented by preachers, teachers and evangelists, for validation.

In addition to this, we must realize that having most of the truth, with a small part of the information being untrue or misleading, is as faulty as having none of the truth. In fact, it is more dangerous because the lie is hidden when surrounded by truth.

I would also like to point out that subtle lies and misdirection are intended to shift the focus from what is critically important to something less critical. When this happens it becomes very challenging to correct because the less critical item is still important, but it should not be the main focus. We tend to see things as dichotomies (e.g., either black or white) where it is either good or bad, so when we are challenged about a focus on a less critical item, we think the challenger is saying it is a bad thing, and therefore we reject the challenge.

False teachers, just like dishonest politicians, will mislead and deceive by slightly changing the meaning of words, or using words in a way that can have multiple meaning. Or they may leave out important information, telling only partial truth. They will also attempt to slip in a falsehood in the midst of solid truth, so as to be undetected. These surrounding truths usually "tickle the listener's ears" by being what is known to be desired by the listener, feeding their emotions. The result is a misunderstanding of importance or a shift of focus that leaves the foundation weakened and vulnerable.

"But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive opinions. They will even deny the Master who bought them—bringing swift destruction on themselves. Even so, many will follow their licentious ways, and because of these teachers the way of truth will be maligned. And in their greed they will exploit you with deceptive words." 1 Peter 2:1-3

Realize also that not all preachers, teachers or evangelists who have presented faulty messages had set out to deceive or mislead people. They may have initially been sincere in wanting to help people and serve the Lord. Eventually though, they have let some carnal desire to impact their message. It could be the desire to be successful, so they make compromises to their integrity. They may be looking for money, popularity, material gain, etc., and compromise the message to increase numbers or “sell” it more successfully. Satan will take advantage of any weakness and use it to further his agenda.

Some of these errors are inherited from previous teachers, so some are just parroting what they have already heard, not realizing that there is an error. It is critically important that all teachings are validated by the Scriptures. Any teacher of the Gospel who is not presenting their message along with the supporting Scriptures should be seen as suspicious.

As Christians, especially new Christians, we desire to do what is right. We want to be trusting and listen to those who are older in the faith. It is difficult, if we are looking at the person who is teaching or preaching, to be seemingly judgmental towards them. We must look beyond the person, though, and examine the message. Many times, in today’s world, we are not exposed to the character of the person speaking, especially if we only see them on Sunday or if we only see them speaking on television or read their ideas in a book. It is our responsibility to examine what is said and compare it to the truth that is found in the Bible. We must know the meaning of words in the Bible, looking up their definition in the original language (Strong’s concordance is available online for free).

Here is Paul’s advice to Timothy (inspired by the Holy Spirit and therefore it applies to us also):

“But evil men and impostors will grow worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived. But you must continue in the things which you have learned and been assured of, knowing from whom you have learned them, and that from childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.” 2 Tim. 3:13-17

Both Paul and Timothy were leaders in the Christian community of that time, but don’t think that knowing and understanding the Scriptures is only for the leadership elite and not for the common Christian. That is another ploy of the enemy to keep the truth hidden, like during the past dark ages, where only the so called “church leaders” could know and interpret the Scriptures and the common people couldn’t directly read the word of God but had to get their understanding through the “priest” or “bishop” who was the “expert” with the authority to “hear” from God and understand. In fact, for a long time the Scriptures were only translated to Latin, until Martin Luther and others came along and the reformation happened, putting the Bible translated to the local language into the hands of the masses.

We should follow the example of the believers that Paul and Silas encountered in Berea:

“Then the brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea. When they arrived, they went into the synagogue of the Jews. These were more fair-minded (or noble) than those in

Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so. Therefore many of them believed..." Acts 17:10-12

My hope is that the reader will be challenged to go deeper into the Scriptures and begin to question for themselves if what they were taught is aligned with the truths of the Word of God. Having a deeper knowledge and understanding of the truth is the only real defense against falsehoods. Hear and absorb the truth, and then put it into practice.

If you have questions about doctrine or if there are Scripture verses that you don't understand or are uncertain about, pray about it and ask the Holy Spirit to show you the truth. Asking church leaders about doctrine could help but could also be misleading. Please make sure that you are assured in your own mind and that your conscience bears witness to the truth.

Here is more of Paul's exhortation to Timothy in his second letter:

"But know this that in the last days perilous times will come; for men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good, traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having a form of godliness but denying its power, and from such people turn away! For of this sort are those who creep into households and make captives of gullible women loaded down with sins, led away by various lusts, always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth. Now as Jannes and Jambres resisted Moses, so do these also resist the truth: men of corrupt minds, disapproved concerning the faith; but they will progress no further, for their folly will be manifest to all, as theirs also was." 2 Tim. 3:1-9

To summarize up to this point, we have looked at the symptoms of the foundational weakness in Christians or the "bad fruit" in many churches including sexual issues such as pornography and adultery, immaturity such as dissension and strife within congregations caused by carnal issues like envy and jealousy. We also pointed out issues like depressed and despondent Christians on anti-depression medication, and erroneous teachings such as materialism or "prosperity" teachings, "Kingdom Now" teachings, and candy-coated, positive thinking teachings, all linked to the symptoms that point to a weakness in the foundation. We also discussed the need for Christians to determine the truth and separate out the lies, looking also at some of the deceptive ways that lies are promoted. Similarly, shifting the Christian's focus to the wrong things can be difficult to detect, but will cause serious problems.

Let's look closer now at the problem of having the wrong focus and the specifics of this problem in today's western churches.

I first must ask the question, what should be the focus of the Christian ministry? What is the main goal? As I look at western churches (looking at their actions, not so much their statements), it appears that the overwhelming answer for them is what they would call evangelism or winning souls, but it really equates to increasing the number of people associated with their organization. The success of the Christian ministry is measured in the size of the congregation, or the number of converts that have been gained

through their outreach. For most churches the main thrust of the ministry is to get more people to come to the church services and get them more involved in church activities. Individuals are encouraged to “share their faith” with others and then encourage them to come to church.

Evangelism, reaching out to non-Christians, is important, but it should not be the main goal or main focus of the Christian ministry. And it certainly should not be the measure of success for a Christian ministry. Yet it would appear that many churches are making their important decisions about how the church functions based on their desire to attain this goal.

A good example would be the worship time of many churches. The music is geared towards attracting more new people to the church. Worship services have become more like viewing a musical performance than a time for the congregation to focus their hearts on praise and worship of the Lord. Even the musical “key” (how high or low of a pitch the music is played in) chosen for the songs to be sung is for the benefit of the “performers” in the musical band up front on the stage, rather than for the congregation to join in the singing.

I would not say that having a mini Christian rock concert every Sunday is necessarily evil per se, but it is my judgment that it is wrong if the motive for doing so is to attract new people who want to be entertained, and if it replaces the important time of worship, praise and interaction that follows the admonition of the Scripture regarding the use of music:

“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.” Col: 3:16

Or this:

“...but be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord, giving thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another in the fear of God.” Eph. 5:18-21

My experience in the past was that this time of worship was a valuable time of learning, singing hymns and songs from the Scriptures that either taught or reinforced some truth to the congregation. Also, it was during this time that the entire congregation was focusing their hearts on the Lord and offering up sincere praise and thanksgiving to the Lord, that the Holy Spirit moved; prophecies came, people were touched and moved to tears and repentance, people came to the altar for prayer. I don’t see the current atmosphere of extremely loud music and songs intended to entertain being conducive to the moving of the Holy Spirit. We have put aside this valuable time of unified praise and openness to the Holy Spirit in order to have instead a “concert” for the purpose of attracting more people.

Another example of churches that are basing their success on the increase of people in their services are churches that go deep into debt to greatly increase their building size to assure that they can accommodate many more newcomers. They also go into debt to make sure that their church is modern looking and comfortable, and to have the latest sound and video equipment. They may even add additional “attractions” like a lobby with a coffee shop or a fun room. In some parts of the world,

Christians have no meeting house at all and meet under a large tree, but this does not hinder their spiritual growth. My point is that too much time, money and effort are being directed towards the wrong things.

None of these above mentioned things are evil in themselves. Their presence does support my claim that the focus of the churches is to attract people and keep them involved in the church organization. There is one thing that I do consider to be evil: when the Gospel message is compromised in order to reach this goal of greater numbers, and I will be looking deeper at this serious problem later.

Some Christian leaders might say that the Scriptural support for this goal of increasing numbers is found in the portion of Scripture known as “the great commission” found in Matthew. Here is the quote:

“Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. And when they saw him they worshiped him, but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.’” Matt. 28:18-20

You will notice that this directive from the Lord Jesus is to “make disciples” and to “baptize them” and “teach them to observe” His commandments. I would consider this directive to fall more into the category of discipleship than evangelism. Evangelism is about preaching the message to those that have not heard it. Discipleship is about turning those who have accepted the message into mature Christian disciples.

Notice too that it is assumed that if you are going to baptize a person, that you will be explaining the significance of the act to them, and not just going through some form of initiation ritual. The outward action of immersion represents an inward, spiritual change that the Christians who are baptizing are responsible to make sure that the person being baptized understands.

The modern western Christian churches have used the directive of “the great commission” to justify their emphasis on getting more people into their churches and involved in their organizations. This has caused problems.

It is clear throughout the New Testament that the focus of the Christian ministry is to produce holy, sanctified, spiritually mature, strong Christian disciples. Even a casual reading through its books will support this claim. Of course, evangelism is an important prerequisite for discipleship, but it is not the focus or end goal. In other words, we should never sacrifice quality for quantity. Anyone who takes an honest look at modern western Christianity will see that this sacrifice is being made.

Here is a clear, direct, portion of Scripture to support this view (I like the way that J.B. Phillips translated it):

“The ultimate aim of the Christian ministry, after all, is to produce the love which springs from a pure heart, a good conscience, and genuine faith.” 1 Tim. 1:5

Here is the same verse from the Amplified Bible version:

“Whereas the object and purpose of our instruction and charge is love, which springs from a pure heart and a good (clear) conscience and sincere (unfeigned) faith.”

The context of this verse is that Paul is directing Timothy about people who had lost the main focus of their Christianity and had drifted into other teachings or distractions. Here are the verses immediately before it:

“that you may charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrines, not to occupy themselves with myths and endless genealogies which promote speculations rather than the divine training that is in faith” 1 Tim. 1:3-4

We see from these verses that the true goal of the Christian ministry is to foster the development of the internal nature of each Christian so as to produce a true, spiritual, godly love, and that the root source of this love is a pure heart, a clear conscience, and sincere faith. Christian ministries should be making sure that their efforts are focused on attaining this goal of having Christians who can truly love, and that the root sources that produce this love are being supported and built up in their congregations. Sadly, I don't see this happening; the fruit of this labor is not present.

“And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love.” 1 Cor. 13:13

At the core of the Christian ministry is a unique responsibility that no other organization in the world can accomplish. It is to prepare the bride of Christ. It is to foster and foment a transformation in a person that will result in a deep, sincere, and abiding faith, a living faith, that will produce holy and blameless saints, with pure hearts that are focused totally on obeying their Lord and Master Jesus Christ, and whose consciences are clear and spotless, who have the mind of Christ and are patiently waiting for His return. The church is responsible to work with the Holy Spirit to develop spiritual people who can truly love one another, in fact, they should be known for their love for one another. This is the core of the Christian ministry and no other goal, no matter how beneficial or benevolent, should supersede it.

When Christians are truly changed and are walking in the spirit and walking in love, they will produce good works like feeding the hungry, or helping the widows and orphans, visiting the sick or imprisoned, and it will happen naturally because it will be a part of their nature. Each individual will respond to these needs as they encounter them. They won't need to be organized and managed, and they won't need fundraising or advertising to make it happen. In fact, the flow of any wealth in a congregation should be towards these individual good works towards the poor, sick, widows, orphans, and imprisoned, and not towards building larger or fancier facilities.

When Christians attempt to do the good works without being transformed, but being still in their flesh, immature and not in tune with the Holy Spirit, functioning in their own carnal minds, the results are worthless. The apostle Paul warned about functioning without this core character of true, deep, spiritual love. He warns that any work you do will profit you nothing!

“And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing.” 1 Corinthians 13:3

Another way of looking at this erroneous shift of focus onto the wrong things is to compare it to putting the "cart before the horse" (the cart doesn't pull the horse!). Obviously, this is a foolish approach, so either Christian leaders don't understand the importance of focusing on love, or they mistakenly think that love is already in place. Some churches are possibly assuming that their congregation is spiritual and mature, but they aren't examining the fruit. Or perhaps they have changed the meaning of spiritual to something that's not scriptural, like someone who uses a lot of "Christian speak" words and claims to be hearing from the spirit. I will spend more time later in this book looking more closely at what it means to be spiritual, but for now realize that the proof of spiritual maturity is in the fruit. There must be the fruit of godly love in a person's actions.

I have heard some Christian leaders and pastors indicate that the Bible sets a "high bar" of love that is essentially unattainable for us, but only Jesus could walk in this type of love. We are told that we are "only human" and "not perfect, but forgiven". This is not true! We are expected to walk in the type of love that is defined in 1 Corinthians 13. And this is the fruit that should be tested to determine if a person is spiritual or in the faith. If the test fails, there needs to be serious actions taken to correct the situation, not just an "oh well, I'm not perfect" attitude.

This "cart before the horse" focus error can also be applied to those who focus their ministries on manifestations of the spirit. What does it matter if there are great moves of the Spirit if the mature, spiritual, character of love is missing? We can't just assume that if the Spirit is moving, then everything else must be in order. This is not the case; if it was we wouldn't have a need for this warning from Jesus, that comes right after His instructions to examine a person's fruit to expose false prophets and teachers:

“Therefore by their fruits you will know them. Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven. Many will say to me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me you who practice lawlessness!’” Matt. 7:20-23

This verse is also followed by the parable of the house built on the rock that stands against the flood waters (quoted above).

Paul also gives a similar warning in his letter when discussing the need to focus on love as a goal, or to properly place "the horse before the cart":

“Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. “ 1 Cor. 13:1-2

Here is Paul's definition of true love as found in his letter to the Corinthians (and inspired by the Holy Spirit):

“Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails; whether there are tongues, they will cease; whether there is knowledge it will vanish away. For we know in part and we prophecy in part, but when that which is perfect (or complete) has come, then that which is in part will be done away. When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child, but when I became a man, I put away childish things. For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known. And now abide faith, hope, love, these three, but the greatest of these is love.” 1 Cor. 13: 4-13

The Problem of Shallow Roots

“But he who received the seed on stony places (or on rock), this is he who hears the word (of God or of the kingdom) and immediately receives it with joy; yet he has no root in himself, but endures only for a while. For when tribulation or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he stumbles (or falls away).” Matt. 13: 20-21 (see also Luke 8:13)

The above quote is from the explanation that Jesus gave for His parable of the sower. In this parable, Jesus compares the spreading of the truths of His word to planting seeds and the plants that spring up from the seeds as being the people impacted by the truth. One problem that He defines is a plant that has shallow roots, and therefore when the sun comes up the plant is scorched and dies because the roots are not deep enough to supply moisture. The analogy is that Christians too who have shallow roots will not survive when difficult times are encountered.

As I previously pointed out, many churches are not focusing their ministries on increasing or enhancing the spiritual maturity of their members, but rather, they are concerned with attracting more people. They are measuring success by the number of people they “convert” and/or become members of their church organization. One of the major problems that I believe is the result of this false focus on attracting people is what I call “shallow conversion” that results in shallow roots.

New converts are not presented the full picture of the Gospel message and therefore do not understand the full cost of their decision to follow Jesus as His disciple. This approach of presenting only a partial Gospel message is likely to make a conversion shallow resulting in a weak foundation.

Let me first make it clear that the Holy Spirit works with each individual differently and reveals truths to them through various events in their lives. Eventually though, people reach a place where they are ready to hear and receive the Gospel message and it is the responsibility of the Church (and individual Christians) to deliver this message. It is important that these people receive the full message in a very clear manner so that they can make the deep, serious decision needed to follow Jesus as His disciple with “deep roots” and a firm foundation in place that can be built upon. Paul the apostle mentions this foundation in one of his letters:

“For we are God’s fellow workers; you are God’s field, you are God’s building. According to the grace of God which was given to me, as a wise master builder I have laid the foundation, and another builds on it. But let each one take heed how he builds on it. For no other foundation can anyone lay that that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.” 1 Cor. 3:9-11

It is my view that unfortunately there are very few wise master builders who can lay the proper foundation that can be built upon with confidence so as to make it through the stress of a storm or flood, or that will produce the deep roots needed to endure difficult times.

Historically, there came a point within the last century that evangelical preaching was reduced to a formula, or a quick recipe for conversion. There is first a message about how we all have “fallen short and have sinned” and are in need of a savior. Then the message that God loves us and sent Jesus as the savior who has died for our sins, and we need to put our faith in His forgiveness and realize that He has paid the price for our sins. The conversion, where we are “saved”, is presented as occurring when we recite a “sinner’s prayer” where we admit that we have sinned and are in need of a savior, and that we accept Jesus as that savior, believing that he died for our sins and has given us a fresh, new start in life. The new Christians are usually assured that God loves them and has a plan for their lives. Some include that once they have said the “sinner’s prayer” they are “saved” and are now a part of the family of God and will go to heaven when they die.

There are many evangelists on television and with worldwide crusades who have made this approach popular, boasting of preaching to billions and having multiple millions of people who came forward at evangelical meetings or responding to radio and television shows and movies, who have recited the “sinner’s prayer” for conversion. It would stand to reason though that there is a disconnect between the number of supposed converts and the impact this would have on society if all of these conversions were legitimate and were showing forth the fruit of a true, deep conversion.

I am not saying that all evangelists in our modern western Christian organizations are false teachers who are purposely misleading people. I must assume, though, that they see quantity, or the number of respondents, as a measure of success and design their method of communication and presentation to increase these numbers. It would seem, whether their motives are sincere or not (God knows), that the result is that the Gospel message is changed to be more of a “sales pitch” with any offensive elements removed so as to result in the most respondents.

It appears also that this shallow, non-offensive Gospel message has been propagated for so long and by so many that it has become accepted as the proper approach to evangelism. Many preachers and evangelists, I suspect, are not even aware of the problem with the message.

I am also not saying that all of these conversions through these evangelist’s efforts are not Christians. God is able to work in people’s lives regardless of their exposure to truth or lies. I say again, my point is that many of them had or may still have shallow roots or a weak foundation that leaves them vulnerable.

You may be saying, “What’s wrong with the Gospel message that was described above?” Well, as I stated earlier, there is nothing that is blatantly false. The problem is that important parts are missing, creating an improper shift of focus and areas that are not addressed. The fact that the message contains many truisms is what causes confusion. Again I emphasize that a message that is true but incomplete can be just as problematic as a message that is totally false.

The problem with this current faulty Gospel message is that it typically leaves the new Christian with the impression that the main goal of their new faith is to improve their lives here on earth. Their focus remains on their earthly existence, thinking that now with God on their side they can prosper, be happy, have any negative situations and events removed from their lives, and have the power of God at their disposal. I have seen this message presented in the same way as other “self-help” or “self-improvement” methodologies or philosophies. In other words, living the Christian life becomes just another wholesome way of living, and a means of improving a person’s current situation, including getting out of jail, or recovery from addiction, or healing from physical problems, or a way out of poverty, etc.

The confusing part is that Christianity does bring about all of these important improvements, but there is a paradox in the true Christian message, and it is this: If we love our life we will lose it, but if we lose our life we will gain it. Here is how Jesus said it:

“He who loves his life will lose it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.” John 12:25

The true, full picture, Gospel message shifts the focus of the new convert onto eternal life, removing their focus from the temporary life here on earth. This may not seem to be too important, but it is an extremely critical component in the conversion act. This shift of focus from this life to the next life is radical and extreme. The Scriptures compare it to a death experience, and what could be more extreme than death? We are told that we should consider ourselves as having died to this world, and we should live the rest of our lives as temporary residents here on earth with our future hopes and desires set on the eternal life we will have with Jesus in heaven.

“Therefore, if you died with Christ from the basic principles of the world, why, as though living in the world, do you subject yourselves to regulations – do not touch, do not taste, do not handle, which all concern things which perish with the using – according to the commandments and doctrines of men?” Colossians 2: 20-22

“If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Set you mind on things above, not on things on the earth. For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory.” Colossians 3:1-4

I have been criticized by some Christians for presenting the Gospel message in this manner for the following reason: they say that new converts cannot absorb this idea of dying to this life and living for the next, and that it should be presented later in the Christian’s walk when they are ready for it. I

disagree – the thinking behind this criticism is carnal thinking, using the natural mind and not considering the power of the Holy Spirit to work in people’s hearts. I also see it as disingenuous to present the Gospel without this context, only to later extend the requirement for discipleship. How will the potential convert weigh the cost of discipleship without knowing the full extent of what is required of them? Jesus made this very clear when He spoke of becoming one of His disciples:

“Now great multitudes went with Him. And He turned and said to them, ‘If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple. And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple. For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not sit down first and count the cost, whether he has enough to finish it, lest, after he has laid the foundation, and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, saying, “This man began to build and was not able to finish.” Or what king, going to make war against another king, does not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? Or else, while the other is still a great way off, he sends a delegation and asks conditions of peace. So likewise, whoever of you does not forsake all that he has cannot be My disciple.’” Luke 14: 25-33

It is critical for Christians to understand the commitment that they are entering into upon deciding to follow Jesus as His disciple. They need to understand that they are no longer a part of this world system in the same way that they had been. True faith understands that this world and everything in it is temporary and pursuing these things is vanity. True faith also understands that this world has been cursed and is under the influence of Satan, and will not change until the Lord Jesus returns at His second coming to destroy the devil and his work. True Christians are patiently enduring through this life, proving our loyalty and commitment to Jesus, trusting Him in all circumstances no matter where He sends us, and allowing His Spirit to purge us through various trials and hardships to transform us into vessels of honor to bring glory to Him.

Unfortunately, a large number of Christians who initially hear an incomplete message about salvation are never filled in on the full message later, or at least that has been my observation. Older Christians become resistant to the message of dying to this world, or to not loving their life here on earth, and desire to continue in their immaturity. Once the poor foundation has been laid and built upon, it becomes much harder to correct the misconception, very similar to attempting to repair the foundation of an existing building. It's much better to build it correctly in the first place.

Obviously, this true Gospel message that I just described is very different than a self improvement approach to our life. It is very different than seeing Christianity as a way to better one’s life that also removes guilt and has heaven as a bonus guaranteed at the end, like some ticket you previously acquired that will assure entrance to heaven, but you have stored away and don’t need until that time.

I once had a conversation with someone who claimed to be a Christian and when I mentioned our hope in heaven, his response was, “Heaven, oh, I have that covered.” I was confused and asked what he meant. He said, “I took care of heaven when I got saved. I don’t have to think of it anymore.” He meant that since he was “saved”, he was assured of heaven and therefore he didn’t have to think or

worry about it anymore since it was taken care of when he first came to the Lord. My response was, “How can you not think about heaven if you have placed your hope there, unless your hope is still focused on the earth? How can you store up your treasures in heaven? Are we as Christians not instructed to set our affections on the things above, where Christ is, and not on earthly things?”

I don't think that his attitude or thinking was unique, but rather, I think it is a common result of our modern faulty Gospel that leaves out the important principle of shifting our hope from what this world offers to the eternal hope that we have in heaven. We are clearly instructed by God's Word to stop loving our life in this world, but to instead cherish our eternal life, and to place our full hope and focus on the eternal, permanent, spiritual things of heaven.

“Do not love or cherish the world or the things that are in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world – the lust of the flesh [craving for sensual gratification], the lust of the eyes [greedy longing of the mind], and the pride of life [assurance in one's own resources or in the stability of earthly things] – these do not come from the Father but are from the world [itself]. And the world passes away and disappears, and with it the forbidden cravings (the passionate desires, the lust) of it; but he who does the will of God and carries out His purposes in his life abides (remains) forever.” 1 John 2: 15-17 (The Amplified Bible)

True Christianity requires that a person makes a drastic change in their life. They must no longer love the life that they have in this world, but rather they must put it to death. They must consider themselves as dead to this world, and recognize that their life is in Jesus Christ, that is, that they will have eternal life with Him if they continue in this mindset. They must no longer seek the things that this world offers like success, wealth, prominence, security, or happiness.

The paradox is that when we seek after the things that the world has to offer, we never really get the full satisfaction that we really desire but we end up empty and still wanting, even after we attain them. When we turn from these things and look towards heaven, we are free from the bondage and experience a true satisfaction that comes from our spirit. We attain the fruit of the spirit, that is, love, joy, peace and more.

"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control." Galatians 5:22

To summarize, a major root cause of the immaturity and carnality of modern western Christians, and what has caused a shallow root or a weak foundation, is the faulty modern Gospel that is presented with partial truth and results in a shallow conversion. The Gospel message must include a clear statement regarding the prerequisite for discipleship that involves a shifting of focus from this temporary life here on earth, and the things that this life offers, to the permanent, eternal life promised by God through the redemption of Jesus Christ. True Christian converts become pilgrims on a journey, only passing through this life as temporary residents. This shift of focus, that can only occur as a result of a deep, sincere faith, will cause a deep change to take place in a person's heart and mind, constituting a “deep root” in their lives. A transformation will then begin to take place with a renewing of their minds, no longer

conforming to the worldly ways of thinking and perceiving their surroundings and circumstances. The result will be maturity and spiritual fruit.

Christians like to use the term “Born again” to describe their experience. In order to be truly born again of the spirit, you must first put to death your life in the flesh. The old nature that was based on the flesh and this physical world system must die and be replaced with a new nature that is based on spiritual things.

I will cover this topic of spiritual maturity more thoroughly in the last section of this book including the supporting Scriptures. Next I want look at the importance of hope in our lives, or more specifically, that we should live with our hopes set on the promise of heaven.

The Problem of Misplaced Hope

“Now he who received seed among the thorns is he who hears the word, and the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and he becomes unfruitful.” Matthew 13:22

I believe that there are many, many Christians who have either left the organized churches or who remain in a church but are disillusioned and turned off by what they see, but stay in the church out of obligation or perhaps thinking that leaving would be worse than staying.

I’m sure that there are still some good churches with good pastors. If you have found one and the Lord has directed you to stay, you certainly should stay.

Previously I discussed the problem of Christian believers having shallow roots as described in the parable of the sower. It is my observation that shallow roots are the result of an initial shallow conversion, and that an incomplete, faulty Gospel is at the root of the problem.

I also flagged the issue of Christian leaders and pastors focusing more on attracting new people to their organizations than on helping Christians to become spiritually mature. It has been my observation that this unscriptural focus on numbers has influenced the quality of the Gospel message. Whether this observation is correct or not is not as important as the recognition of a problem with the current Gospel message and the results of Christians having shallow roots. There are other contributing factors that have influenced the content of the Gospel message, but I feel that the desire for increased numbers is a major one.

I will mention here again that ultimately the best solution to these problems is for individual Christians to seek the Lord directly, one on one. They need to study His Scriptures and hear His voice. They need to pray and read the Bible, and communicate with the Holy Spirit, asking for wisdom and guidance in this wicked age. We live in a spoiled society and we are used to having things handed to us with someone else doing the work. These issues involve eternal life and the salvation of your soul; it’s worth doing the work to find out the truth for yourself or to know enough of the truth to guard against the lies.

The quote above from Matthew 13:22 is also from the parable of the sower. In this portion of Scripture, Jesus described a problem that is the same as a plant growing among thorns, that is, that the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches cause a problem that results in a lack of fruit.

It has become apparent to me that the problem of “shallow roots” is closely related to this problem of “growing among thorns” and producing no fruit. I have noted previously that new converts are not shown clearly that they need to die to this world, and to no longer love their temporary life here on earth, resulting in having shallow roots. New converts should instead be directed to consider themselves to be dead to this world, and to set their focus and affections on the next world, that is, on heaven and eternal life, resulting in an internal change that is the equivalent of having “deep roots”. Similarly, this problem of being among “thorns” defined as allowing the cares of this world or the riches of this world to choke out the spiritual fruit, has to do with having a focus on the things of this world rather than on heaven.

The only real difference between these two problems is the timing of when the problem occurs. If the Christian with shallow roots is exposed to tribulation or persecution they immediately fall away, but if not, then they continue to grow, but, like the plant among thorns, bear no fruit. The underlying cause is very similar or the same in both cases, but the resulting problems manifest at different times depending on the surroundings. In our western culture there is very little severe persecution or tribulation, at least for now, therefore, I would suspect that more Christians would have problems like the plants among thorns, resulting in no fruit and immaturity.

We must realize that it is a very serious thing for Christians to not produce any fruit. The fruit being referred to here is the spiritual fruit that is defined in Galatians 5:22: Love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, gentleness and faith. A living faith produces true, Christ-like love that includes or results in various good works.

Realize also that any fruitless plant is at risk of being uprooted and destroyed by the owner; in other words, the Lord will deal with fruitless Christians, and the result could potentially be similar to the shallow roots that fall away.

“And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” Matthew 3:10

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch of mine that bears no fruit, he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. You are already made clean by the word which I have spoken to you. Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. If a man does not abide in me, he is cast forth as a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you will, and it shall be done for you. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s

commandments and abide in his love. These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full." John 15: 1-11

Fortunately, we do have a loving heavenly Father and "vinedresser" who is able to remove the thorns and restore the fruit in our lives if we allow Him.

Let's look closer at the problem of allowing the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches to choke out the fruit.

The word translated as "the cares" in the original Greek is "merimna" and can also be translated as anxiety. It comes from a root word that means to divide, and it literally means to be drawn away in a different direction. These "cares" are the earthly things that draw us away from the things of the spirit, draw life from us, and cause us anxiety. Worries and anxiety are the opposite of trusting God.

Jesus also explicitly addressed the worries and anxieties of this life:

"Therefore I say to you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat; nor your body, what you will put on. Life is more than food, and the body is more than clothing." Luke 12:22

"And do not seek what you should eat or what you should drink, nor have an anxious mind. For all these things the nations of the world seek after, and your Father knows that you need these things. But seek the kingdom of God, and all these things shall be added to you." Luke 12:29-31

We worry about many, many things in this life. We worry, get anxious, and fret about our jobs, our futures, finding a spouse, losing something we want and think we need. We even worry about other people's needs and issues. Worry and anxiety will choke our spiritual fruit!

How do riches, and their deceitfulness, choke our fruit? The pursuit of riches takes our time, energy and emotional life. Riches never satisfy and we never seem to have enough. Riches can also be gone overnight; stolen by thieves or destroyed. Most importantly though, riches will occupy the focus of your heart, and this will be destructive to your spirit. In the end, we leave this life naked, so all of the riches that we accumulate have no eternal value.

Jesus taught us about the rich fool:

"And I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years; take your ease; eat, drink and be merry.' But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul will be required of you; then whose will those things be which you have provided?' So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich towards God." Luke 12:19-21

"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, where no thief approaches nor moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." Luke 12:33-34

You may just say, "Okay, got it. I just need to not allow the cares of this world to distract me, and not let riches deceive me or take too much of my attention." Unfortunately, it's not as simple as deciding or

using your will power not to let those things happen. This is the same mistake that the Israelites made when they attempted to keep the law by using their willpower alone or just making the decision to keep the law. No, there needs to be an internal change that will give you the power to be free from the cares of this world and will not allow riches to deceive you. A carnal, fleshly minded man is powerless against these “thorns”, but a spiritually minded man will be victorious.

“For to be carnally (or fleshly) minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace. 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.” Romans 8: 6-8

“For if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.” Romans 8:13

This portion of scripture in Romans chapter 8 gives us much understanding about the difference between being carnal and being spiritual, but the key to understanding the difference is in verse 5:

“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, (set their minds on) the things of the Spirit.” Romans 8:5

It is critically important that we have our minds (or hearts) set on the things of the Spirit, and not set on the things of the flesh! This change in our mind is the internal transformation that gives us the power to overcome the bondage that the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches have on our lives.

“And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.” Romans 12:2

And this brings us to the root of the problem: what we set our minds upon is directly related to where we have placed our hope! Yes, our hope determines the focus of our minds and hearts, and this is extremely critical.

The original Greek word that is translated as “set the mind on” is *phroneo* which is a verb that can mean “to savor” or “to set the affection on.” This would indicate that we need to be extremely aware of the things that have become the focus of our affections. We need to ask ourselves, “What do I long for?”, or “What am I coveting?” These feelings or emotions are directly associated with where we have placed the hope of our lives!

Remember what Jesus said, that where your treasure is, there will your heart be also (quoted above). We have been promised a treasure of extreme value as a free gift of God through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. We have been promised eternal life, a resurrected, spiritual body, a mansion in heaven, an inheritance as a child of God. As Christians, the hope of our life has been set on this promise, and therefore, our hearts and minds should be set on this hope. It is critical that we keep this hope at the forefront of our daily existence. Our thoughts should be anchored by this hope. Having this hope, and the internal change of thinking that occurs as a result of treasuring this hope, is the distinction between Christians and everyone else. It is also the power that allows us to overcome anxiety and worries, and also keeps us from being deceived by riches!

On the other hand, if we keep our hope focused on earthly things (even if they are “good” things), we will be powerless over the distractions, anxieties and worries that soak life from us and keep us carnally minded. If we place our hope on earthly things we will be dissatisfied, disappointed, discouraged and it will carry with it the burden of anxiety and worry.

“Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but when desire comes, it is a tree of life.” Proverbs 13:12

I need to say this bluntly: If the hope of your life is not totally and completely set on the promise of eternal life and the future of heaven that will become a reality upon the second coming of Jesus, than you are carnally minded and you will be in bondage to the earthly things that you have set (even a portion of) your hope upon.

The hope in the promise of God should be the source of your happiness; if it is not, then something is amiss. In other words, if you are unhappy, depressed, anxious, or discouraged, then you have placed your hope on something in this world.

“Base your happiness on your hope in Christ.” Romans 12:12 (J.B. Phillips)

I am not saying that you will never be unhappy, depressed, anxious, or discouraged. I’m saying that if you are, you know the root cause. This is the battle that we fight every day as Christians, to keep the focus of our hope on heaven, to set our affections on things above, to set our minds on the things of the spirit, and resist the constant barrage of distractions from the world that attempt to draw our hearts down to the things of this world, to care about them instead.

"If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth. For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory." Col. 3:1-4

This focus on the hope of future glory with Jesus is also our power to get through the trials and tribulations of this life. Recognizing that this life is temporary and short, and offers nothing of lasting value compared with our future hope can be a source of strength during times of suffering:

“For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.” Romans 8:18

“Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ’s sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy.” 1 Peter 4:12-13

“Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal.” 2 Cor. 4:16-18

I must mention that I believe it is a deceitful ploy of the enemy, or possibly a deception of our own flesh, to think that some earthly things are “spiritual” and therefore okay to set our hope upon. Things like building Christian ministries, or working miracles, or contributing to solving the world’s problems like hunger, abortion, human trafficking. If any of these items become the main focus of your hope, then your hope has been misplaced. All of these things are good and God could call you to do these things mentioned, but they must be secondary to the main hope of heaven. If not, they will become a “care of this world” and will choke out your spiritual life and leave you without spiritual fruit.

Our faith, if properly directed towards the promises of God that were presented through His Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ, will give us a living hope to replace the dead hope that we had from the false promises of this world. Having our hearts set on this hope in heaven, that is, treasuring the spiritual things of heaven, will produce an internal change in us that will result in true, godly love. Praise God!

It is extremely important that we have established in our hearts the living hope that is based on the promise of eternal life and glory with Christ Jesus and that we are storing our riches in heaven and awaiting His return when he will make our hope a reality. We must be careful on a daily basis to not allow our hope to be shifted back to the earthly things that cause anxiety, discouragement, depression and unhappiness resulting in the absence of spiritual fruit. We should exercise our faith to re-establish our hope when we find ourselves in a state of unhappiness or anxious or any of the above mentioned symptoms. This hope is not only a source of power to free us from the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches, but it will also take us through our trials and sufferings. Our Christian lives are mostly about patiently enduring as temporary residents here on earth awaiting Christ’s return. We may be called to other work or ministry, but it must be secondary and aligned to our focus on this main heavenly hope.

This hope is an integral part of a deep Christian conversion. The Scripture support this, as we can see from the following quote from Romans regarding our attitude towards our hope:

“For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God. For 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. 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 first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body. **For we were saved in this hope**, but hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one still hope for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we eagerly wait for it with perseverance.” Romans 8:19-25

We have now examined the major errors that have weakened the foundation of western Christianity. I have also touched upon the solutions to the problem. In the following sections I will look deeper into the solutions, explaining in detail the Christian world view, the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the importance of faith, hope and love in the development of true spiritual maturity.

Section 2 – The Foundational Truths of Christianity

The Christian Philosophy of Life

“Pilate therefore said to Him, “Are You a king then?” Jesus answered, “You say rightly that I am a king; for this cause I was born, and for this cause I have come into the world, that I should bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice.” (John 19:37)

It is critically important for a Christian to establish the source of truth in their life. Our view of this world and our existence within it is based on the truths that we have accepted and integrated into our life. A person’s world view (or philosophy of life) will determine the course of their actions and influence every decision that they make in their life. For example, it was concluded in a recent documentary about scientists who support Darwinism that they are heavily influenced by their world view when reaching conclusions, rather than an unbiased assessment of the supporting data.

As Christians we must therefore be very careful about how we formulate our world view because it will not only influence our actions and decisions, but it will become a foundation upon which all of our subsequent truths will rest. Conversely, if our world view is weakened, then it will undermine our entire belief system.

The definition of philosophy from dictionary.com is: “the rational investigation of the truths and principles of being, knowledge and conduct.” A philosophy of life is a set of beliefs that guides a person’s behavior and establishes in their mind a purpose for their existence that stems from the truths they have determined about their origin, their identity, and their future existence beyond this life. A person’s philosophy of life answers those age-old questions about life such as, “Who am I?”, “Where did I come from?”, “What is my purpose here?”, and “What happens to me after I die?”

So how does a Christian make this “rational investigation of the truths and principles of being, knowledge and conduct” to establish their philosophy of life?

The Truth of a Creator God

The first realization of truth for the Christian that will contribute to their philosophy of life is that this world and everything in it was created by a superior being. People can use their ability to observe and their common sense and intelligence to determine that the complexity of design and the intricacies of living organisms would require a superior designer and creator to bring them into existence. The more we uncover about the complexities of living things the more this conclusion of a superior designer/creator is supported. For example, the recent discovery and understanding of DNA has revealed that it is a complex and sophisticated information storage system that had to be designed by a superior intelligence.

This idea that we should be able to conclude that this world was created by a superior being has been around for centuries and is not limited to recent generations who have more information at their disposal. Paul the apostle wrote this in his letter to the Roman churches nearly 2,000 years ago:

“For what can be known about God is plain to them (all men), because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world His invisible nature, namely, His eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.” (Romans 1:19&20)

Although we can easily and rationally conclude that there is a superior creator by observing the creation that surrounds us, it should be noted that we are limited in our ability to determine the deeper truths such as the origin of man and life after death by a process of observation and empirical deduction. None the less these truths are available to us, but by a different means of determination.

Truth by Revelation

Determining the truth of a superior creator can be accomplished without issue using our skills of observation and analysis, but when seeking for the deeper truths regarding our origin and purpose in life, we run into limitations. I think you will agree that these limits of our observation and analysis skills when seeking out these deeper truths are absolute and undeniable. For example, there is a limit to the knowledge we have of our surroundings (and we don't know how much we don't know!). We are limited to our five senses and the three dimensions of space we are in, but there are strong indications that there is more to our surrounding than what's manifested in these three dimensions. We are limited in time, constrained to the present and unable to travel to the future, or to revisit the distant past. We are restricted to a short memory of the past, with a dependency on historical records to determine facts about our past, and most of these records are either incomplete or unreliable.

Although we are in a finite realm, our universe is seemingly limitless. In size, we don't really know the limits of how large the universe is or it's full extent (although some have guessed), nor do we know the limit of how small it is, beyond our microscopic observations. Time is infinite in its limit: there is an infinite past and infinite future. Obviously, our limited senses cannot properly ascertain sufficient information in order to correctly determine the deeper truths we seek about our origin, our purpose, or our ultimate destination after death.

Much of what we conclude about our surroundings through observation and analysis is purely speculation. Although we use sophisticated terminology and so called "scientific" examination and studies, we can only really guess about things. A thousand years in the future people will laugh about our foolish "scientific" speculations the same way that we laugh about the foolish speculations of people a thousand years ago. There are conclusions that we have made today that we likewise will learn are incorrect due to the limitations in scientific analysis and observation.

With regards to the deeper questions about life concerning our origin, our purpose, our identity, and our eternal future, we must admit that our human limitations restrict us from determining the true answers by examining and analyzing our surroundings and/or studying the analysis of other humans (they're guessing too). But once we establish that there is a creator, we can then correctly and confidently conclude that the creator must have these answers, and the creator's answers must be

absolute truth. It is quite rational and logical that a superior being, who created us and this world that we live in, would have the true answers about our origin, our identity and purpose, and our future. Christians therefore, having established that there is a divine creator, look to this creator for the answers to life's deeper philosophical questions.

My personal experience followed this logical pattern. As a young teenager I was disillusioned by the hypocrisy of the church I was raised in. Life's difficulties and turmoil had driven me to a point of desperation where I needed to have answers about my purpose in life. I was searching and had come to the conclusion that there must be a superior being who created this world. I sincerely cried out to this creator to reveal Himself to me and to help me. I knew that He would have the answers, and that His answers would be the truth. In my desperation, I needed the truth.

It stands to reason that the answers to questions that we need to know, but are beyond our ability to answer, must come from our Creator. Attempting to accept the answers to life's deeper questions from limited human sources is foolish and irrational - deep down we know they are incomplete and wrong. People who accept these human answers are really lying to themselves. But the answers that are revealed to us from our Creator are absolute truth, and can be completely depended upon.

The Revelation of the Holy Scriptures

The next step in this rational investigation is to identify the superior being who created us. In other words, we must look for how our Creator has revealed truth to His creation. We as Christians have determined that the Holy Scriptures and the Lord Jesus Christ are the Creator's revelation to His Creation. Here is what the Christian Bible, in the New Testament letter to the Hebrews, proclaims about God's revelation to us:

"God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world. And He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power." Hebrews 1: 1-4

Unfortunately the ability of a person to receive truth from God can be complicated by the choices they have made in the past.

John 3:19-21: "...the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who does the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be clearly seen, that they have been done in God."

If you are honestly seeking the truth and have concluded that there must be a creator God, then cry out to Him to reveal Himself to you. He is faithful and will lead you to His Scriptures and the message about the life and teachings of Jesus, His messiah.

One of the main purposes of the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ was to reveal and establish these truths:

Jesus answered, "You say rightly that I am a king; for this cause I was born, and for this cause I have come into the world, that I should bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice." (John 19:37).

For centuries the Scriptures have been used by Christians who have accepted it as a revelation from God, and therefore absolute truth, upon which they established the truths for their philosophy of life. Here is Paul the apostle's advice about the use of the Holy Scriptures to his younger protégé Timothy, found in his second letter to Timothy, in the New Testament of the Bible:

"You, however, continue in the things you have learned and become convinced of, knowing from whom you have learned them, and that from childhood you have known the sacred writings which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work." 2 Timothy 3: 15-17

The Guidance of the Holy Spirit

God is a personal God who can communicate with us on a personal level. He did not leave us alone on this planet to solve some logical puzzle to determine our purpose in life. He is real and will respond to our calling out to Him. I am a witness to this truth. Since the time I was a teenager up until now He has responded to my cries for help and answered my requests for wisdom and understanding.

"If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him." James 1:5

God has also sent His Holy Spirit to help us in this matter. Jesus said this:

"Nevertheless I tell you the truth. It is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away the Helper will not come to you; but if I depart, I will send Him to you.....However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come He will guide you into all truth; for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak; and He will tell you things to come." John 16:7&13

The God of the universe who has created all living things is able to reach down into our lives through His Holy Spirit and guide us in our discovery of truth. He has sent Jesus to display His divine nature and to teach truth to His disciples, and these things have been recorded in the Scriptures. The combination of the Holy Spirit and the Word of God have been left at our disposal to gain the knowledge and understanding we need to discover our real purpose in life, to know who we really are, to know where we have come from and where we are going. These truths have been discovered by millions of people around the world throughout the ages and are as fresh and powerful today as they were thousands of years ago. We should take advantage of these things.

Jesus said:

"I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me." John 14:6

As Jesus told Pilate, His very purpose was to bear witness to us of the truth, but we must be “of the truth” in order to hear His voice. We must seek the truth, seek His wisdom, cry out to Him for help, turn from evil, listen for the Holy Spirit’s guidance, and respond in faith. Then we will find the absolute truth and establish in our hearts the only true philosophy of life.

The Christian philosophy of life is based on the following tenets:

- This universe, including the world we live in and all living things, was created by a supernatural Creator God.
- The truths that are needed to understand our existence, and to establish our knowledge and conduct resulting in our philosophical world view, have been revealed by our creator God. We have concluded that it is foolish to attempt to establish these basic philosophical truths using our own limited facilities such as our observations and accumulative knowledge. (Revelation, not scientific observation, establishes our philosophical truths)
- The Creator God's revelation to mankind is the Holy Bible that has recorded His divine revelations to His chosen people, the nation of Israel, and His promised Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ. This revelation has been guarded by Him throughout the ages and is preserved now for all who desire to know the truth.
- The Creator God has also sent His Holy Spirit to personally guide people into the truth. The Holy Spirit is a real, metaphysical person (a part of the Godhead or 3 persons revealed by the Scriptures representing one God) who has the infinite characteristics of the Creator God, and therefore can help all who call upon Him.
- The truths that are revealed in the Holy Scriptures (Bible) are aligned with our internal conscience. If our conscience has not been overly scarred and hardened then we will be able to confirm by our healthy conscience the validity of the truths revealed.
- Only people who are "of the truth" will be able to hear from God regarding further truths. This implies that people who are insincere, or who are practicing evil, or who are rebellious against the things of God, will not be receptive of the truths that are revealed. Only humble, sincere hearts will receive the truths that are revealed.
- Although not mentioned in the discussion above, there is a devil who will steal away the revealed truth from the minds of those who are still under his influence and leave them blocked from receiving it. Those who practice evil have left themselves vulnerable to this influence of the devil and his demons. (refer to the parable of the sower in the Gospel of Matthew chapter 13, specifically the seed that fell beside the road - see verse 19.)

The Christian Philosophy of life is centered on the God of the universe as the source of absolute truth, recognizing that the Holy Bible is the revelation from God for His creation. Thus we recognize that the revelation of truth contained in the Bible is the authoritative and ultimate source of tangible information

containing wisdom and knowledge for both this life and especially the life to come. As a result of this recognition we hold the Bible to be of immense value.

The preface of the English Standard Version (ESV) of the Bible starts with a quote from the Moderator of the Church of Scotland that he spoke when he handed a new Bible to the new monarch in Britain's coronation service. This quote summarizes what should be the attitude and respect of all of Christianity towards God's Word, the Bible. Here's what he said:

"This Book is the most valuable thing that this world affords. Here is Wisdom; here is the royal Law; these are the lively Oracles of God."

The Bible is Absolute Truth!

"All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work." 2 Timothy 3:16

"Truly, truly, I (Jesus) say to you, if anyone keeps my word, he will never taste death." John 8:51

"Consecrate them in the truth; Thy word is truth." John 17:17 (Jesus prayer to the Father)

Have you ever seen the Bible or anyone associated with the Bible shown in a positive way in a secular TV show or movie? I have not. My experience has been that any mention of the Bible is to either directly or indirectly ridicule or debase the Bible and anyone who adheres to its teachings. I understand that for anyone who doesn't believe that the Bible is the Word of God, they would see its teachings as foolishness. We live in a society that supposedly values the idea of respecting other people's opinions even if you don't agree with them. This doesn't seem to apply to the Bible.

I mention this because, whether we realize it or not, we are influenced by our surroundings and the messages that our brains are bombarded with on a daily basis. As Christians, we need to explicitly and constantly reinforce the importance of God's Word, the Bible and the critical role that it plays in our life.

You may be saying to yourself, "I got it; yes; not a problem for me." But I am not talking about hearing sermons or reading books that quote the Bible; that's hearing someone else's opinion or interpretation of the Word. We need to be directly and personally studying the Bible for ourselves. The Bible is a source of wisdom, a source of truth, a source of life, and it is protection against the seductive and deceitful lies of the enemy.

Contrary to the accepted view of the mainstream media, our educational system, and most of the major influential organizations of our culture, the Bible is extremely valuable. In fact, I would say that it is the most valuable physical, non-human, item in this world. Consider these quotes from Proverbs:

“Take my instruction instead of silver, and knowledge rather than choice gold.” Proverbs 8:10

“How much better to get wisdom than gold! To get understanding is to be chosen rather than silver.”
Proverbs 16:16

“There is gold, and abundance of costly stones; but the lips informed by knowledge are a precious jewel.” Proverbs 20:15

The Bible is our source of knowledge, wisdom and understanding, and as such is extremely valuable, more than the items that are historically considered to be of high value: gold, silver, and precious jewelry.

Sadly, it has been apparent from my conversations with some Christians that the knowledge and wisdom that comes from God’s word is not present with them. Over the years, it has often been the diagnosis that the source of problems in the church has been the lack of understanding of God’s word, leaving Christians vulnerable to various lies and deceptions that have crept into the church. Many Christians are willing to accept anyone’s teachings as truth as long as that teacher claims to be a Christian or if they have some celebrity status or if their teaching makes sense intellectually, but the real test is to weigh a person’s teaching against the word of God as revealed in the Bible. To do this, we need to spend time reading and studying His word ourselves individually.

“Study *and* do your best to present yourself to God approved, a workman [tested by trial] who has no reason to be ashamed, accurately handling *and* skillfully teaching the word of truth.” 2 Timothy 2:15 (Amplified Bible)

“The naive *or* inexperienced person [is easily misled and] believes every word he hears, But the prudent man [is discreet and astute and] considers well where he is going.” Proverbs 14:15

Most importantly for us as Christians is the realization that God’s Word is the source of spiritual truth. Anyone can say that they believe in God or that they believe in Jesus, but if it is not the God or Jesus that is revealed in the Bible, than it is not the true God or the true Jesus. Remember that our realization of spiritual truth does not come from our own observations or accumulated knowledge from other men. Nor does it come from communication with spiritual, non-physical entities through channeling or parapsychology or open-consciousness and meditation. The realization of spiritual truth is not even something that we “feel in our hearts” as being true because our hearts can be deceptive. Although our conscience will align with the truth (if it is healthy), it cannot be the source for establishing spiritual truth.

Absolute spiritual truth comes as a revelation from our Creator, and there is only one true revelation from Him: the Bible. This is the foundation of Christianity. We can only know the true nature of God and His Son Jesus, the Christ, by reading and studying the Bible. This has been the case since God began to reveal Himself through Abraham and will remain true until the Lord Jesus Christ returns on clouds of glory to establish His kingdom on a new earth and a new heaven.

God has established His Word for us. First, it was recorded through the nation of Israel who has meticulously recorded their history and the words of their prophets. Then the life and teachings of Jesus and the early church has been preserved and is available to us directly today. We are without excuse if we neglect this treasure.

There are no short cuts. We cannot expect someone else to do the work for us. This is not like the world where there are so called “experts” who learn a subject and then become the main source of information about that subject. Dead churches use this ungodly system where only the priest or minister can interpret the Bible and the “average” believers are discouraged from directly reading it themselves since they are not the “experts”.

The church has teachers but their role is to support and build up, not to be the main source of truth and to interpreter of the Bible. They should be exhorting and directing their listeners towards the true source, Jesus and the Bible. Christians should be like the believers at Berea, as recorded in Acts 17:

“Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with all eagerness, examining the scriptures daily to see if these things were so. Many of them therefore believed.” Acts 17: 11-12

I must caution you also regarding the communications from the Holy Spirit. As we pray, we should also be listening to the Holy Spirit, hearing His voice as He communicates to us. I believe this is very important. But we must also be aware that both our flesh and the enemy can influence us and possibly disrupt this interaction with the Holy Spirit. We must be sure that we are aligned with God’s word. The Holy Spirit will never contradict the Biblical truths.

Prayerfully reading God’s word, the Bible, is the most valuable time that you can spend, equal to your time of prayer and supplication, and listening quietly before the Lord. Please continue in this spiritual work. It will not only help you, but also will equip you to help your family and friends.

As we put to death those distractions from this world, and focus our affections on our future hope and promise that God has made available to us through Jesus Christ, we will find the words of His Bible to be satisfying and encouraging, taking us through difficult times, warning us of dangers ahead, and protecting us from evil lies that attempt to draw us away from the one and true God.

“Now this I affirm and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles (non-believers) do, in the futility of their minds; they are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to the hardness of heart; they have become callous and have given themselves up to licentiousness, greedy to practice every kind of uncleanness. You did not so learn Christ! – assuming that you have heard about Him and were taught in Him, as the truth is in Jesus. Put off your old nature which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and put on the new nature, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.” Ephesians 4: 17-24

The renewal that Paul mentions in the above quoted verse from Ephesians is the same as what Jesus referred to as “consecrate” when He prayed in John 17:17 quoted above.

“Consecrate them in the truth; Thy word is truth.” John 17:17

Other versions translate the word as “sanctify”. The original Greek word is Hagiazō (hag-ee-ad'-zo) meaning to make holy, i.e. (ceremonially) purify or consecrate; (mentally) to venerate:—hallow, be holy, sanctify. God’s word is the source of truth that will allow us to become new creatures, holy and righteous, created after the likeness of God, as Paul suggests.

Please recognize the value of these truths in God’s word and use the Bible to both enable the renewal in the spirit of you mind, and to protect you from the deceitfulness of the enemy.

The Role of the Holy Spirit to Guide Internal Change

“If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you.” John 14: 15-17

“Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you. And when he comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment: concerning sin, because they do not believe in me; concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father, and you will see me no longer; concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged. I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.” John 16: 7-15

Prayer and Bible study go hand in hand; you can’t have one without the other. We need to approach the Bible as a means of communication with God, allowing Him (the Holy Spirit) to lead us into all truth, especially the truths that are pertinent to our current life situations.

It is of critical importance that Christian believers allow the Holy Spirit to bring about an internal change in their life. This process is long and involved. It requires us to be open to the Holy Spirit’s leading as He does His work in us. Some of the work involves enduring difficulties or sufferings in our lives. Change is never easy and the types of changes needed to bring about maturity and growth as a Christian are especially challenging.

I would like to look at the book of Nehemiah as a prime example of how the Holy Spirit works in our life to bring about the needed internal change in us. Although it is a book from the Old Testament, as Paul explained to the Corinthians, these examples are there for us to learn from and apply to us today.

“Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction.....” 1 Corinthians 10:11

The book of Nehemiah is a historical book that records the events surrounding the restoration of the city of Jerusalem following its destruction by the Babylonians under king Nebuchadnezzar at around 450 BC. The summary of the book is that Nehemiah, one of the Israelite captives from the Babylonian seizure, is a cup bearer for king Artaxerxes of Persia (Babylon was overtaken by the Medes and Persians), and when Nehemiah learns of the extremely poor condition of the remnant of Israelites in Jerusalem, he is noticeably sad in the king’s presence and, when confronted by the king about his downcast appearance, is subsequently allowed to go to Jerusalem to restore the cities demolished walls and gates, to protect the people from abuse by the surrounding tribes.

“They said to me, ‘The remnant there in the province who survived the captivity are in great distress and reproach, and the wall of Jerusalem is broken down and its gates are burned with fire.’” Nehemiah 1:3

Nehemiah was made governor of the province and given authority by the king to do this work and to obtain the materials needed for rebuilding. He was governor for 12 years and restored order to the city of Jerusalem, despite the efforts of the surrounding evil governors to thwart their efforts, rebuilding the walls and gates, and then re-establishing the city government.

Nehemiah as a Type of the Holy Spirit

The name Nehemiah means “comforted by the Lord.” Jesus calls the Holy Spirit the “comforter” and therefore it has been suggested the Nehemiah is a type of the Holy Spirit. Certainly Nehemiah’s mission to restore the wall of Jerusalem can be symbolically compared to God’s efforts through the Holy Spirit to restore the broken defenses in our lives that allow our enemies to abuse us. As Christians, we are God’s temple. Before our conversion, the enemy of our soul, the devil, was able to break down and destroy the walls and gates of protection in our lives and therefore he, by his demons, could pillage us and cause us much distress. This lack of protection makes it impossible to establish our internal spiritual “temple” where we can confidently and peacefully enter into the presence of the Lord and communicate with Him. When we come to Jesus, the Spirit begins His work of restoration, building up our defenses, delivering us from the destructive bondage that had become a part of our lives, and then restoring our ability to communicate with God.

Remember that the issues that we struggle with are internal, not external. The devil would like us to focus on the external, physical things. This is his trick. Listen to this lesson from the gospel of Mark chapter 7:

“The Pharisees and some of the scribes gathered around Him when they had come from Jerusalem, and had seen that some of His disciples were eating their bread with impure hands, that is, unwashed. (For

the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they carefully wash their hands, thus observing the traditions of the elders; and when they come from the market place, they do not eat unless they cleanse themselves; and there are many other things which they have received in order to observe, such as the washing of cups and pitchers and copper pots.) The Pharisees and the scribes asked Him, 'Why do Your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat their bread with impure hands?' And He said to them, "Rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written: 'This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far away from Me. But in vain do they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men.' Neglecting the commandment of God, you hold to the tradition of men.' He was also saying to them, 'You are experts at setting aside the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition. For Moses said, 'Honor your father and your mother'; and, 'He who speaks evil of father or mother is to be put to death'; but you say, 'If a man says to his father or his mother, whatever I have that would help you is Corban (that is to say, given to God),' you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or his mother; thus invalidating the word of God by your tradition which you have handed down; and you do many things such as that.' After He called the crowd to Him again, He began saying to them, "Listen to Me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside the man which can defile him if it goes into him; but the things which proceed out of the man are what defile the man. [If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear.] When he had left the crowd and entered the house, His disciples questioned Him about the parable. And He said to them, "Are you so lacking in understanding also? Do you not understand that whatever goes into the man from outside cannot defile him, because it does not go into his heart, but into his stomach, and is eliminated?" (Thus He declared all foods clean.) And He was saying, "That which proceeds out of the man, that is what defiles the man. For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, deeds of coveting and wickedness, as well as deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride and foolishness. All these evil things proceed from within and defile the man." Mark 7:1-23

It is our internal thoughts and feelings that are the root cause of the difficulties of our lives that cause us to enter into bondage and to be abused by the enemy. The sad thing is most people in the world don't even understand or recognize this truth. They only see the symptoms and think that it's a physical problem so they think that some medication or operation or vacation or change of scenery or some other physical remedy will solve their problems. That's exactly what the enemy wants us to think. That way, we don't put any attention into restoring the internal walls and gates that are broken down. The truth is that we need to change the way that we think. As the quoted verse from Mark says, "For from within, out of the heart (or mind) of men, proceed the evil thoughts..." And the power of the Gospel is that it shows us how we should think. As you read through the Scriptures, you will notice phrases like "consider yourself..." or "Reckon" or "have this mind..." or "put on the mind of Christ" or "don't be conformed to how this world thinks, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind..." We must recognize that faith is a way of thinking. The Scriptures are intended to show us how we should think. We should notice how the heroes of the faith would think and copy them. Thinking thoughts that are immersed with our faith are a defense for the attacks of the enemy. Ephesians 6:16, "in addition to all, taking up the shield of faith with which you will be able to extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one" The flaming arrows of the enemy come in the form of internal thoughts. We must safeguard ourselves against these evil thoughts by using the shield of faith, that is, by countering the false

thoughts that come from the enemy by acknowledging the truth. We must think the thoughts that are established by God's revelation and are accepted by faith because they are spiritual and not physical.

Our fight is not a physical fight, but a spiritual one. The walls that are being restored are not physical walls but are spiritual ones, internal, having to do with our thought life and thought habits. Many of these habits cause us to automatically think thoughts that trigger emotions or reactions that lead to negative manifestations. Including God's truth in our thoughts changes everything. Thinking from God's perspective, and seeing things from an eternal, spiritual viewpoint will change everything about our situation.

Jesus complemented a centurion's faith because of the way that he thought about his situation (in Matthew 8):

"And when Jesus entered Capernaum, a centurion came to Him, imploring Him, and saying, "Lord, my servant is lying paralyzed at home, fearfully tormented." Jesus said to him, "I will come and heal him." But the centurion said, "Lord, I am not worthy for You to come under my roof, but just say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I also am a man under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to this one, 'Go!' and he goes, and to another, 'Come!' and he comes, and to my slave, 'Do this!' and he does it." Now when Jesus heard this, He marveled and said to those who were following, "Truly I say to you, I have not found such great faith with anyone in Israel."

Here the centurion was able to recognize the reality of the Lord Jesus' authority and applied this reality to his situation. We need to do the same as we encounter similar situations. Consider the centurion's thoughts: he was humble, unassuming, peaceful, confident, and assured as a result of his faith. How would we respond in a similar situation if someone close to us or important to us was afflicted and tormented? Our spiritual battles are won or lost depending on how we think in our daily situations. It takes an effort to apply faith to our thoughts, and to take the viewpoint that God is in control and that the eternal things are what really matters. Guard your thoughts and fight to keep them pure and focused on spiritual truth.

If you are a new Christian, recognize that it is God's desire to build up the defenses in your life by restoring the purity of your heart and removing the lies that the world and the devil have convinced you of over the years, replacing them with the truth. For older Christians that have been already mostly restored, recognize that God may still be working in some areas to secure up your defenses. Keep on guard and don't allow them to be torn down again. Also, Older Christians are used to help the restoration of younger Christians. Be aware of what the Holy Spirit's work entails and what the true goals are, that is, internal changes, not external.

"Keep (or guard) your heart (or mind and thoughts) with all diligence, for out of it spring the issues of life." Proverbs 4:23

Like Nehemiah who rebuilt the temple in Jerusalem and restored the city walls, the Holy Spirit's work is to rebuild our walls of protection and reconstruct our temple so that we are free from the attacks of the

enemy and transformed into a suitable abode for the Spirit of God. Read the book of Nehemiah to gain more insight into the working of this work of restoration by the Holy Spirit.

The Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ for Salvation

“For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes” Romans 1:16

As we learned above, it is very important for us to know and understand the source of truth, or more specifically, to recognize that the revelations that are contained in the Bible are absolute truth and are the standard by which all other professed truths should be measured. The truths that I am referring to are the truths that we use to determine our world view, that is, the truths that guide our lives, determining what is right and wrong, influencing our decisions, and form the foundation of our philosophy of life or belief system.

The core revelation that is presented in the Bible is the Gospel of salvation through the Lord Jesus Christ. The books of the Old Testament of the Bible lay the ground work for the coming of the Messiah (or Christ) and the need for salvation and the books of the New Testament record the details of His coming and the purpose behind it.

When we accept and believe the Gospel of Jesus Christ and enter into a covenant relationship with God based on the redemption offered to us by the sacrifice of the cross of Christ, we are then open to the ministry of the Holy Spirit of Truth, to begin the work of internal transformation in us. In order for this work of transformation to be properly performed, we need to have a clear and complete understanding of the Gospel with a full assurance of hope. Our Christian conversion must be deep and complete.

Since most of the letters to the churches included in the New Testament of the Bible were written by Paul, and they make up a large part of the New Testament Scriptures it is important note that Paul had a unique revelation from the Lord regarding the Gospel for the Gentiles (the non-Jewish believers).

The following Scripture verses explain Paul’s special relationship to the gospel:

“But I make known to you, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man. For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but it came through the revelation of Jesus Christ.” Galatians 1:11-12

“This is the reason that I Paul am a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles— for surely you have already heard of the commission of God’s grace that was given me for you, and how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I wrote above in a few words, a reading of which will enable you to perceive my understanding of the mystery of Christ. In former generations this mystery was not

made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.” Ephesians 3: 1-6

I would like to start with a couple of simple statements of the Gospel found in the Gospel of John.

The first is found in an exchange between Jesus and Martha at the death of her brother Lazarus, where I see a concise statement of the Gospel:

“Jesus said to her, ‘I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?’ She said to Him, ‘Yes, Lord, I believe that You are the Christ, the Son of God, who is to come into the world.” John 11: 25-27

The next statement, which complements the previous, comes from Jesus when talking to Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jew:

“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.” John 3:16-17

In a nutshell, the Gospel message is that if you believe that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah (the Christ) then you will be saved. There are three important questions that arise from this simple message that need to be fully defined in order to get gain the proper understanding of this Gospel: 1) what does it mean to be saved? 2) What does it mean for Jesus to be “the Messiah”? 3) What does it mean to believe? We’ll look at each of these separately.

Part 1: “What does it mean to be saved?”

The use of the word “saved” implies that you need to be saved *from* something. In order to understand this “need to be saved from something” we must first look at the background from the scriptural revelation.

The Bible explains that God had originally created man in a paradise and had intended for us to have eternal life in this paradise, in direct communication with Him, that is, physically seeing and interacting with Him in His presence. As a result of man’s direct disobedience of God’s directives (instigated by satanic deception), man was rejected by God from the garden paradise and placed under a curse. The curse brought death to all mankind and has also made it so that all men inherit a sinful nature from our first parents. Additionally, we are all born into a cursed world that is separated from God’s physical presence.

Here are some Scriptures that are the source of these truths:

“Then to Adam He said, ‘Because you have heeded the voice of your wife, and have eaten from the tree of which I commanded you, saying “You shall not eat of it”, Cursed is the ground for your sake; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life. Both thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you, and you

shall eat the herb of the field. In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground for out of it you were taken. For dust you are and to dust you shall return.” Genesis 3:17-19

Notice in the above scripture that the statement that Adam would “return to the ground” was referring to the fact that he would now die. Up until this point Adam would have been given access to the tree of life and lived forever, but under the curse God restricted him from accessing the tree of life (the source of eternal life).

“Then the Lord God said, ‘Behold, the man has become like one of Us, to know good and evil, and now, lest he put out his hand and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live forever’—therefore the Lord God sent him out of the garden of Eden to till the ground from which he was taken. 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 the way to the tree of life.” Genesis 3:22-24

We also know that as a result of the rebellion in the garden, that God’s enemy, Satan, has somehow gained control over this world and influences those who have not honored God, nor accepted His Messiah, and who follow the world system (course of this world) that is opposed to God’s system.

“And you He made alive who were dead in trespasses and sins, in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience, among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind and were by nature children of wrath just as the others.” Ephesians 2:1-3

This current cursed world system is diametrically opposed to God’s ways and all who follow it are not of God.

“Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all this is in the world – the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life – is not of the Father but is of the world.” 1 John 2: 15-16

This information leads us to a critical truth that the Apostle Paul states in his letter to the Romans when explaining the gospel: As a result of the sin of Adam and Eve and the separation from God and curse of this world, all men who are a part of the world system (and who remain in the world system by rejecting the opportunity to come out of it through Jesus Christ) are guilty of sin and when judged by God will be the object of His wrath.

“For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because what may be known of God is manifest (or evident) in (or among) them, for God has shown it to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead (or divine nature, deity), so that they are without excuse, because although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened.” Romans 1: 18-21

Because we were all born into this world system and have dishonored God, we are all guilty. This is confirmed explicitly by Paul in Romans also:

“What then? Are we (Jews) better than they (the Gentiles)? Not at all. For we have previously charged both Jews and Greeks that they are all under sin. As it is written: ‘There is none righteous, no not one. There is none who understands. There is none who seeks after God. They have together become unprofitable. There is none who does good, no, not one.’” Romans 3: 9-12

And Paul again in the letter to the Galatians:

“But the Scripture has confined all under sin, that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.” Galatians 3:22

Now back to the question, “What does it mean to be saved?” The answer is that we need to be saved from the judgment of God, who will judge us, and if we are found guilty, He will exercise His wrath against our sin, and will send us to the second death, meaning that we will be thrown into the lake of fire, (i.e. hell). Jesus, as the Messiah, paid the price to redeem us from this judgment so that we can be removed from the curse of death and judgment, and instead have a resurrected immortal body for eternal life.

“Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away. And there was found no place for them. And I saw the dead, small and great, standing before God, and books were opened, and another book was opened, which is the Book of Life, and the dead were judged according to their works, by the things which were written in the books. The sea gave up the dead who were in it, and Death and Hades delivered up the dead who were in them. And they were judged, each one according to his works. Then Death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. And anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire.” Revelations 20: 11-15

All those who have accepted the redemption from the Lord Jesus Christ will have their names written in the Book of Life, and therefore will be spared the second death.

Many are confused by this answer and find it hard to accept, but we must realize that God has His reasons for what He does, much of which we cannot understand in our current position in this world. Some of His purposes behind this truth are revealed in the scriptures, for example, by allowing all men to become entangled in sin and unable to redeem themselves on their own merits, it is impossible for any man to boast before God:

“Where is boasting then? It is excluded.” Romans 3:27

And this:

“For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God.” Romans 4:2

And again:

“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.” Ephesians 2:8

For a man to accept God’s forgiveness and mercy in order to be reconciled to Him requires humility. Remember that the pride of mankind is a core evil, and that it was Satan’s pride that caused him to rebel. God’s method of redemption eliminates all pride and boasting in a man’s heart.

If a man receives God’s merciful forgiveness with the proper attitude it will lead him to repentance (or changing the way he thinks).

“Or do you despise the riches of His goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering, not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance?” Romans 2:4

Also we learn from the scriptures that God desires to show mercy towards all mankind so He has allowed this situation of all men being under the bondage of sin and in need of a savior/redeemer:

“For God has committed them all to disobedience, that He might have mercy on all. Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out!” Romans 11: 32-33

God has sent a Savior and Redeemer, the Lord Jesus Christ, and He has made it known to all mankind in order that all men may receive this free gift of mercy. There are no special talents needed, nor is there a need for a superior intellect, but all men everywhere can receive this gift of salvation from God by applying a sincere faith to what He has promised to us through Jesus Christ.

Part 2: “What does it mean for Jesus to be the Messiah?”

“Remember that Jesus Christ of the seed of David, was raised from the dead according to my gospel,...”
2 Timothy 2: 8

We learned above that the sin and rebellion of our first parents in the Garden of Eden resulted in a curse upon mankind, placing us in a demonic and corrupted world system with an inherited sinful nature. All mankind is therefore in need of a savior to redeem us from God’s judgment that will happen at the end of this age. The Messiah was sent in response to this need with the intention of offering a means of removing the consequences including the removal of God’s judgment incurred due to man’s sin, and also the transformation of man’s fallen, carnal nature, that is, our tendency to focus on the physical world and the hopes and pleasures that this world offers. The Messiah offers a means of removing the penalty resulting from our sins and a means of transforming us from carnal to spiritual beings (being born again of the spirit).

In order to accomplish this purpose of removing the consequences of the curse and of man’s sins, we must understand who the Messiah is, what His purpose was in coming, and how His coming impacts our lives. We cannot place our faith and trust in Him without a complete understanding of these things. The following is an attempt to clearly define who and what the Messiah is, why He came, and what His

coming means to us, so that we can better exercise our faith in Him and in the promises of God that He represents.

The dictionary definition of the word “messiah” is “the promised and expected deliver of the Jewish people.” According to Wikipedia, in Judaism the word “messiah” (hamashiach, meaning “the anointed one”) is often referred to as “King Messiah”, emphasizing the fact that the Messiah is to be physically descended from King David and King Solomon, and His coming will re-establish Israel and usher in the Messianic Age. It is my understanding that much of the Jewish religious ceremonies and activities are focused on the expectation of the coming of the Messiah (and they are still today looking for the messiah since they have not accepted Jesus as Messiah).

There are many prophecies concerning the promised coming of the Messiah and I would suggest that you research these prophecies for yourself. A good source of information is the “Jews for Jesus” website (<https://jewsforjesus.org/>) where they have listed the many prophecies about the Messiah and the fact that these prophecies point to Jesus as fulfilling them (Jews for Jesus is an organization for Jews who have accepted Jesus as the Messiah).

In the New Testament of the Bible, the use of the Greek word for Messiah is “Christos” (or Khristos), meaning “anointed” and has been anglicized into the word “Christ” as it also appears in the Bible when it is translated to English. Any place where the word Christ is used you can substitute Messiah. We must recognize that even the title attributed to Jesus in the New Testament scriptures, i.e. The Lord Jesus Christ, acknowledges that Jesus was regarded as the Messiah by the writers of the biblical text and the Holy Spirit.

The Jews who were living during the time of the initial coming of the Lord Jesus, even His disciples, were expecting the coming of the Messiah to be with physical power, and that He would be a deliverer of the Jews from the Roman Empire and a restorer of the nation of Israel. They had missed the fact that the Messiah must first come in humility and suffer at the hands of evil men, as was prophesied, and that He would come a second time to establish and restore the kingdom of God. There are many prophecies regarding His first coming; here is an example from Isaiah:

“Behold, My Servant shall deal prudently; He shall be exalted and extolled and be very high. Just as many were astonished at you, so His visage was marred more than any man, and His form more than the sons of men;” Isaiah 52-13-14

This fact of His humble coming to suffer was also confirmed by the angels who were at the empty grave when Jesus was resurrected.

“He is not here but risen! Remember how He spoke to you when He was still in Galilee, saying, ‘The Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, and be crucified, and the third day rise again.’” Luke 24: 6-7

And there is also this from the Lord Jesus Himself after when He appeared to the men on the road to Emmaus after His resurrection:

“Then He (Jesus) said to them, ‘O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! Ought not the Christ (Messiah) to have suffered these things and to enter into His glory?’ and beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself.” Luke 24: 25-27.

As pertaining to the Gospel, it is important to recognize that the Messiah was promised to be sent to this world by God the Father with the express purpose to remove the curse from God’s creation and restore the world to its intended state (as it was originally created to be in the Garden of Eden). The Scriptures state clearly that Jesus came to restore what was lost by the first Adam.

“Therefore, as through one man’s offense judgment came on all men, resulting in condemnation, even so through one Man’s righteous act the free gift came to all men, resulting in justification of life. For as by one man’s disobedience many were made sinners, so also by one Man’s obedience many will be made righteous.” Romans 5:18-19

It should be noted that when God issued the conditions of the curse, at that exact time, He first mentions the coming Messiah:

“So the Lord God said to the serpent: ‘Because you have done this, you are cursed more than all cattle, and more than every beast of the field; on your belly you shall go and you shall eat dust all the days of your life. And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise you head, and you shall bruise His heel.’” Genesis 3:14-15

The following lists the multiple purposes of the coming of the promised Messiah:

1. He is THE only begotten Son of God who had taken on human form and come to earth, and is equivalent to God as His only Son, and the physical representation of God with the stamp of His nature (remember that mankind was separated from God’s physical presence as a result of the curse and did not clearly know God’s nature and attributes).
2. He is the Lamb of God, the Savior of mankind, offering redemption from the judgment of God that was the result of the curse. This redemption represents God’s mercy towards us, even when we were His enemy. God showed His love towards us by sending His only Begotten Son to die on our behalf.
3. He is the first to be resurrected by God, the first born of many who will enter into glory with a resurrected, immortal body, restored from the cursed body of death and corruption, and He is alive and seated at the right hand of the Father. The curse from Adam’s sin brought death, but the free gift of redemption from Jesus Christ brought eternal life, restoring hope to all who believe.
4. He is the King of kings and Lord of lords, who will return to destroy the current earth with its associated world system, and establish a new heaven and earth where He will rule His kingdom in righteousness and justice. All authority and powers that exist will then be submitted to Him,

with Him submitted to the Father. He therefore is the Lord of every believer, and so we must recognize and honor Him as such.

I would like to discuss each of the above listed items briefly with the supporting scripture, but would encourage you to research deeper.

Purpose 1 - The only begotten Son of God

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him and without Him nothing was made that was made. In Him was life, and the life was the light of men.” John 1: 1-4

“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.” John 1: 14

Although all of those who have entered the kingdom of God through the redemption of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Messiah, are children of God and therefore sons and daughters of God, the position of Jesus is different or special as ***the only begotten*** Son of God.

In Psalm 45 there is a clear statement about the Messiah being God:

“Your throne, O God, is forever and ever; A scepter of righteousness is the scepter of Your kingdom. You love righteousness and hate wickedness; Therefore God, Your God, has anointed You with the oil of gladness more than Your companions.” Psalm 45: 6-7

And also, in Psalm 110, David addressed the Messiah as Lord, although He was to be a descendant of his, suggesting that David knew that the Messiah would be more than just a descendant, but that He would have an exalted position, since He would ascend into heaven and be seated at the right hand of God:

“The Lord said to my Lord, ‘Sit at My right hand, till I make Your enemies Your footstool.’” Psalm 110:1

The fact that Jesus was born of a virgin, conceived by the Holy Spirit also points towards His divine origin.

Why is this important? We must understand that Jesus came down from heaven. He was God with us! He represented God on earth, and therefore His communications, actions, judgments, and declarations of truth were and expression of God, and were ordained by God the Father.

“Then Jesus cried out, as He taught in the temple, saying, ‘You both know Me, and you know where I am from; and I have come of Myself, but He who sent Me is true, whom you do not know. But I know Him, for I am from Him, and He sent Me.’” John 7:28-29

Jesus, as Messiah, is also the only representation of God the Father. The Father sent Jesus on His behalf and He is the only way to be restored to the Father.

Jesus said to him, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.” John 14:6

Think of the implication of this truth, that Jesus had come down to earth from heaven as a direct representation of God. Proverbs 30 says this:

“Who has ascended into heaven, or descended?” Proverbs 30:4

Jesus expressed to us the nature of the living God, the Creator of the universe, in human form:

“God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds; who being the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person, and upholding all things by the word of His power when He had by Himself purged our sins, sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become so much better than the angels, as He has by inheritance obtained a more excellent name than they.” Hebrews 1: 1-4

And Jesus set an example for us by humbling Himself to become a man:

“Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery (something to be held onto to be equal) to be equal to God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men, and being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross.”
Philippians 2: 5-8

In short, the Messiah, Jesus, has made a way for all who believe in Him to enter into an intimate relationship with the living God. We can communicate with Him, and we can get to know Him through His Word, the Bible, seeing in Jesus the very nature of God. When He returns at His second coming, we will be fully restored to a place where we will be in His physical presence, and the curse will be completely undone.

Summary of purpose 1:

- Who was the Messiah: The only begotten Son of God with the stamp of God's Nature
- Why did the Messiah come: to reveal the nature of God to mankind, since they had been rejected from God's presence under the curse.
- What Promise did the Messiah present: the establishment of truth from God the Father, from someone who had come from heaven directly.

Purpose 2 - The Savior and Redeemer

Our need to be saved is the result of the sin of our first parents, Adam and Eve, and the resulting curse and system of sin and death that was passed down to all humans. All mankind is guilty before God, needing a Savior to redeem them or to pay the price required for the judgment of sin to be removed from their life. God has supplied that redemptive payment by sending His Son, Jesus, to die, or be sacrificed, as an innocent “sacrificial lamb” to pay the price for all mankind.

“In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace which He made to abound toward us in all wisdom and prudence, having made known to us the

mystery of His will, according to His good pleasure which He purposed in Himself, 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. In Him also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestined according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will, that we who first trusted in Christ should be to the praise of His glory. In Him you also trusted, after you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation; in whom also, having believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, to the praise of His glory.” Ephesians 1: 7-14

This redemption applies to us immediately to restore our relationship with God, allowing us direct access to the Father.

“For through Him we both (Jew and Gentile) have access by one Spirit to the Father. Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God.” Ephesians 2: 18-19

Additionally, the redeemed have their name written in the “Book of Life” so that on the day of Judgment, when we stand before God, we will be spared from the second death.

“And anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire.” Revelations 20:15

A very high price was paid on our behalf, that is, the life of the Messiah. We have been purchased by this payment, or redeemed. Yet we didn’t deserve it. We need to live our lives within this context.

Summary of purpose 2:

- Who was the Messiah: The Savior and Redeemer of all mankind
- Why did the Messiah come: to remove the penalty of sin, paying the price by His suffering and death on the cross, and to restore our relationship with God the Father, allowing us to enter into intimate communion with Him even now.
- What Promise did the Messiah present: All those who are written in the Lamb's book of life will be spared the second death; All those under the blood of Jesus can enter into God's presence directly to communicate with Him.

Purpose 3 - The Resurrected Messiah

The Lord Jesus Christ was not just raised from the dead, as was Lazarus previously (who later died), but His body was transformed into a new resurrected body, from a physical body like ours to a new, resurrected, spiritual body. No other person, throughout history, had gone through this type of transformation, nor has anyone since. It is this new, immortal, spiritual body that is promised to all those who are truly in Christ Jesus, truly saved, and who are the true Christians.

In the 15th chapter of the book of 1st Corinthians in the Bible, the apostle Paul emphasizes the importance of the resurrection as part of the gospel. Please read the entire chapter to get the full context.

“Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you— unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He was seen by Cephas (Peter), then by the twelve. After that He was seen by over five hundred brethren at once, of whom the greater part remain to the present, but some have fallen asleep. After that He was seen by James, then by all the apostles. Then last of all He was seen by me also, as by one born out of due time.” 1 Cor. 15: 1-8

And this later in the same chapter:

“ But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep (died). For since by man came death, by Man also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive. But each one in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, afterward those who are Christ’s at His coming.” 1 Cor. 15: 20-23

This is our hope! No other religion or alleged revelation or belief system offers this hope that has been established by an historical event, that is, the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ, as was witnessed by many and has changed our world as a result.

The curse of death and hell were defeated by the risen Christ Jesus!

“Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep (die), but we shall all be changed – in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and the mortal must put on immortality. So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, ‘Death is swallowed up in victory.’ ‘O Death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory?’” 1 Cor. 15:51-55

Summary of purpose 3:

- Who was the Messiah: The First and Only person who has been Resurrected
- Why did the Messiah come: to establish our hope of a future resurrection with an immortal and eternal body. Therefore, we can set our minds and hearts and affections on the spiritual things that await us, storing up our riches in heaven rather than on earth.
- What Promise did the Messiah present: All those who are in Christ Jesus are citizens of Heaven and will share in the Glory of the resurrected Messiah, including the receipt of a new spiritual body.

Purpose 4 -The Messiah King

The very same Jesus who was resurrected from the dead exists today in the same body. Remember that He ascended up into heaven and will return in the same manner.

“Now when He had spoken these things, while they watched, He was taken up, and a cloud received Him out of their sight. And while they looked steadfastly toward heaven as He went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel, who also said, ‘Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven.’” Acts 1: 9-11

The Lord Jesus ascended to a place of authority at the right hand of God the Father, with all things submitted to him:

“and what is the exceeding greatness of His (God the Father) power towards us who believe, according to the working of His mighty power which He worked in Christ when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, 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. 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.” Ephesians 1: 19-23

Looking back also at the 15th chapter of 1st Corinthians, Paul states that at the second coming of Jesus Christ the final enemies will be defeated and all things will be in literal submission to the Lord Jesus, the Son, with Him in submission to God the Father, making God the Father “all in all”.

“For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive, but each one in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, afterwards those who are Christ’s at His coming. Then comes the end, when He delivers the kingdom to God the Father, when He puts an end to all rule and all authority and power. For He must reign till He has put all enemies under His feet. The last enemy that will be destroyed is death. For ‘He has put all things under His feet.’ But when He says “all things are put under Him,’ it is evident that He who put all things under Him is excepted. Now when all things are made subject to Him, then the Son Himself will also be subject to Him who put all things under Him, that God may be all in all.” 1 Corinthians 15: 22-28

Summary of purpose 4:

- Who was the Messiah: The Lord and King
- Why did the Messiah come: to prepare for the restoration of creation to what was initially intended and to establish the eternal kingdom of God. The Messiah's first coming clarified that His first appearance would be in humility and suffering as a lamb to be slain, but His second coming would be in power and authority as the lion of Judah to restore the kingdom.
- What Promise did the Messiah present: Upon the second coming of the Lord Jesus Christ, the new heaven and new earth will be established and all of God's children will have an inheritance in this kingdom. This is the New Covenant.

We see that the Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ, has come to correct the damage that resulted from Adam and Eve’s rebellion and sin. Upon His first coming, He has made a way for us to be reconciled to God the Father, and to establish in us a hope for a future in heaven. This establishment of our hope is

the means for us to be transformed internally from the carnal/fleshly attitude and mindset of this world to a spiritual way of thinking with our hearts and minds set on heaven and the things above.

We will see more clearly in Part 3 below how the exercising of our faith/believing has also made a way for us to be internally transformed into new creations, resulting in our becoming spiritual with the ability to walk in true love.

We eagerly await His second coming when all things will be made completely right with the kingdom of God completely restored and all enemies defeated. In the meantime, we press on towards the prize that awaits us, with our hearts set on the promised future in heaven.

Part 3: “What does it mean to (really) Believe?”

“Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that He may send Jesus Christ, who was preached to you before, whom heaven must receive until the times of restoration of all things, which God has spoken by the mouth of all His holy prophets since the world began.” Acts 3: 29-21 (Peter’s sermon to the people in the temple after the lame man was healed)

We learned previously that we are in need of a savior due to the sin of Adam and Eve and the curse that has come upon us, and that God the Father has sent His Son Jesus as the Messiah as a means of escaping this situation and to restore the damage that resulted from the curse. Believing in Him requires that we now follow Him, that is, to humbly accept His forgiveness and now focus on the promises that He had provided for our future in heaven - this is the pathway to escape from our situation and be saved. Following Him will redeem us from the penalty of the curse and from the penalty that was incurred from our own personal sins and will give us a way to be transformed into a new, spiritual creature with the power to live free from sin, and the power to produce the fruit of the spirit in our lives.

When we say that we believe that Jesus is the Messiah, if we **really** believe, there will be a change in our life. There will be a transformation that occurs. Let's look closer at what it means to really believe.

In many circumstances, when you really believe something, it will result in some form of action. For example, if a man walks by a home and notices smoke and flames of fire coming out of the attic and roof of the building, and he runs to the door and informs the people living there about what he saw, it would stand to reason that these people would respond with some type of action, acknowledging and confirming that they have believed the message they were told. Most likely, they would evacuate the house, alerting any other family members inside, and notify the local fire department. If they just continued their previous activity, maybe watching a television show or eating a meal, then it would indicate that something was amiss; either they didn't believe the message or they didn't understand it. The gospel message also requires a responsive action on our part to confirm that we truly believe the message.

True belief must be accompanied by some change on our part. It must be more than just a mental agreement with the facts. The message is that God the father has sent Jesus, the Messiah, to make a

way for us to get out of our circumstances. Jesus referred to Himself as "the way" and "the door", implying that He is in fact the means of escape from this cursed world and the wrath of God's judgment. Truly believing in Him requires more than mental consent. It requires that we embrace this truth entirely, seeing that we must die to this cursed world and place our hopes and affections in the future that Jesus has pointed us to. We must pass through "the door" from the cursed world system into the new kingdom of heaven. As we will see, this change is internal, having to do with our minds and hearts, thoughts and emotions, and our attitudes and perceptions of our surroundings.

Truly believing in the Gospel requires us to change the way that we think. It requires that we change our view of this world, and that we change the "path" that we are on in this life. This is why the word "repent" is often combined with the exhortation to believe in the Scriptures; repent meaning to change the way that we think or to change the direction of our life. For example, here is what Jesus said:

"Now after John was put in prison, Jesus came to Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. **Repent, and believe** in the gospel." Mark 1: 14-15

The Greek word used here translated as "repent" is metanoeo meaning to change one's mind, to think differently or afterwards, that is, to reconsider." Over the years the English meaning of repent has changed to emphasize more a feeling of remorse rather than being focused on changing the way we think.

If we truly believe that Jesus is the Messiah than it should be apparent in our lives. It should be reflected in our actions, the way that we live, and the direction that our life is headed in. One critical area that should change is the focus of our hope. The Messiah offers us hope for a future kingdom where He is King. If we have accepted this truth and placed our faith in it, then we should have this future hope as the focus of our life. We should not continue with our hope set on the things of this world.

A true, deep, sincere belief in the message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ results in an inner change, or a conversion (as Peter mentions in his sermon in Acts 3 quoted above – "Repent and be converted..."). Our old view of this world must be abandoned. The old path that we were traveling must be abandoned. Our old way of thinking must be abandoned. Our old hopes and dreams must be abandoned. Faith requires that we die to all of these old ways and take on a new life making us like completely new creatures. We can no longer follow our own way or the ways of other men who claim to know how to get us to a better place. No, we must follow the way of the true Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ.

The pathway of the Messiah is a spiritual one, but our old way of life is a fleshly, physical one. The new path leads us away from this physical earth and all that this world has to offer and leads us to a new heaven and new earth, spiritual and eternal, no longer under the curse.

God has made a promise to all who have placed their faith in the Messiah that they will be part of the new kingdom of God in heaven. He has made a covenant that all who will turn from this world and

follow His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, the Messiah, will be received into the new kingdom of God when Jesus returns at His second coming. We must embrace this promise in the same way that Abraham, the father of all who have faith, had embraced the promise that God made to him.

The Scriptures say this of Abraham's faith:

"He did not waver at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strengthened in faith, giving glory to God, and being fully convinced that what He had promised He was also able to perform. And therefore 'it was accounted to him for righteousness.' Now it was not written for his sake alone that it was imputed to him, but also for us. It shall be imputed to us who believe in Him who raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was delivered up because of our offenses, and was raised because of our justification. Therefore having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God." Romans 4: 20 – 5: 2

This is the amazing wisdom of God, that He has offered us an opportunity to be transformed in our inner man by placing our faith in His promise that was made tangible in the first coming of the Lord Jesus Christ, and will be fulfilled in His second coming. By placing our hope in the promise of His second coming and accepting the reconciliation that was made at His first coming, including the reality of a resurrected, immortal new body, we can shift the focus of our hearts and lives to this future promise of hope, and this causes us to be transformed from carnally (or physically) minded to spiritually minded.

"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, (set their minds on) the things of the Spirit. For to be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace. 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. But you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. Now if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not His." Romans 8: 5-9

"For we were saved in this hope, but hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one still hope for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we eagerly wait for it with perseverance." Romans 8: 24-25

"And since we have the same spirit of faith, according to what is written, 'I believed and therefore I spoke,' we also believe and therefore speak, knowing that He who raised up the Lord Jesus will also raise us up with Jesus, and will present us with you." 2 Corinthians 4: 13-14

"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new. Now all things are of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation, that is, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation. Now then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us; we implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God. For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him." 2 Corinthians 5: 17-21

There is no other message or promise in all of mankind that offers this opportunity for salvation as does the gospel of Jesus Christ in the Biblical text. There is no other revelation that compares to this with a resurrected Christ who has fulfilled the prophecies of the holy prophets that were made over thousands of years. No other message has the power to transform lives as does this gospel. Listen to how the apostle Peter presented the gospel to the men of Israel:

"Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs which God did through Him in you midst, as you yourselves also know - Him, being delivered up by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death; whom God raised up, having loosed the pains of death, because it was not possible that He would be held by it...This Jesus God has raised up, of which we are all witnesses. Therefore being exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He poured out this which you now hear." Acts 2: 22-24,32-33.

And later Peter says this:

"Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved." Acts 4: 12

I remember as a young teenager when I first turned my heart to God and began to seek Him that I wished that there was someone else who really, really believed in God and lived their life aligned with their belief. It was my desire to live that way. As time went on and I began to understand more and more of the message that had been revealed from God in the Scriptures, that is, the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, I realized that really, really believing the Gospel required me to die to this world. As it turns out, this is a beautiful thing because it leads to freedom from the bondage that this world has on us. It leads to freedom from fear, stress, and anxiety.

The full picture of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is this: God initially created man to live in a paradise, to be in close contact and communication with Him, and to have an immortal body with eternal life (no death, to pain, no sorrows). Our first parents, Adam and Eve, had sinned and caused a curse to come upon mankind including ejection from paradise and from the presence of God, as well as becoming mortal, facing death. Mankind, that is, the descendants of Adam and Eve, have inherited this curse. God, in His mercy, sent a Messiah to offer a way of escape to all those who turn to Him, follow Him, and place their faith and hope in the promises that have been established by His first coming and will be realized at His second coming.

All of us who have entered into this covenant relationship with God through the blood sacrifice of Jesus Christ, have put to death our old self and consider ourselves as having died with Christ on the cross with our old man being buried with Him, and now we consider our new self as having risen with Christ, as a new creation, born of the spirit, with our hearts and hopes set on the spiritual things above where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God the father in heaven.

We also are patiently enduring through this life as sojourners (temporary residents) the same as Abraham, the father of our faith, waited for the promises that God offered him.

Please take a fresh look at the gospel and what it means to you personally. Get the whole picture of what we are being saved from and who the Messiah really is to us, and then exercise your faith fully to align your entire life completely with this beautiful message of hope. The fruit of this faith will be spiritual fruit: love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness faithfulness, gentleness, self-control, and the final result will be eternal life in a new heaven and earth with the Lord Jesus.

There is only One Gospel and it produces Love

In Paul's letter to the Galatians he specifically addresses the importance of the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, correcting them for looking to what he called "another gospel". There is much that we can learn from this letter.

"I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and turning to a different gospel— not that there is another gospel, but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again, if any one is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you received, let him be accursed." Galatians 1: 6-9

The apostle Paul wrote this warning to the churches of Galatia close to 2,000 years ago. I firmly believe that this same warning also applies to Christians today, and was not just a one time warning unique to the situation that Paul was addressing at that time. I believe that there are Christian teachers and church leaders today who "pervert the gospel of Christ" in a similar manner, to varying degrees, as was being done at that time. Historically, there has been a tendency for Christian organizations to digress from the core elements of the gospel, focusing on "religiosity" rather than producing true Christian character and love. Even today there are many Christian churches that would be considered spiritually dead. This letter to the Galatians addresses the cause of this problem that leads to death.

If you read the entire letter that Paul wrote, you will see that he is essentially saying that there is no other means of restoring our relationship with God, no other way to remove the curse from Adam and Eve's sin, no other way of salvation from this present evil age, no other way to become spiritual, no other way to be transformed to walk in love, and no other Messiah sent from God for this purpose, but only the Gospel message that Paul had previously preached to them about the Lord Jesus Christ, the true Messiah, and what He had accomplished on our behalf through His death and resurrection, and which is only attained by us through faith as a free gift from God.

I thought that it would be valuable for us to look at the main underlying components that support the Gospel so that we can protect ourselves from unknowingly turning to any other proposed "different"

gospel. Paul touches on these components throughout his letter to the Galatians. Let's consider some of these:

The Truth

"You were running so well; who hindered you from obeying the truth?" Gal. 5:7

The Gospel is based upon the truths that have been revealed in the Bible. We must be very clear about how we establish truth in our mind, or the Gospel can potentially become compromised or even abandoned. Truth should be established through recognizing the authority of God's revelation in the Holy Scriptures. The writings of the Bible are not mere writings of men, but are revelations inspired by the Holy Spirit.

"And we also have the more sure prophetic word, which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts; knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation (or origin), for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit." 2 Peter 1: 19-21

We must remember that there are very few things in this life that we can rely on as being absolute truth. We cannot trust the teachings of men as being absolute truth, although they may perhaps contain some portion of truth that may apply to some circumstances. At best, any truths coming from men are limited in their scope to this physical realm, as well as limited to our recent time frame; anything beyond that is guess work and unreliable.

Many of us are able to hear from God by listening to the still, small voice that speaks to us for guidance and encouragement. Although I encourage this type of communication with God, I also must caution you that this is not the same type of anchor for our soul as the absolute, authoritative truth that comes from the Scriptures. Our natural minds often interfere with our ability to hear the Holy Spirit's communication and therefore we must always check our understanding of what God is speaking to our hearts against the Biblical truths which are absolute.

As a side note, I recently read a beautiful story about a Christian woman who saw a homeless man outside of her grocery store and wanted to buy some food for him. The Holy Spirit spoke to her and said she should buy him bananas and some protein bars. She wanted to buy him some fried chicken instead, thinking it would warm him up, but she listened to the inner spiritual voice and didn't get the chicken. When she gave the man the bananas and protein bars, he was very grateful. Immediately after giving them to him, there came another woman with some fried chicken for the man, much to the original woman's surprise and joy, bringing her to tears. She thought how great it was that God had a concern for this homeless man in this way.

It is a beautiful thing to be able to hear from God directly, but we must not use it for determining the absolute truth that establishes our understanding of life and that anchors our soul. Only God's Word, the Bible, can be the authoritative source for our truth, and the source for the Gospel message. Be warned that following your heart or the teachings of men without the guidance of Scriptures can lead you astray into the error of false gospels.

True Faith

“Now it is evident that no person is justified (declared righteous and brought into right standing with God) through the Law, for the Scripture says, The man in right standing with God [the just, the righteous] shall live by and out of faith and he who through and by faith is declared righteous and in right standing with God shall live. But the Law does not rest on faith [does not require faith, has nothing to do with faith], for it itself says, He who does them [the things prescribed by the Law] shall live by them [not by faith].” Gal. 3: 11 – 12 (Amplified Bible)

The situation that Paul was confronting at Galatia was about religious Jews who were attempting to recruit the Galatian Christians to Judaism and to follow the Jewish religious rituals and practices, focusing on the Mosaic laws. The problem with this, as Paul pointed out, is that being “religious”, that is, focusing on keeping a set of regulations and adhering to ritual practices, does not require faith. In other words, a purely "religious" person's “life” comes from following religious regulations and practices; this is what gives them satisfaction and comfort, relieves their guilt, and makes them feel like they are accepted by God. Unfortunately, when we focus our lives on keeping religious rules, rituals and regulations, it puts us into bondage because there is no resulting spiritual growth produced from this activity. The bondage is a result of remaining focused on our "flesh"; only true faith can take us out of our fleshly focus.

In contrast, when we put our faith and trust in Jesus, and the promises of God, we have spiritual growth and are free from the bondage of the flesh. Our “life” comes from the reality of being true children of God and heirs of His kingdom. This is where our satisfaction and comfort come from: knowing that our relationship with God has been repaired, our sins forgiven, and our future home in heaven is secured for us and waiting. We look forward for the final return of our Savior and Lord, Jesus Christ, who will establish the final Kingdom here, including us with our resurrected, immortal bodies. This is the true faith that causes us to be born of the spirit and sets us free from the bondage of the flesh.

Be advised that any proposed gospel message that does not require faith and that keeps our focus on this physical world, and the material things within it, is an erroneous, false gospel. We will need discernment to recognize this because the proponents of these false messages will surely make the claim that the focus is spiritual and that faith is involved, but we must look deeper into the reality of true faith and true spirituality as defined by the Scriptures.

I believe that there are many “Christian” churches that have shifted the focus of their message to regulations and practices and have de-emphasized the need for true faith. It may not be explicitly stated in their doctrines and preaching from the pulpit, but it is communicated by other means, requiring the congregation to focus on church attendance, donations, volunteer work, participation in church functions, etc, rather than having the main emphasis and focus on true faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. We need to be careful not to fall back into flesh based activity, but rather remain in a place that focuses our affections on spiritual things, requiring our faith to be strong.

Hope

“But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a custodian; for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise.” Gal. 3: 25-29

The truth of the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ has as its main focus the hope that we have in the future promise of eternal life in heaven with a resurrected body, living in the glory of the kingdom of God as His children with an inheritance waiting for us. This hope allows us to shift our affections from this physical world, which feeds our flesh, to the spiritual world that causes our spirit to come to life. The concept of being “in Christ” means that we have removed ourselves from this physical world in our minds and hearts, having put our flesh to death by dying with Christ. This is the true power of the Gospel message; no other message is needed since this blessed hope with its transforming power is fully available through Jesus Christ as proclaimed in the Bible.

“Now we, brethren, like Isaac, are children of promise.” Galatians 4: 28

Love

“For through the Spirit, by faith, we wait for the hope of righteousness. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is of any avail, but faith working through love.” Galatians 5: 5-6

In the above two verses in chapter 5 of Galatians, Paul reaches the climax of his letter, culminating his warnings and arguments with the fact that what really matters is “faith working through love”. So we see that if we embrace the truth of the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, and place our faith in what has been promised to us as children of the living God, our hope is then established, our flesh no longer rules our lives but rather we shift to becoming spiritual beings, new creations, with the realistic power to walk in love. Love is the goal; if we are not able to love then something is wrong – something is missing. In that case perhaps we need to re-examine the gospel that we have accepted to make sure that it aligns with the true Gospel as revealed in the Bible.

A few verses later, Paul again reinforces the concept of love. He shows them that the essence of the law is really about love:

“For the whole law is fulfilled in one word, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’. Galatians 5: 14

In the amplified Bible, the word “fulfilled” is replaced with the phrase “complied with”, which I think better explains that we can’t just ignore the law completely, but rather, if we are truly walking in love we will be complying with all the precepts of the law. Again I say that the problem with the law is that if we focus on the law by itself and pursue abiding by its precepts without true faith, then we will not, and in fact cannot, become spiritual, and therefore cannot walk in love. Without true faith we cannot adhere to the law.

“For if a Law had been given which could confer [spiritual] life, then righteousness and right standing with God would certainly have come by Law.” Galatians 3: 21b (Amplified)

For Christians the key is to become spiritual; if we are spiritual, we will be able to walk in love with the law written on our heart. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul explicitly states this need for spirituality in our battle against the desires of the flesh that hinder our ability to love.

“But I say, walk by the Spirit, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you would.” Galatians 5: 16-17

When he says “doing what you would” I believe that equates to walking in love.

Be warned though that you must make sure that you have the correct biblical definition of love (not the world's definition), and likewise, the correct biblical definition of being spiritual. Many religions use the term spiritual and love to describe their activities, but these do not align with God's meaning as revealed in His Scriptures. Seek Him to help you gain the true understanding of these!

I encourage you to prayerfully read the entire book of Galatians for there are many other truths brought out in this letter that can help us in our walk with the Lord.

Section 3: The Fundamentals of Christianity for Maturity and Spirituality

The Circumcision of Christ and Baptism

“In Him also you were circumcised with a spiritual circumcision, by putting off the body of the flesh in the circumcision of Christ;” Colossians 2:11

In order to understand the circumcision of Christ we first need to define this internal, spiritual circumcision, and then, we will need to explain how this spiritual circumcision is connected with the Lord Jesus Christ. In other words, we must answer the question. "Why is Paul calling this the circumcision of Christ? We will be looking directly to the Scriptures for these truths.

In the book of Romans, Paul establishes that true circumcision is internal. He states that true circumcision is an internal spiritual occurrence that was “symbolized” by the external, physical act of circumcision.

Paul’s statement about true circumcision is found in Roman’s chapter 2:

“For a person is not a Jew (true believer) who is one outwardly, nor is true circumcision something external and physical. Rather, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly, and real circumcision is a matter of the heart—it is spiritual and not literal. Such a person receives praise not from others but from God.”

Romans 2: 28-29

Moses, earlier in the Old Testament, confirms this concept that true circumcision was internal:

“Circumcise, then, the foreskin of your heart, and do not be stubborn any longer.” Deuteronomy 10:16

Next we must determine the nature of this internal, spiritual, non-literal change that Paul spoke of. Likewise, we need to consider what Moses means when he says to "circumcise (or cut away) the foreskin of our heart"? To understand this, we must look to Abraham, whom God used to first institute the sign of circumcision. We find the answer in Romans chapter 4:

“He (Abraham) received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the ancestor of all who believe without being circumcised and who thus have righteousness reckoned to them, and likewise the ancestor of the circumcised who are not only circumcised but who also follow the example of the faith that our ancestor Abraham had before he was circumcised.” Romans 4:11-12

Paul is emphasizing that Abraham’s physical circumcision represented the faith that he had placed in God’s promise. The internal, spiritual change that occurred in Abraham’s heart was that he believed God’s promise fully and completely, therefore, God wanted to symbolize this change by the outward physical act of circumcision.

Romans 4 goes on to explain more explicitly the type of faith that he had.

In Romans 4:18 it says this:

“In hope he believed against hope,”

I see this as indicating that Abraham believed God’s promise even when the physical circumstances suggested that the promise was unlikely to happen or even impossible. For Abraham, he and Sarah were advanced in years and Sarah's womb was barren, yet he believed that God was able to fulfill His promise of making him the father of many nations. (See Romans 4 for more info on this)

Then in verse 20 it says:

“No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.”

The key words in this verse are “fully convinced”, meaning that he was completely committed to what God had promised. His faith was such that he had completely severed himself from any other promises that the physical world had offered to him and was focused completely on the promise of God. The word "waver" means "to feel or show doubt or indecision; or to vacillate"; Abraham was "all in" on God's promise.

Abraham's faith was based completely on God's words and he did not allow what he could see from his physical surroundings and circumstances to cause him to doubt. His life and future were completely aligned with his faith since he was fully convinced that God was going to fulfill His promise to him. His heart was pure in its focus on God's promise.

Abraham, much like us in our previous life, had been focused on the things that this world has to offer before God made His promise to him. He was living with his extended family, including the families of his father and uncle. He had been accumulating wealth and establishing himself there. When God spoke the promise to him, He also told him to leave his father's family and in faith Abraham obeyed, severing himself from his previous hopes, looking completely to God's promises. This is confirmed in the book of Hebrews:

"By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God." Hebrews 11: 8-10

We see then that the external physical cutting away of the fleshly foreskin symbolized the internal cutting away of Abraham's hope in the world's promises, shifting his focus and hope to the promise of God. Abraham had, by faith, removed his carnal dependency on the world and replaced it with a spiritual dependency on God and what He had promised to him.

Up until now we have been discussing the circumcision that was instituted by God based on Abraham's faith, but we must now look at how this relates to Christ Jesus and why Paul made reference in Colossians to the "circumcision of Christ" and not the "circumcision of Abraham."

Looking back to Colossians chapter 2, we find more information regarding this. In the Amplified version, there is additional information that we need to look at, specifically looking at verse 12 of chapter 2 (following the above quoted verse 11):

"[Thus you were circumcised when] you were buried with Him in [your] baptism, in which you were also raised with Him [to a new life] through [your] faith in the working of God [as displayed] when He raised Him up from the dead." Colossians 2:12

A footnote in the Amplified Bible for this verse says this:

"The aorist tense puts the burial as contemporaneous (occurring at the same time) with the circumcision."

In other words, the original language connects our circumcision with the act of baptism, clearly stating that the internal spiritual change that had occurred for Abraham when he fully believed in God's promise should now occur in us and is symbolized by our baptism. This internal change is represented symbolically by our physical, external actions during our baptism when we were buried with Christ while immersed in the water, thus putting off the body of flesh, dying with Christ to this world and dying to

our old sinful nature with its ties to this world and the associated passions and desires that feed our flesh. Additionally, when coming up out of the baptismal water, we considered ourselves to be raised with Christ, as a new creature, as a citizen of heaven, and as being a part of God's kingdom.

The circumcision of Christ is the internal change that occurs in a Christian when we place our full confidence in what God has promised to us in Christ Jesus, that is, eternal life in heaven with a new, resurrected, eternal body. We must exercise, as Abraham did, faith in God's stated promise since we do not see any evidence in our surroundings or in our circumstances to support the fulfillment of this promise, but rather it is all a matter of our faith and trust in God. Additionally, also like Abraham, we must endure without wavering in this faith, becoming stronger and stronger in our commitment to God's promise.

As we place our hope in the promise of heaven, shifting our focus away from the hope we had in the promises in this world, we are also set free from the bondage of sin in our life. Yes, this is why this internal change, the circumcision of Christ, is so critical for us.

Remember that our sin is directly linked to the desires and longings that we have for the physical things of this world that feed our flesh. When we sever our ties to this world, when we shift our affections towards heaven, when we store up our riches in heaven, and when we place our hopes fully on our future in heaven, we are set free from these passions and desires that are the root of our sinful behavior. The physical things of this world no longer have an importance to us. We no longer care about our reputation here on earth, nor about our security, our successes, or our happiness here on earth that comes from these physical things. Instead, our joy comes from the hope we have in heaven. We rejoice in our hope in Christ Jesus. He becomes the source of our fulfillment and our satisfaction. You must experience this to fully appreciate the profound change that occurs and the freedom that you have in Christ.

Paul clearly supports this view in his treatise in Romans. Here is the Amplified Bible's version of the part of Romans chapter 6 where he discusses our baptism and freedom from sin:

"What shall we say [to all this]? Are we to remain in sin in order that God's grace (favor and mercy) may multiply *and* overflow? Certainly not! How can we who died to sin live in it any longer? Are you ignorant of the fact that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? We were buried therefore with Him by the baptism into death, so that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glorious [power] of the Father, so we too might [habitually] live *and* behave in newness of life. For if we have become one with Him by sharing a death like His, we shall also be [one with Him in sharing] His resurrection [by a new life lived for God]. We know that our old (un-renewed) self was nailed to the cross with Him in order that [our] body [which is the instrument] of sin might be made ineffective *and* inactive for evil, that we might no longer be the slaves of sin. For when a man dies, he is freed (loosed, delivered) from [the power of] sin [among men]. Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him, because we know that Christ (the Anointed One), being once raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has power over Him. For by the death He died, He died to sin [ending His relation to it] once for all; and the life that He lives, He is living to God [in

unbroken fellowship with Him]. Even so consider yourselves also dead to sin *and* your relation to it broken, but alive to God [living in unbroken fellowship with Him] in Christ Jesus. Let not sin therefore rule as king in your mortal (short-lived, perishable) bodies, to make you yield to its cravings *and* be subject to its lusts *and* evil passions.” Romans 6: 1-12

The Scriptures are also very clear about the connection between our physically based desires and our sin. James explains it this way:

“No one, when tempted, should say, ‘I am being tempted by God’; for God cannot be tempted by evil and he himself tempts no one. But one is tempted by one’s own desire, being lured and enticed by it; then, when that desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and that sin, when it is fully grown, gives birth to death.” James 1: 13-15

Be aware that these desires come from this physical world and our connection to it. When we are living with our hopes and affections set on this physical world, then these desires are a part of our lives and come alive in us, taking a strong hold on our heart. But when we sever our connection to this world, when we consider ourselves to have died with Christ, then these desires are also dead, and therefore the root of our sins is dead.

Paul explains this concept of focusing or setting our minds on the flesh, or on the things of this physical world that are linked to our flesh, in Romans chapter 8:

“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 set their minds on the things of the Spirit. To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God’s law—indeed it cannot, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.” Romans 8: 6-8

We see that a spiritual circumcision occurs when we die with Christ and consider ourselves to be dead with Christ, severing our affections, hopes and desires from this world, focusing instead on God's promise of a future place in heaven with Christ, with our eternal, immortal body. This hope in the promise of God becomes our source of joy. We can feed our spirit by rejoicing in this hope and finding satisfaction in knowing that we have a secured place in heaven through Jesus Christ. With this new hope and new focus we now have the power to overcome the sin in our lives, since the root of our sins, that is, the desires that came from focus on this physical world, has been removed. This inward change is transformative and will impact our entire being, making us a new creation, with the old things passing away and all things becoming new in Christ.

Paul sums up this idea in the 3rd chapter of Colossians as follows:

“So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory. Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication,

impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry). On account of these the wrath of God is coming on those who are disobedient. These are the ways you also once followed, when you were living that life. But now you must get rid of all such things—anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator. In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all! As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.” Colossians 3: 1-17

We must be aware that our baptism is not a onetime exercise of “identifying” ourselves with the death and resurrection of Jesus at the time of our conversion and then it is over. No, this signifies the end of the old way of thinking and the start of the new way of thinking where we now identify or consider ourselves as dead with Christ to this world and to sin, and consider ourselves as alive to God and a part of the new life that is spiritual and eternal in heaven with Him. This is how we now walk and how we now think, everyday and in all our circumstances. This is the key to victory over our flesh and over sin in our lives. This is the real power of the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus.

This change that is symbolized by the Christian baptism (or the circumcision of Christ) is a major and fundamental truth that is a critical part of the Christian’s walk and victorious life. Paul refers to this principle in many of his letters to the churches as he argues against false teaching and false thinking. In Colossians chapter 2, he also questions their desire to go back to keeping the rituals of the Jewish regulations as a means for becoming a “true child of God”.

In Colossians 2:20 he uses this principle of considering yourself dead to this world and alive to Christ:

“Therefore if you died with Christ from the basic principles of the world, why, as though living in the world, do you subject yourselves to regulations...”

In Galatians, Paul is also dealing with Jews who are trying to bring back Jewish rituals to Christians, saying that Gentile Christians need to be circumcised to be truly righteous before God. Part of Paul’s rebuttal is to remind them that they have died to the law and have been crucified with Christ:

“For I through the law died to the law that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.” Galatians 2: 19-20

This change in the way that we think will not only give us the power to overcome our flesh, but it will also protect us from the lies and deceitfulness that false teachers and religious people will attempt to bring into our lives. We know that the devil wants to change the way that we think. He will always be attempting to undermine this powerful truth. We must keep the truth of our dying with Christ and living and walking in the Spirit as an important part of our thinking.

The Importance of Hope

In the 6th chapter of Hebrews, there is a very clear emphasis upon the importance of hope:

“It is our earnest wish that every one of you should show a similar keenness in fully grasping the hope that is within you, until the end. We do not want any of you to grow slack, but to follow the example of those who through sheer patient faith came to possess the promises.” Hebrews 6: 11-12 (J.B. Phillips)

The Holy Spirit used the writer of the book of Hebrews to encourage and exhort us to “fully grasp the hope that is within” us. In the New King James translation it’s worded thus:

“And we desire that each one of you show the same diligence to the full assurance of hope to the end” Hebrews 6:11

Just prior to the verses quoted above from Hebrews 6, there is a compliment regarding their labor of love towards other Christians. The Hebrews writer was encouraging them to show the same “diligence” or “keenness” in their efforts towards grasping the importance of their hope as they had towards loving other Christians.

We should heed this exhortation based simply on the authority of the Scriptures. I would like to look deeper, though, into the importance of the Christian’s hope. First, we need to understand hope from the Biblical perspective, making sure that we have not lost any of the meaning of this word from its original intent.

The Greek word translated as “hope” in the above quoted verses from Hebrews 6 is “elpis.” From Strong’s concordance it is defined as follows: “from a primary *élpō* (to anticipate, usually with pleasure); expectation (abstractly or concretely) or confidence:—(translated as) faith, hope.” Note that this same word is sometimes translated as “faith”. And so the meaning of hope, in the Biblical context, is “to anticipate with pleasure and to expect with confidence”.

Having a better understanding of the Biblical meaning of hope, we now need to answer this question regarding our hope: “What is the ‘object’ of this hope that is within us that we need to fully grasp?” We need to know who or what we are anticipating and confidently expecting. It is clear from the next few verses in Hebrews 6 that the object of our hope should be the promise of God (please read the entire chapter for the full context):

“...imitate those who through faith and patience inherit the *promises*.” (vs. 12)

“For when God made a *promise* to Abraham.....” (vs. 13)

“And so, after he had patiently endured, he obtained the *promise*.” (vs. 15)

The object of our hope (our anticipation with pleasure, our confident expectation) is the promise of God. But we need to be even more specific. What is it specifically that God has promised to us that is the object of our hope?

As we read on in Hebrews we find the answer:

“Thus God, determining to show more abundantly to the *heirs of promise* the immutability of His counsel confirmed it by an oath, that by two immutable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we might have strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold of the *hope* set before us. This *hope* we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast, and which enters the Presence behind the veil, where the forerunner has entered for us, even Jesus, having become High Priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.” Heb. 6: 17-20

And this.....

“But now He has obtained a more excellent ministry, inasmuch as He is also Mediator of a better covenant, which was established on *better promises*.” Heb 8:6

And....

“And for this reason He is mediator of the new covenant, by means of death, for the redemption of the transgression under the first covenant, that those who are called may receive *the promise of eternal inheritance*.” Heb. 9:15

Based on these Scripture verses, we see that the object of our hope is the promise of eternal inheritance that was established by our Lord Jesus Christ through His death and resurrection. His sacrifice on our behalf redeemed us from (or paid for to remove from our account) the penalty of God’s judgment. The resurrection of Jesus and His entrance into the presence of God the Father as a High Priest with His own blood have secured for us the promise of having eternal life in heaven.

The writer of Hebrews goes on to say this:

“...and (you) joyfully accepted the plundering of your goods, knowing that you have a better and an enduring possession for yourselves in heaven. Therefore, do not cast away your confidence, which has great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that after you have done the will of God, you may receive the *promise*.” Heb. 10: 34-36

Peter also calls attention to this important hope in his Biblical letter:

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again to a *living hope* through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. To an

inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, who are kept by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.” 1 Peter 1:3-5

And a few verses later, Peter exhorts us more about our hope:

“Therefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and rest your *hope* fully upon the grace that is to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ.” 1 Peter 1:13

The Scriptures have much to say about this Christian hope and I would encourage you to do a more thorough study surrounding this hope for yourself.

We have established now a clear definition of our Christian hope, but we have not talked about its importance. I draw your attention now again to the verse 19 of Hebrews 6:

“This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast....”

We see here that our hope in the promise of eternal life is an anchor for us so that when the wind and waves from life’s storms increase and threatens to carry us away we can hold fast in this hope. Consider how valuable this anchor is for us. And this anchor of hope needs to be in place now *before* the storm comes.

We must ask ourselves, “Are we truly anchored by our hope?” When was the last time that you have established or “fully grasped” this hope in the promises? When have you last thought about it? It should be a daily occurrence!

The Bible also reveals to us that we cannot have this hope in the promises without faith, but that our faith works in unison with our hope, as the writer of Hebrews confirms:

“Now faith is the assurance of things *hoped* for...” Heb. 11:1

And this from Romans:

“For we were saved in this hope, but hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one still hope for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we eagerly wait for it with perseverance.” Romans 8:24-25

Furthermore, we see in Romans that the very righteousness based on faith is directly related to our confident hope in what was promised in Jesus:

“But the righteousness based on faith says, ‘Do not say in your heart, “Who will ascend into heaven?” (that is, to bring Christ down), or “Who will descend into the abyss?” (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? ‘the word is near you, on your lips and in your heart’ (that is, the word of faith which we preach);” Romans 10:6-8

We know that the promise of God is that Jesus conquered death by being buried and then was resurrected and ascended into Heaven to secure a way and a place for us, our promised inheritance.

The above quoted verse from Romans states that the righteousness based on faith does not question this promise (bringing Christ up from the dead or down from heaven is questioning the promise!), but rather believes in the heart and confesses on the lips the confidence that this promise is true.

Allow me to again state this very clearly: Our way of faith, by which we are reckoned as righteous, is based on our confidently believing and confessing our hope in the promise of eternal life as was secured by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is the full assurance of hope that we need to fully grasp. This is the hope that is an anchor to our soul. Let's walk in the light of this hope, patiently enduring until the promise of eternal life is reached. Come quickly Lord Jesus!

The Fear of death Brings Hopelessness Resulting in Bondage

“...and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong bondage.” Hebrews 2:15

Fear and death have got to be two of the most negative words in the English language. In our western culture, we are encouraged to focus only on the positive things, but to avoid and ignore all things that we see as negative and to focus only on the positive is not healthy. If we continually ignore or suppress all the negative things in our life it will create an imbalance. There is a need for us to examine and understand some of these negative aspects of our life in order to properly deal with them. Facing these negative things requires courage and honesty. It requires a strength that must be developed over time, but if we are constantly pampering ourselves and protecting ourselves from anything negative we will never have the strength and courage to honestly confront the critical issues of our life.

We must be willing to honestly and courageously examine the reality of our death so that we can gain understanding about our life and about what will lead us to the after-life.

Let me first point out that it is not God's intention to place us in a position of fear. On the contrary, God wants to deliver us from fear:

“For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind.” 2 Timothy 1:7

And this:

“For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out ‘Abba, Father’.” Romans 8:15

Let's now look closer at Hebrews 2:15 (quoted above). First, we need to understand the broader context, that is, how it fits into the author's intentions in writing this letter. At a high level, the letter to the Hebrews begins by explaining the purpose and position of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Chapter 1 establishes that the life of Jesus was the means by which God has spoken to us; that He represents the very nature of God the Father and that He is in a position much higher and better than the angels of God.

Chapter 2 of Hebrews starts with some warnings about the seriousness of the message that Jesus communicated to us, and continues by defining His exalted position as glorified Lord, as well as defining the purpose for which He had come.

The definition of His purpose begins to be revealed in verse 9 of chapter 2:

“But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, for the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor, that He, by the grace of God, might taste death for everyone.” Hebrews 2:9

Here again is the same verse in a modern English translation:

“What we see is Jesus, after being made temporarily inferior to the angels and so subject to death, in order that he should, by God’s grace, taste death for every man, now crowned with glory and honor.” Hebrews 2:9 (J.B. Phillips)

In other words Jesus was purposely made human so that He could die. It was part of His purpose for coming.

Although more of His purpose for coming is explained in verses 10 to 13, let’s skip to verse 14, noting only that when “His children” is mentioned in verse 14, it is explained earlier that these are all those who God has drawn to Jesus or has opened their eyes to the truth of the Gospel.

“Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise partook of the same nature, that through death He might destroy him who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong bondage”. Hebrews 2: 14-15

Before considering the meaning of these verses, we must first look at the broader picture regarding death, the fear of death, and the devil.

Death is part of the curse that came about because of the sin of Adam and Eve. Because of their sin, all men must die, whereas, the original intention was for all men to live forever with access to the tree of life.

Also, the devil received some legal rights over humans as a result of their sin and the curse. Apparently, the devil also had the power of death, as is stated in verse 14 of Hebrews 2. It is not clear exactly what this implies, but we must at the very least acknowledge that there is a link between the devil and death.

We can also acknowledge that when a person comes to the realization of the inevitability of their death, it results in hopelessness and a feeling of vanity. Every human being is faced with the reality that all that they do will end with their death and that all that they accumulate will be left behind after they die. For the unbeliever, who has no guarantee that any further life exists after this one, so all could end at death, it is an even more hopeless situation.

King Solomon summed up this condition when he wrote the biblical book of Ecclesiastes almost 3,000 years ago. He said the following:

“What profit has a man from all his labor in which he toils under the sun? One generation passes away (dies) and another generation comes.” Ecclesiastes 1: 3-4

“I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and indeed, all is vanity and grasping for the wind.” Ecclesiastes 1: 14

“For there is no more remembrance of the wise than of the fool forever, since all that now is will be forgotten in the days to come, and how does the wise man die? As the fool!” Ecclesiastes 2: 16

“Then the dust will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it. Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, All is vanity.” Ecclesiastes 12: 7-8

Death is the greatest predicament that we face as humans. Death’s inevitability, and our lack of knowledge regarding the aftermath of death, are at the heart of every human’s worldview and philosophy of life. At some point in our life we were confronted with the reality of death and we somehow came up with a “solution” that gave us a reason to continue living. This “solution” then becomes the foundation for a person's worldview.

For most people, their “solution” is to enjoy life and pursue happiness during this life and not focus on the afterlife, but rather focus on enjoying this life to the fullest. This view has varying degrees where some have no regard whatsoever for the potential consequences of living a self-feeding lifestyle, where as others may limit their indulgence, knowing that it may cause issues, or have negative consequences, later in their life. Part of this worldview seems to include blocking out the reality of death or ignoring its inevitability.

The apostle Paul mentions this worldview in the 15th chapter of 1 Corinthians, saying that if there is no resurrection of the dead (as the Corinthians were mistakenly suggesting), and therefore no hope, then we should take the same approach as the wicked person or unbeliever does:

“If the dead are not raised, ‘Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die!’ Do not be deceived: ‘Bad company ruins good morals.’ Come to your right mind, and sin no more. For some have no knowledge of God. I say this to your shame.” 1 Cor. 15:32-34

The phrase, “Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die” in the verse above is quoted from the prophet Isaiah when the Lord was rebuking his people for their wicked behavior that included this self indulging attitude towards life (see Isaiah 22:13).

Let’s try to piece this all together at this point. My main point is that the fear of death can put us into bondage, and to follow on this, point out that it is Jesus, that is, what He accomplished by His death, who can sets us free from this bondage.

To summarize, we have noted that due to the fall of man in the Garden of Eden death has come upon all mankind and therefore all humans are faced with the reality that their life will end with death with the uncertainty surrounding this reality. This uncertainty produces some degree of fear in us. Most importantly, the reality of our ultimate death produces a hopelessness that must be addressed. Any approach to this hopeless situation outside of the hope that is offered by the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ puts us in a worldview that will lead to bondage.

Let's look closer at this bondage that results when a person encounters the reality of their own death and the attitude and worldview it produces in them.

One conclusion is that the devil has a legal ownership of your life due to this condition and that he can influence your life, putting you in slavery to sin. I believe this is true, but I also believe that in addition to his legal right to you, there is also the fact that having a focus on this world and the things of this world puts you in bondage to your flesh. Living a life that is focused mainly on producing happiness and pleasure in this life will put you into bondage. We understand that at the root of our sins is the desire for the things of this world to feed our flesh. As we examined earlier, the book of James states this fact:

"But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed, then when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and sin when it is full grown, brings forth death." James 1: 14-15

Hopelessness causes spiritual death. The fear and uncertainty of our death produces hopelessness in us and it will result in spiritual death. This spiritual death becomes an enslavement that we cannot correct on our own. We don't even recognize that this condition exists in us. All we know is that something is wrong and is causing pain and misery in our life as we become depressed and disillusioned in our hopelessness.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ offers hope that will release us from this bondage of hopelessness and therefore will bring about spiritual life in us.

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, who are kept by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time." 1 Peter 1: 3-5

For Christians, the direction we should take with regards to death is very clear. We should not have any fear of death whatsoever. In fact, we should welcome death as the apostle Paul did (I believe to be an example to us).

"For me to live is Christ and to die is gain." Philippians 1:21

My advice is as follows: First, we should be open and honest about the fact that one day in the future we will die. Our death should not be something that we block out of our minds, but rather, we should embrace the fact that upon our death our future hope of entering heaven will be fulfilled. As such, all fear of death should be removed from our thoughts. Of course it is understood with this approach to

death that we would have already established our future hope in the promise that God has made to us in Christ Jesus, that is, that we would have a resurrected immortal body and will have a place in His heavenly kingdom, a mansion built for us, along with any reward and treasure that will be awarded to us there due to our good works here on earth.

If we live our lives with this attitude towards death, with our hearts and affections focused on the next life, we will be completely and utterly free from the bondage of our flesh and the influence of the devil upon us. Our focus on the things that are above rather than the things on this earth will bring spiritual life to us. This is the true freedom that Jesus has brought to us by His death. He has guaranteed our position in His kingdom, having made a way for us to be restored to God the Father through His death. His death established and secured the promises of God's covenant with us, and it also set an example for us to follow. Jesus blazed the trail for us. He proved that God will raise up those who are His, just as He raised Him from the dead with a resurrected eternal body.

If you are in Christ you are free! Death has no power over you! Death is the end of our journey through this corrupted decaying world and the beginning of our life in paradise, where we should have been in the first place, had Adam and Eve not sinned. If you can grasp the reality of this you will find power for your life, and it will bring a deep joy. This is what is meant by rejoicing in our hope.

The apostle Paul knew the importance of having this hope established. He addressed it in his letter to the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians starting at chapter 15. Here's how he concluded the discussion on death and the resurrection:

"Now I say this, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Behold, I tell you a mystery; we will not all sleep, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For this perishable must put on the imperishable, and this mortal must put on immortality. But when this perishable will have put on the imperishable, and this mortal will have put on immortality, then will come about the saying that is written, 'Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?' The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law; but thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord." 1 Corinthians 15: 50-58

Paul knew that we need to understand that our current condition is temporary, and that our next life will be immortal. We need to know that our perishable, corruptible bodies that are under the curse will be replaced with imperishable immortal bodies. When this occurs the curse will be completely undone and death will have no power over us. This is the victory that we have. We need to walk and live in the reality of this victory.

Paul states a similar truth once again in his second letter to the Corinthians:

“For we know that if the earthly tent which is our house is torn down, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For indeed in this house we groan, longing to be clothed with our dwelling from heaven, inasmuch as we, having put it on, will not be found naked. For indeed while we are in this tent, we groan, being burdened, because we do not want to be unclothed but to be clothed, so that what is mortal will be swallowed up by life. Now He who prepared us for this very purpose is God, who gave to us the Spirit as a pledge. Therefore, being always of good courage, and knowing that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord— for we walk by faith, not by sight— we are of good courage, I say, and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord. Therefore we also have as our ambition, whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to Him. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.” 2 Corinthians 5: 1-10

Notice that he says very clearly that “we...prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be home with the Lord”, speaking of course about our death, confirming that we should be looking forward to being with the Lord. This is in stark contrast to those who are hopeless and fear death.

And again Paul has this to say in 1 Thessalonians:

“But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep, so that you will not grieve as do the rest who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus. For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of *the* archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore comfort one another with these words.” 1 Thessalonians 4: 13-18

Paul’s encouragement to those who may be grieving about their loved ones who have died also applies to the rest of us as Christians. It reinforces that fact that both those who have died and those who remain until Christ returns will all be raised up to meet Him in the air. Not only should we not grieve about those Christians who have passed on before us, but we too can be comforted and confident about the aftermath of our death, that we can look forward to sharing the glory of the Lord at His coming.

May the Lord grant you complete freedom from the fear of death, with the fullness of a living hope in our glorious future with Christ Jesus, so that you can have a deep and lasting joy.

God's Promise was Fulfilled in the Resurrection of Jesus

“And we declare to you glad tidings – that promise which was made to the fathers, God has fulfilled this for us their children, in that He has raised up Jesus.” Acts 13:32-33

In the 13th chapter of the book of Acts, it is recorded that Paul stood up in a synagogue in Antioch and gave a message regarding the Gospel, or good news, of Jesus Christ.

Paul starts by making it clear who he is addressing:

“Men of Israel, and you who fear God, listen.” Acts 13:16

Notice that Paul knew that he would be mostly addressing Jews, but he also knew that there were some God-fearing Gentiles (non-Jews) who were familiar with the Scriptures.

He started his message by giving a brief history of the people of Israel starting from the time of Moses and their deliverance from the bondage of Egypt, and ending with the time of David. Paul then establishes that Jesus was the Savior that was promised to be a descendant of David:

“From this man’s (David’s) seed according to the promise, God raised up for Israel a Savior – Jesus.” Acts 13:23

He then described how Jesus was confirmed to be the Savior and the Messiah by John the Baptist, then he explains that the prophecies concerning Jesus were fulfilled by His being condemned to death.

“And as John was finishing his course, he said, ‘Who do you think I am? I am not *He*. But behold, there comes One after me, the sandals of whose feet I am not worthy to loose.’” Acts 13: 25

After this, Paul takes the time to not only established the fact that Jesus was raised from the dead, after being buried in a tomb, but he also points out that Jesus appeared to many in resurrected form, and on many occasions, and that those who saw Him had attested to this fact. Paul also made it clear that not only was the resurrection of Jesus a fulfillment of prophecy, but it was a fulfillment of the promise that was made to the fathers of Israel, and was for the children (as quoted in the Scripture verse above – Acts 13: 32-33).

Paul concludes his message by making known to the listeners that the forgiveness of sins is offered through Jesus which would allow them to be justified before God:

“Therefore let it be known to you, brethren, that through this Man is preached to you the forgiveness of sins; and by Him everyone who believes is justified from all things from which you could not be justified by the law of Moses.” Acts 13: 38-39

Then Paul gives a final warning to any who would reject this message in disbelief, quoting a prophecy from the prophet Habakkuk.

“Beware, therefore, lest what is said in the Prophets should come about: ‘Look, you scoffers, be astounded and perish for I am doing a work in your days, a work that you will not believe, even if one tells it to you.’” Acts 13: 40-41

It is interesting that the Gentiles were more interested in Paul's message than the Jews. The Jews left the synagogue after Paul's message but the Gentiles stayed and begged Paul to return the next Sabbath and tell them more. (By the way, the next week the whole city showed up to hear Paul.)

The question I have regarding this account of Paul's preaching in the synagogue in Antioch is why did Paul put so much emphasis on the resurrection of Jesus when presenting the Gospel? Was this a one-time situation that Paul presented or was the resurrection an important part of the Gospel needing to be emphasized? I'm convinced that it is the latter, that Paul saw the resurrection as an important part of the Gospel. Sadly, it is also my observation that there is not enough emphasis placed on the resurrection when presenting the Gospel today in our western Christianity.

In the 15th chapter of 1st Corinthians, Paul makes it explicitly clear that the Gospel is centered on two events: First, that Jesus died for our sins. Second, that Jesus was raised from the dead and His resurrected body was witnessed by many.

"Moreover, brethren, I declared to you the Gospel.....For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day, according to the Scriptures, and was seen by Cephas, then by the twelve, after that He was seen by over five hundred at once...." 1 Cor. 15:1-6

My experience has been that when the Gospel is presented, it is mainly focused on the forgiveness of sins and justification, but the resurrection is only mentioned in passing or is totally disregarded. Why is this?

It is clear from the Scriptures that the resurrection is an integral part of the Gospel. Why? What makes the resurrection an important part of the Gospel?

Regarding Jesus being the promised Messiah, His resurrection establishes the fact that Jesus is now the living King who has ascended into Heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father, with all things placed under His authority. His resurrection and ascension into heaven were both witnessed and recorded. It then became clear that Jesus fulfilled the prophecies of not seeing corruption, and that He was the promised King of God's kingdom and of heaven who first needed to suffer and die at the hands of sinners, as prophesied, as a payment for the justification of believers.

"And we declare to you glad tidings—that promise which was made to the fathers. God has fulfilled this for us their children, in that He has raised up Jesus. As it is also written in the second Psalm: 'You are My Son, Today I have begotten You.' And that He raised Him from the dead, no more to return to corruption, He has spoken thus: 'I will give you the sure mercies of David.' Therefore He also says in another *Psalm*: 'You will not allow Your Holy One to see corruption.' For David, after he had served his own generation by the will of God, fell asleep, was buried with his fathers, and saw corruption; but He whom God raised up saw no corruption. Therefore let it be known to you, brethren, that through this Man is preached to you the forgiveness of sins; and by Him everyone who believes is justified from all things from which you could not be justified by the law of Moses." Acts 13: 32-39

Additionally, we see that the resurrection establishes our hope, and this is extremely critical. Paul knew that the resurrection of Jesus was the event that confirms to us the fact that all who are “in Christ” will also be resurrected in the future. This is the promise that we base our hope upon and is the focus of our faith.

Some of the Corinthians at the time of Paul's writing of 1st Corinthians were stating that there was not going to be a resurrection, and thus Paul's exhortation in chapter 15 was to correct this error:

“Now if Christ is preached that He has been raised from the dead, how do some among you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ is not risen. And if Christ is not risen, then our preaching is empty and your faith is also empty.” 1 Cor. 15: 12-14

What did Paul mean that their faith would be “empty”? He is saying that if the resurrection is not real, then we have no future hope and our faith is in vain (empty). In other words, our faith would have no value because in the end, what we were hoping and believing for would not come about.

Consider what Paul says next:

“Then also those who have fallen asleep (died) in Christ have perished. If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable.” 1 Cor. 15:18-19

The “good news” of the Gospel is that Jesus came to deliver us from the curse. He became a “curse” on our behalf so that the curse would be removed from us. Death is a part of the curse. Death, and the fear of death, has caused mankind to be in bondage and without hope. Most of mankind don't even recognize that this hopelessness is the root cause of their bondage. Jesus came to fulfill the promise made by God to deliver us from death, and deliver us from the bondage, and from the penalty of sin that results in death. The resurrection of Jesus Christ established the fact that those who are “in Christ” will also be resurrected to eternal life, thus establishing the hope of eternal life for all who are “in Christ” by faith in this promise. It is critically important that we shift our hope from the shallow false hope that the world offers us to this blessed hope of eternal life!

“But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep (died). For since by man came death, by Man also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive. But each one in his own order: Christ the first fruits, afterward, those who are Christ's at His coming. “ 1 Cor. 15:20-23

Placing our hope totally in this promise of eternal life and the promise of a resurrected body requires that we put to death our worldly hopes that are associated with our earthly, physical life. Dying to this world (with Christ) severs us from the strong desires and longings of our carnal nature, since they are rooted in this false worldly hope. We are then free to allow our spirit to grow and become a major influence in our life. This spiritual growth is mostly due to our focus on the hope of eternal life with Christ in heaven.

As you can see, this hope is critical to our maturity as Christians. We must also be sure to establish this hope as we communicate the Gospel to others so that they too can be set free from the hopelessness of death and have the hope in the promise of eternal life as an anchor to their soul.

For Christians the Goal is Love!

“...whereas the aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and sincere faith.” 1 Timothy 1: 5

The Bible is a book about love. Not only does it explicitly define love within its pages in terms that we can understand (especially the 13th chapter of the first letter to the Corinthians), but its very purpose is to restore our ability to walk in love, if we are willing to embrace and believe its revealed truths.

The Old Testament of the Bible explains the circumstances that have created the current state of mankind, that is, the sin of our first parents, Adam and Eve, and it then records how God set the stage for the coming of His Messiah who was sent to correct mankind’s fallen condition.

The New Testament is a record of the coming of the Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ, and His life and death, with the subsequent resurrection from the dead that re-established the Christian’s hope for eternal life and removed the curse caused by our first parents. The New Testament also records the activity of the early Christians as well as the teachings of the early church fathers, following the established message (the Gospel) that resulted from The Lord Jesus Christ’s first coming. These teachings also point to the hope of His final, second coming in the future that will culminate this age.

The first coming of Jesus was an act of love. He selflessly gave His life for mankind. He left His heavenly position and riches to become a common man so that we could be set free from the bondage of Satan and be redeemed from our inherited position in this cursed world. He paid a high price of suffering and death for our sins so that we can be forgiven by God the Father and welcomed back into the family of God. It was God’s mercy that caused this to come about – an act of love.

“For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.” John 3: 16

This act of mercy and love by God towards us (God’s grace) is intended to cause a change in us so that we can be free to love.

“Or do you presume upon the riches of His kindness and forbearance and patience? Do you not know that God’s kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?” Romans 2: 4

The true follower of Christ has set as their goal to become more and more like Him. We desire to be changed into His image. We use His life as an inspiration and a definition of how we should live.

“...looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider Him who endured from sinners such hostility against Himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.” Hebrews 12: 2-3

Unfortunately the world that we live in has twisted and perverted the meaning of the word “love” so that it now is more associated with sexuality, romantic feelings, and strong attractions towards someone or something. But the Bible says that God is love. His very nature defines love, and Jesus Christ displayed in human form the nature of God.

“He (Jesus) reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of His nature...” Hebrews 1: 3

Herein lies a very important truth, that is, that in order for us to walk in this true love as revealed in the Bible and defined by the life of Jesus Christ, we must become spiritual. We must be born again of the Spirit. Godly love is spiritual, so if we are carnal (i.e. focused on our flesh and this world) we cannot walk in this love. Conversely, if we become spiritual, we will by nature be able to walk in love.

Paul’s message to his protégé Timothy is quite revealing along the lines of this discussion of love. While directing Timothy to correct the false teachings or misguided focus of certain persons within Timothy’s circle of influence, Paul clearly states the goal of the Christian Gospel as love, and also expounds on the underlying source of this type of love. As quoted above:

“...whereas the aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and sincere faith.” 1 Timothy 1: 5

Or as the J.B. Phillips translation reads:

“The ultimate aim of the Christian ministry, after all, is to produce love which springs from a pure heart, a good conscience and a genuine faith.”

Notice the explanation that this type of love “issues from” or is the natural result of the following three things: 1) a pure heart, 2) a good conscience and 3) a sincere faith.

Regarding a pure heart, the original Greek word for pure refers to purification by fire, much like gold is purified by melting and removing the dross. It suggests a clean and purified heart and mind. This aligns with the idea of having a “circumcised” heart where the fleshly part of the heart is cut away and removed. As we have discussed earlier regarding this process of circumcision, the core idea is to shift our hope and focus from the things that this world offers us to focus on the heavenly promise that God has offered to us that becomes our “living” hope. This shift of focus from earthly things to heavenly things is the key to being transformed from carnally minded to spiritually minded.

“Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind” Romans 12:2

“If you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hid with Christ in God.” Colossians 3: 1-3

With regards to a good conscience, I find it troubling that there is not much taught or said about the importance of our conscience in the western Christian churches. And yet it is our conscience that should be guiding our actions. Our conscience can either accuse or excuse us about thoughts and actions – and this is a critical part of having “the law written on our hearts” and “doing by nature what the law requires.”

“When Gentiles (non- Jewish converted Christians) who have not the law (the Mosaic law taught to them since their youth as the Jews have been) do by nature what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness and their conflicting thoughts accuse or perhaps excuse them...” Romans 2: 14-15 with my comments in parenthesis

Before coming to Christ, our conscience was scarred and damaged from the world and it must be restored and put to use as we walk in love. We need to be sensitive to the working of our conscience allowing our thoughts to guide us, understanding that our conscience is influenced by the Holy Spirit who now lives within us. This healthy conscience is a vital key to walking in love.

Lastly, it is our faith that causes us to be truly spiritual and therefore transforms us so that we can have a love nature within us. It only stands to reason that it would require faith to be able to “set our minds on things above” as suggested in Colossians 3 as quoted above. How can we hope for these unseen spiritual things without faith? It is our sincere, genuine faith that allows us to become spiritual and therefore is a key factor in being able to walk in love.

“Now faith is the assurance (the confirmation, the title deed) of things [we] hope for, being the proof of things [we] do not see and the conviction of their reality [faith perceiving as real fact what is not revealed to the senses].” Hebrews 11: 1 (Amplified Bible)

We need the Holy Spirit to help us to incorporate these truths in our life and Christian walk so that we can attain to this goal/aim of walking in love. Consider again this beautiful definition of love from Paul’s letter to the Corinthians as inspired by the Holy Spirit:

“Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing. Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails. But whether there are prophecies, they will fail; whether there are tongues, they will cease; whether there is knowledge, it will vanish away. For we

know in part and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect has come, then that which is in part will be done away. When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known. And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love.” 1 Corinthians 13: 1-13

Does Willpower and Desire Produce Righteousness?

“I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but it is not enlightened. For, being ignorant of the righteousness that comes from God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God’s righteousness. For Christ is the end of the law, that everyone who has faith may be justified.” Romans 10: 2-4

The answer is no, willpower and desire alone will not produce righteousness, but only a true, living faith that is focused upon the promises that God presented to us through His Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ, can produce in us a Godly righteousness (literally in our actions, not just a positional righteousness from applying the righteousness of Christ).

Here’s what the Bible has revealed and what works: True faith in our living hope will produce Godly love. Remember that this Godly love is the equivalent to Godly righteousness since all the law and all the prophets are summed up in the commandment to love God with all your heart and mind and to love your neighbor as yourself.

I remind you regarding this relationship between love and righteousness that if you are walking in true, Godly love you will be fulfilling the Godly demands of righteousness because you will be doing all the things that the law requires. Some have mistakenly thought that in the New Testament the law doesn’t matter because it is “replaced” by love, meaning that as long as we are acting in a way that we consider to be within the confines of love we don’t need to be concerned about following God’s laws. On the contrary, we should be looking for the inverse of this, that is, if we are not following God’s laws then we do not have a true, Godly love.

“Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, ‘You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet’; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.” Romans 13: 8-10

A foolish man may consider it okay to commit adultery or fornication because he is acting in “love” since he feels a “love” towards the woman and his sexual activity is based on his “love” for the women. What about the love for the woman’s husband or the love for God and His directives for His creation?

Wouldn’t these outweigh the man’s condition of love? (It is most likely that his real motive is a passion for sexual pleasure and not love.)

In a sense, the commandments of God define love. His laws have a purpose and not for His benefit but for ours. We may not see the direct connection to love, but they are intended to be aligned with the goal of true love towards God and towards our fellow man.

The Scriptures also reveal to us that the law is spiritual, and therefore we must be spiritual to keep the law and we must be spiritual to love.

“We know that the law is spiritual;” Romans 7:14

If you are not spiritual (i.e. if your mind is set on the flesh) you cannot keep God’s laws, according to the Scriptures:

“For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God’s law, indeed it cannot; and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.” Romans 8:7-8

And 1 John chapter 2 confirms this:

“Do not love the world or the things in the world. If any one loves the world, love for the Father is not in him.” 1 John 2:15

Loving this world and the things of this world is the opposite of being spiritual.

My key point: It is a major error for Christians to focus on their willpower and determination for keeping God’s laws and being righteous, putting their energies into increasing their determination to do what is right, and into feeding their zeal and strong desire to do what is right, if they have not first focused on becoming spiritual. I repeat: a carnal man cannot keep God’s laws! This is the stumbling block, to attempt to bypass faith, since it is only by faith that we become spiritual and only becoming spiritual can we then keep the law and walk in love.

We see the Israelites as a prime example of this error. They knew the law of God and had a strong desire to keep the law. They focused their energy towards keeping the law (e.g. the Pharisees), and yet they failed to do so. Why did they fail? Because they did not pursue it through faith!

“..but that Israel who pursued the righteousness which is based on law did not succeed in fulfilling that law. Why? Because they did not pursue it through faith, but as if it were based on works. They have stumbled over the stumbling-stone,” Romans 9: 31-32

The apostle Paul also defines this condition of desiring to keep the law but being unable to do so. He was trapped in a cycle of sin and death. In his mind he agreed with the law and wanted to keep it, but in his actions he found that he always failed.

“I can will what is right but I cannot do it.” Romans 7:19

“Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?” Romans 7:24

Paul was delivered from “this body of death” by being born again of the Spirit through Jesus Christ our Lord. Paul defines this new principle of becoming spiritual by faith that produces righteousness in Chapter 8:

“For the law (principle) of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set me free from the law (principle) of sin and death.” Romans 8:2

The solution to the cycle of death is the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus. This is how we exercise our faith and then become spiritual.

“For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.” Romans 8:3-4

When a man is carnal, even if he knows and agrees with the law, or even if he sets his energy towards keeping the law through sheer determination and will power, he will fail. The law is weakened by the flesh, meaning if you are in the flesh you can't be changed even if you know the desired result of the change (i.e. righteousness).

The original Greek word for condemned in the verse above means “to remove the power of” or “to break its deadly harm” meaning that through Jesus we can be free from the cycle of sin and death caused by our being focused on the flesh. Through Jesus we die to the flesh and become born again to the spirit.

“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 set their minds on the things of the Spirit. To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law—indeed it cannot, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.” Romans 8: 5-8

The focus of our energy should be on becoming spiritual. We need to understand how to set our minds on the things of the Spirit so that we can become spiritual as the scriptures direct us. This is clearly the key to having the righteousness of God (not by willpower or desire).

“So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh— for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.” Romans 8: 12-13

Above I quoted Romans 10: 2 where it said that the Israelites “had zeal for God but it was not enlightened.” We too can have a zeal for God, but if we don't understand how to become spiritual, or how to put to death the deeds of the body by the Spirit, then we too will fail as they did.

I have been in Christian gatherings where well meaning Christians have confessed that they were struggling in areas of their life with sin, but their solution was that they just needed to be more

determined to do the right thing, or that they just needed to direct more willpower towards doing the right thing. This solution is misguided and erroneous; it's not scriptural but rather is contrary to the enlightenment of the scriptures. The solution is to put to death the area of the flesh that is at the root of the sin. The solution is to set the mind on the spirit, not the flesh. The focus needs to be on true faith and true spirituality, not on determination and will power.

Unfortunately, these ideas of being spiritual are foreign to today's western Christians. They are so embedded in this world and the ways of this world that they would be clueless as to the real meaning of walking in the spirit and not in the flesh, and would therefore just write this solution off. The teachings that promote material "blessings" and prosperity, or that focus on earthly dominion and political positioning are not making Christians spiritual, but rather, are keeping them carnal.

I have also heard preachers emphasize the importance of having a hunger for righteousness, and that this is the key to being victorious or to being justified and accepted by God. Is this supported by the scriptures? Clearly some of the scripture I have quoted in this message contradicts that idea. Having a zeal for the law or a hunger and desire in your mind to keep the law does not amount to any tangible change that would result in righteous behavior. The danger of this approach is that by focusing on this hunger or desire you will be distracted from focusing on exercising the kind of faith that will make you spiritual.

In summary we see that true faith, that is, the faith that causes us to die with Christ to the things of this world and to die to the hopes that this world has to offer us, a faith that causes us to set our hearts and minds on the future hope that we have in being raised with Christ to a new heavenly kingdom with Jesus Christ as Lord and King, this living faith will transform us from being carnally minded people to being spiritually minded people. As we walk in the spirit we will not fulfill the deeds of the flesh, but rather will put them to death. As spiritual people we will have the law written on our hearts and will do by nature what the law requires, walking in the true Godly love that fulfills the law and commandments of God.

I urge you therefore to search the scriptures to confirm the proper means for becoming spiritual, while prayerfully asking the Holy Spirit to enlighten you to these truths.

The desire to do what is right and the determination and willpower to keep God's commandments will have limited results, if any, and will ultimately distract you from becoming spiritual through dying to this world and to our flesh, or being crucified with Christ. Paul addressed a similar issue in Colossians where some were focused on keeping physically based regulations as a means of becoming more righteous:

"Therefore, if you died with Christ from the basic principles of the world, why, as though living in the world, do you subject yourselves to regulations— 'Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle,' which all concern things which perish with the using— according to the commandments and doctrines of men? These things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, false humility, and neglect of the body, but are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh." Colossians 2: 20-23

Note that he states clearly that the indulgence of the flesh is not stopped by focusing on restricting your actions using your willpower (i.e. submitting to regulations). Immediately following these verses, Paul gives us the real solution to indulgence of the flesh, and although I have quoted this portion of Scripture multiple times above, I will do so again because its message is so important:

“If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. On account of these the wrath of God is coming. In these you too once walked, when you were living in them. But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.” Colossians 3: 1-10

It is only by setting our minds on the things above that we can put to death the earthly things in us.

I like how the New King James Version translates Galatians 5: 16:

“I say then: Walk in the Spirit and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh” Galatians 5: 16

This is the true path to a Godly righteousness and it is sorely needed by today’s western Christians.

The Righteous Shall Live By Faith

“Behold, he whose soul is not upright in him shall fail, but the righteous shall live by his faith.” Habakkuk 2:4

It is indisputable that a person who has a genuine, living faith will also have good works in their life. Chapter 2 of the book of James in the Bible states this very clearly. Here are the pertinent verses:

“So what does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him? (The implied answer is no.)....Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead....For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.” James 2:14,17,26
(comments in parenthesis are mine - Please read the entire chapter for context)

Let me be extremely clear. If it is true that a person with a “dead” faith is absent of good works then someone with a “living” faith *must* have good works in their life. Correct? Yes. A person who has a genuine, true, living faith must also have good works; and a person who does not have good works in their life, but claims to have faith, their faith is dead, or untrue, or disingenuous (and, in fact, can’t save them).

Next we must ask the question, “What is the relationship between a person’s faith and their good works?” Are the two separate items with no inter-dependency? Is the Biblical message that a person who has genuine faith just needs to make sure that they do good works, focusing solely on their efforts to do good works? Or, is there a relationship between their faith and the works, with one dependent on the other? I would say the latter, that a true “living” faith will **produce** good works in a person. So not only must a living faith be accompanied by good works, but we must realize that if we are walking with a true living faith it will result in giving us the ability to do good works. The living faith is the source of the good works.

I remind you that focusing solely on works is the error that the Israelites made prior to the coming of Jesus, as we covered earlier. Paul points this out in Romans 9 that they were focused on works of the law only and did not recognize the importance of faith as the source:

“But Israel, pursuing the law of righteousness, has not attained the law of righteousness. Why? Because they did not seek it by faith, but as it were, by works of the law. For they stumbled at that stumbling stone.” Romans 9:31-32

Let’s look at this relationship between faith and works. First, we must examine what is meant by “works” in the verses from James. There are examples given in the 2nd chapter, one being an example of meeting the needs of a brother or sister (fellow believing Christian) that is destitute:

“If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Depart in peace, be warmed and filled,’ but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit?” James 2:16

And there is another example of Abraham obeying the Lord and offering up his only son Isaac as a sacrifice:

“Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar? Do you see that faith was working together with his works and by works faith was made perfect?” James 2:21-22

Recognize that these were just examples of good works, and that there are many other types of good works that could have been referenced by James.

In general, James cited two examples, the first where Abraham showed his love towards the Lord by his obedience, and the second where Christians had shown their love towards others by meeting their needs when they were destitute. We see the need for a love towards God and also the need for love towards our neighbor. So the real result that we are looking for is love. Good works are the equivalent of walking in love.

And so we see that a genuine living faith will produce good works in a person that are equivalent to them having a divine love that fulfills the law. This should make sense to us as we consider the promise that God made in the New Covenant that He will “write the law on our hearts.”

“For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put My laws in their mind and write them on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.” Hebrews 8:10

And this...

“Love does no harm to a neighbor, therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.” Romans 13:10

We must also consider that the law of God is spiritual, and therefore, in order to align ourselves and our actions with God’s law (i.e., have it written in our minds and on our hearts) we must become spiritual.

“For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am carnal, sold under sin.” Romans 7:14

In the past, before coming to Christ, we were a part of the world system, functioning in our flesh and carnal by nature. We then exercised our faith in the Gospel of Jesus Christ and put to death our old nature with its dependencies on the world system and we crucified our flesh with its desires and longings for the things of this world that fed our passions and pleasures. We died with Christ and became “born again of the Spirit” making us spiritual by nature. We also know that the fruit of the Spirit is love.

“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, long-suffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law. And those who are Christ’s have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live in the Spirit let us also walk in the Spirit.” Galatians 5:22-25

This process that I have just explained, that transforms a person through the exercising of their genuine, living faith in the Gospel of Jesus Christ and causes them to become spiritual by nature with the law of God written on their minds and hearts, is the righteousness of God.

“For in it (the Gospel of Jesus Christ) the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, ‘He who through faith is righteous shall live.’” Romans 1:17

Equating the righteousness of God to this process of faith producing good works/love may be confusing to you. Your confusion may be a result of the fact that we have been taught (erroneously) in many western Christian circles that the only “righteousness” that a Christian has is what is gained by “positional righteousness” by applying the righteousness of Christ to our lives, and that any “righteousness” that we have of our own is but “filthy rags” to God (based on Isaiah 64:6). With this view our faith is focused only on believing that we are forgiven and justified by the blood of Jesus, and it is this faith that saves us. For some it is also taught that a Christian cannot possibly be “righteous” or holy, but can only be “righteous” by position, by applying the righteousness of Christ to themselves by faith.

Let me be clear about this. We are NOT justified or accepted by God based on our own good works or merits, this is clear in the Scriptures, but the faith that we exercise that DOES cause us to be justified and accepted by God needs to be a living faith. If it is a dead faith it cannot save us (see James 2:14 quoted above). Therefore, we must have good works in our lives; we must be walking in love and fulfilling the

law by having it written on our hearts and minds. Does this mean that we will never sin? No, but we must be working towards the complete elimination of sin from our lives and any blatant sin needs to be corrected. Most importantly, we need to be dead to our flesh. We need to be transformed from being carnal to being spiritual (understanding the meaning of this from the Biblical sense).

James also explains in chapter 2 of his letter that Abraham's good works needed to confirm his faith to complete his justification before God. This is stated very clearly:

"Do you want to be shown, you foolish fellow, that faith apart from works is barren? Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he offered his son Isaac upon the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by works, and the scripture was fulfilled which says, 'Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness'; and he was called the friend of God. You see that **a man is justified by works and not by faith alone.**" James 2:20-24

Allow me to now explain what I mean by saying that the righteousness of God is revealed in this process of having a living faith that produces good works and love in a person by producing in them a spiritual nature.

I have been putting the word righteousness in quotes because I believe that the meaning has been changed over the years and that this also could be causing some confusion in some people's minds. The Greek word that is translated as righteousness in the New Testament (e.g. in Romans 1:17 quoted above) is "dikaiosyne" meaning "the virtue or quality or state of him who is such as he ought to be, righteousness, the condition acceptable to God." The original English word was "rightwise" with the suffix "wise" denoting "manner, position, direction" and used in words like "crosswise, lengthwise or coined in words like marketwise or saleswise." With this understanding, I see the word representing a person doing what they ought to be doing according to God's direction and guidance; a person who is doing the right thing!

My main point is that God, as revealed in His Scriptures, places a high importance on faith. More specifically, He places an importance on a genuine, living faith that produces a change in a person's mind and heart so that they will act in love, producing good works towards God, in obedience to His will for them, and also good works towards their neighbor by truly loving them unselfishly. God has revealed that this faith is what we ought to be practicing and exercising as His children. This is what we ought to be doing and by having this faith we are acceptable to God the same as Abraham was acceptable by his faith and resulting good works.

Clearly, the true righteousness of God is that we live and walk in the faith that produces love. Thus we see the importance of the Scripture verse from Habbakuk 2:4 that is quoted a few times in the New Testament (Romans 1:17, Galatians 3:11, Hebrews 10:38).

"Behold, he whose soul is not upright in him shall fail, but the **righteous shall live by his faith.**"
Habakkuk 2:4

I must emphasize here that as Christians we must understand the true meaning of faith as it is revealed in the Scriptures. Please don't just rely on the past definitions that you may have heard from preachers or pastors. Read the Scriptures for yourself and ask the Holy Spirit to teach you directly what a true, genuine, living faith entails. These truths are essential for our growth and maturity as children of God, leading to our sanctification and full acceptance into the kingdom of God when the Lord Jesus Christ returns.

What We Really Need Is Internal, Not External.

“And He (Jesus) said, “What comes out of a man, that defiles a man. For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lewdness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within and defile a man.” Mark 7: 20-22

It has been said that the moral integrity of a society is directly proportional to its freedoms and overall prosperity. In other words, the higher the moral integrity in a society, the more freedoms and prosperity it will experience, and conversely, the lower the morals, the less freedom and prosperity it will experience. I don't see how anyone can dispute this truth. Consider how free market capitalism would function in a society where everyone was dishonest. Obviously, it could not. It is also obvious that societies that have a high percentage of evils such as rape, theft or murder would be forced to implement laws and regulations to protect their citizens that would have a negative impact on the freedoms of all, and would cost its citizens to implement and enforce.

Dishonesty and theft come in many forms, some hidden to us. A poor work ethic results in employees stealing from employers by not giving a full day of work for a day's wage. Members of society who are abusing government “entitlements” are stealing from the rest of the tax payers.

The United States is facing this dilemma right now. As the moral fiber of our society is declining we are seeing a push for more laws and regulations. It seems that a government will take advantage of any opportunity to increase its control over its people, and while it may resolve some problems, it usually creates a whole new set of problems, including the loss of freedoms and prosperity for the masses.

Some would say that these governmental laws and regulations don't accomplish what they are intended to do. The law or regulation does not change the evil that resides in the perpetrators, and they simply find a way around them. Others would say that without the laws and regulations in place there can be no justice. Perpetrators cannot be punished by the governmental authorities if they have not broken some established law. Of course, we also know that when the governmental authorities become morally corrupted, then laws are not enforced, bribes are taken, the innocent are falsely accused, and power is abused; when this occurs there is a risk that the society will collapse.

It would appear that immoral societies have a choice of either suffering from the abuses of the evil perpetrators, or to suffer from the abuses of an imperfect government authority that can over regulate, misapply laws, and has the potential for corruption that results in a systemic collapse. Either way, freedom and prosperity suffer.

It is not my purpose here to get caught up in this debate of how a secular society should be managed. As a Christian, I understand that this world is cursed and under the strong influence of satanic and demonic forces, and therefore the only true freedom and prosperity that our world will experience will occur when the Lord Jesus returns and establishes His kingdom.

My purpose in mentioning the above situation regarding immoral societies is to emphasize the fact that the source of the problem is an internal one that external laws and regulations cannot correct, but can only partially restrain (if at all). What is true for societies is also true for individuals. Christians need to be careful not to look for external remedies to this internal problem.

The Scriptures clearly explain that the old covenant that was based on laws and regulations was not able to bring about the needed internal change in individual believers. When comparing the usage of the old covenant laws and commandments to the faith and hope of the new covenant in the book of Hebrews, it says this:

“For on the one hand, there is an annulling of the former commandment because of its weakness and unprofitableness, for the law made nothing perfect (or complete); on the other hand, there is the bringing in of a better hope, through which we draw near to God.” Heb. 7:18-19

The law was not capable of bringing about the internal changes that were needed. J. B. Phillips translation of verse 18 supports this also:

“Quite plainly, then, there is a definite cancellation of the previous commandment because of its ineffectiveness and uselessness – the Law was incapable of bringing anyone to real maturity”

The point being made here was that the old covenant, with its laws and regulations, was insufficient. But the new covenant is able to bring about the needed internal change to “perfect” or “complete” the believer.

This is what is important to understand: the new covenant does not remove the need for its participants to be holy and righteous (i.e. to have high moral integrity), but rather, it recognizes the need for an internal change to bring about this high moral integrity, and it offers this means through faith and a "better hope" that produces spiritual maturity. The list of laws and regulations from the old covenant were beneficial in exposing the moral deficiencies of the people, but were not able to correct them.

The new covenant addresses two critical areas of the believer’s life that allows them to mature spiritually:

First, all questions and doubts are removed regarding a believer's acceptance into the family of God due to past sins or actions that their conscience knows have offended God. Since guilt and doubt can hinder a person's relationship with God, making it impossible to trust Him and walk in the Spirit, this hindrance is removed by means of the blood of Jesus that paid the penalty on our behalf:

"how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?" (Hebrews 9:14)

We can now confidently enter into a relationship with God and "draw near" to Him, knowing that we are truly His child and that He loves us.

"The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs – heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ," (Romans 8:16-17)

The second is related to the first in that we now realize as God's children that we have the assurance of an eternal inheritance that was established by the death and resurrection of Jesus. This assurance allows us to shift the focus of our hope from the things of this world to this promised hope, and this shift of hope frees us from the bondage of this world system.

"And for this reason He is the Mediator of the new covenant, by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions under the first covenant, that those who are called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance." Hebrews 10:15

The writer of Hebrews wraps up the discussion about the new covenant by confirming the importance of these 2 items and the ultimate goal of an internal change that leads to love and good works:

"Therefore, brethren, having boldness to enter the Holiest (presence of God the Father) by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He consecrated for us, through the veil, that is, His flesh, and having a High Priest over the house of God (Jesus), let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful. And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works." Hebrews 10:19-24

The Scriptures also explain more specifically the results of this internal change that will occur in the believer, stating that the Lord will "put His laws in their mind and write them on their hearts" meaning that believers will do by nature what the law requires, not needing the external written commandments and requirements because they will be present internally.

"For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put My laws in their mind and write them on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people." Heb. 8:10

Paul the apostle also spoke of Gentile Christian believers who were not raised with the commandments and regulations of the law like the Jews had been, but were able to naturally do what was required.

“For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do the things in the law, these, although not having the law, are a law to themselves, who show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and between themselves their thoughts accusing or else excusing them.” Romans 2: 14-15

We must realize also that doing by nature what the law requires is the equivalent to walking in love, for love fulfills the law, as Paul makes clear later in Romans:

“Owe no one anything except to love one another, for he who loves another fulfilled the law. For the commandments, ‘You shall not commit adultery,’ ‘You shall not murder,’ ‘You shall not steal,’ ‘You shall not bear false witness,’ ‘You shall not covet,’ and if there is any other commandment, are all summed up in this saying, namely, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ Love does no harm to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.” Romans 13:8-10

Walking in love is a fruit of the spirit, and we must therefore be spiritual to walk in love and to fulfill the law. Here are some key Scriptures from Galatians chapter 5 that explains this:

“But you, brethren, have been called to liberty; only do not use liberty as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For the law is fulfilled in one word, even this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ But if you bite and devour one another, beware lest you be consumed by one another! 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.” Gal. 5:13-18

“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law. And those who are Christ’s have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit.” Gal. 5:22-25

The new covenant emphasizes a direct relationship with God through faith that causes us to be transformed from being carnally minded, or focused on this physical world, to being spiritually minded, or focused on the spiritual world, i.e. heaven or the kingdom of God. This transformation is the internal change that is required for us to walk in love and fulfill the law.

There are two critical areas that are affected by this transformation from being carnally minded to spiritually minded. First, we realize that we are a child of the living God who is in control of our lives. We learn to trust Him in every situation, understanding that He is involved intimately with our lives and knows exactly what we need. This understanding eliminates our anxiety and stress as we cast our cares upon Him and completely trust Him to meet our needs. We learn to see His purpose in all of our circumstances, even the trials and sufferings.

“Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time, casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you.” 1 Peter 5:6-7

“Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.” Philippians 4:6-7

The second important area is the focus of our future hope. We realize that as children of the living God, we have an inheritance in heaven, and also, have inherited eternal life with an immortal new resurrected body. This is the “better hope” that was mentioned in Hebrews 7, that is based on “better promises.” Jesus conquered death and removed us from the curse of this world, making a way for us to be accepted by God as His child, with an eternal inheritance. Walking in the spirit requires that we shift our hope from the things in this world to the promised hope in Christ. We must set our minds and hearts on this heavenly hope rather than the false hopes that this world has to offer, and we must store up our riches in heaven rather than on earth.

“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.” Romans 8: 5-6

The result of these changes is the recognition that this world holds little value for us. All of the things that we placed our confidence upon or built our reputation upon are reduced to worthlessness compared to the new eternal, spiritual things that have immortal value. These changes also free us from the bondage of our strong desires that were focused on earthly things. This bondage kept us from being able to freely love others and to please God. When we functioned in this world’s system with our minds set on the things of this world we couldn’t please God because we were focused on pleasing other men and ourselves. We were focused on and feeding on (finding happiness in) the earthly things that we had set our minds on and hoped for.

The Scriptures tell us that when we have our minds focused on the things of this world and our flesh (carnally minded) that it leads to “death,” meaning that we are trapped in a cycle of sin. When we set our minds on carnal things (when we treasure them) we feed our strong worldly desires which results in producing the works of the flesh.

Here's an example to illustrate this. Let’s say that I allow my heart to be set on having a beautiful home in a good neighborhood. I treasure this thought and work hard to make it happen. I have set my mind and heart on this and my emotional attachment to fulfilling this dream is very strong. When I think about obtaining this goal it brings me happiness and pleasure that I feed upon; it motivates me when I wake up and go through my day. Anything that hinders the fulfillment of this “earthly hope” will cause my flesh to react. The fruit of this fleshly reaction will be some form of sin.

You may also be thinking, “Can’t I have a desire for a nice home for my family?” Let me make this very clear: it is not wrong to have desires for things on this earth, within the known guidelines of not coveting other people’s things or desiring things that we know are evil. The problem is when we begin to “set our minds and hearts” on these “good” things and allow them to become a focal point and main hope in our lives. It’s a problem when we treasure them and begin to feed off of them, or when we base our

happiness on them, looking forward with pleasure for when we will obtain them. It is this type of strong longing for earthly things that causes the bondage.

When we have a desire for an earthly thing, we can pray and ask God to give us this thing, but then we must leave the fulfillment totally in God's hands. Some things that we think are good for us, the Lord knows are not good for us. Or possibly, the Lord will test us by withholding some desire. We are instructed by the Lord to be content in our circumstances; this means that we must not covet or "set our mind and hearts on" or "treasure" any earthly things beyond what we have been given. Even the things that we have been given are not to be the focus of our affections because we could lose them all (consider Job's life).

The point is that we need to guard our hearts and not allow any earthly thing to take the focus of our lives by becoming the hope that drives us, feeds us and brings happiness. When we die with Christ on the cross, all of these hopes and dreams must die also, and we must continue to keep them dead. Don't be fooled into thinking since an earthly thing is "good" that you can set your mind/heart/hope upon it.

"Keep (or guard) your heart with all diligence, for out of it spring the issues of life." Proverbs 4:23

The church, like secular governments and organizations, has a tendency to think that external remedies will work to bring about the needed changes in people, but what is needed is an internal change that only the Gospel of Jesus Christ (the cross) and the Holy Spirit can accomplish. The church needs to focus on the things that contribute to the spiritual maturity of Christians, encouraging one another to walk in the spirit, walk in love and fulfill the law. Learning to place our trust completely in the Lord, and learning to shift our hope totally towards the promise of our eternal inheritance are the key to this spiritual maturity.

External remedies are easier because they don't require faith. This is how dead religious rituals have developed over the years – they are external attempts to solve an internal problem – that can't work. Today we have the same tendencies, from Christians attempting to change the political system in our country, to thinking that getting people to show up every Sunday and be involved in a church organization will make them spiritually mature.

We need to focus on the internal change that can truly cause us to walk in the Spirit and walk in love. It starts with ourselves, and then we should encourage others to do the same. Draw close to Jesus and He will draw close to you. Set your mind and heart fully on the hope that is in Christ Jesus, and do so until He returns or takes you home. Put to death any earthly desire that challenges your hope in heaven.

My desire is the same as Paul's:

"...the mystery which has been hidden from ages and from generations, but now has been revealed to His saints (to us). To them God willed to make known what are the riches of glory of this mystery among Gentiles: which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. Him we preach, warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus." Colossians 1:26-28

Remember these three: Faith, Hope, and Love

“But, since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation.” 1 Thes. 5:8

The history behind the Apostle Paul’s first letter to the church of the Thessalonians is as follows: Paul had preached the Gospel in Thessalonica a few years prior to this letter and spent some time there to establish a group of believers. He had become concerned about the well being of this congregation since he was not able to revisit them after his initial visit, so he sent Timothy to check on them. Upon the return of Timothy, Paul wrote this letter to commend them on their steadfastness and progress, as well as to encourage and exhort them in their Christian walk.

We can learn from this letter if we look at Paul’s approach to encouraging the Thessalonians and his view of their spiritual strengths.

At the beginning of the letter, after his salutation, Paul immediately commends them on three core items: faith, hope and love:

“We give thanks to God always for you all, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, remembering before our God and Father your work of **faith** and labor of **love** and steadfastness of **hope** in our Lord Jesus Christ.” 1 Thess. 1:3

It is interesting that Paul gives a similar commendation at the start of his letter to the Colossians:

“We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, because we have heard of your **faith** in Christ Jesus and of the **love** which you have for all the saints, because of the **hope** laid up for you in heaven.” Col. 1:3-5

...and also at the start of the 2nd letter to the Thessalonians:

“We are bound to give thanks to God always for you, brethren, as is fitting, because you **faith** is growing in abundance, and the **love** of every one of you for one another is increasing. Therefore we ourselves boast of you in the churches of God for your **steadfastness** and faith in all your persecutions and in the afflictions which you are enduring.” 2 Thess. 1:3-4

...followed by this:

“And to grant rest with us to you who are afflicted, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire,” 2 Thess. 1:7 (relating their steadfastness in affliction to their hope)

Obviously, when Paul examined a group of Christians for spiritual maturity he did so in the perspective of these three Christian attributes: faith, hope and love. Therefore, it is also important for us to examine ourselves in a similar matter, understanding the true meaning of faith, hope and love, and how they should be manifested in our lives.

Notice that in 1 Thessalonians Paul uses the phrase “work of faith and labor of love” when he commended them. The Greek word in the original passage that is translated as “work” is “ergon” and is defined in Strong’s concordance as follows: from a primary (but obsolete) érgō (to work); toil (as an effort or occupation); by implication, an act:—deed, doing, labor, work. The original Greek word for “labor” is “kopos” and is defined thus in Strong’s: toil (as reducing the strength), literally or figuratively; by implication, pains:—labor, + trouble, weariness. There also is an implication of “intense labor with trouble and toil.”

Paul’s interest was in the fruit that they showed in their lives, and Timothy must have reported that they were producing “good works” that confirmed their spiritual maturity. Timothy must have seen sacrifices being made to help the poor and needy, orphans and widows being cared for, and general activity that supported the fact that they loved one another.

The Holy Spirit has taught us through the Scriptures, as we have covered previously, that faith without works is dead, but that our works confirm our faith:

“So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.” James 2:17

“Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he offered his son Isaac upon the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by works, and the scripture was fulfilled which says, ‘Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness’; and he was called the friend of God.” James 2: 21-23

True Christian faith will result in good works and will produce true love in the believer. Remember that love fulfills the law and does no harm to a neighbor. Our spiritual maturity should show forth these spiritual fruits of good works and love for others.

Like Abraham, we all will face situations in our lives that will require us to exercise our faith to “complete” it. Abraham believed that God could raise Isaac from the dead, and was willing to obey God’s command to put him to death.

“By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was ready to offer up his only son, of whom it was said, ‘Through Isaac shall your posterity be named.’ He considered that God was able to raise men even from the dead; hence, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back.” Heb. 11:17-19

Let’s encourage one another to respond with the same faith that Abraham had when we are faced with similar situations and challenges in our lives, knowing that God is able to do whatever is required.

Paul reminded the Thessalonians that when he was with them, he had encouraged each one of them to exercise their faith with their actions. I like how his encouragement was not just words but he had told them to imitate his actions, and he reminded them of his behavior among them:

“For you remember our labor and toil, brethren; we worked night and day, that we might not burden any of you, while we preached to you the gospel of God. You are witnesses, and God also, how holy and

righteous and blameless was our behavior to you believers; for you know how, like a father with his children, we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to lead a life worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.” 1 Thess. 2:9-12

Paul also commended them for enduring afflictions and persecution from their own countrymen, similar to what Paul had suffered from the Jews. We too should be prepared in our hearts, should persecution arise, to endure patiently whatever afflictions come our way.

It is very clear that Paul’s expectation for believers was to walk in love and holiness, and to endure in this way until the Lord returns. Paul first sent Timothy to make sure that they were living appropriately, producing the fruit of spiritual maturity. He then reminded them of how he had trained them in this appropriate behavior and also exemplified this behavior in his life. He then encouraged them to continue in and even increase the quality of their behavior. I point this out to emphasize the fact that our behavior and spiritual maturity is extremely important. Our faith and hope should be producing love as reflected in our good works and holy living.

“And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love to one another and to all men, as we do to you, so that he may establish your hearts unblamable in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints. Finally, brethren, we beseech and exhort you in the Lord Jesus, that as you learned from us how you ought to live and to please God, just as you are doing, you do so more and more. For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus. For this is the will of God, your consecration: that you abstain from immorality;” 1 Thess. 3:12- 4:3

The original Greek word that is translated as “consecration” in the above verse is *hagiasmos*, and is defined in Strong’s concordance as: properly, purification, i.e. (the state) purity; concretely (by Hebraism) a purifier:—holiness, sanctification. Again, Paul makes it very clear that it is God’s will for us to walk in holiness.

Paul also knows that the key to our spiritual maturity and our ability to walk in holiness and love is to have our faith focused on the hope we have in Christ Jesus and our future with Him in His Kingdom that He will establish upon His return. Therefore, after exhorting and encouraging them to walk in holiness, Paul reminds them of the soon coming of the Lord, and our part as believers in this event:

“But we would not have you ignorant, brethren, concerning those who are asleep (dead), that you may not grieve as others do who have no **hope**. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so through Jesus, God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep. For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, shall not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel’s call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first; then we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air; and so we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore, comfort one another with these words.” 1 Thess. 4:13-18

Paul knew that this hope that we have will comfort us in our afflictions and help us to endure, continuing in holy living. This is our source of strength that will get us through difficult times and empower us to walk in love and holiness, as we make this assured hope a reality in our lives.

A living faith in our blessed hope we have in what God has promised to us in Christ Jesus, namely a place in heaven for eternity with Him, will produce in us the ability to walk in holiness and love, with the strength to endure until the end. It is critical that we continue in this way so that we too can be found blameless in holiness when Jesus returns.

Recognize that all of the things in this life are trivial compared with the glory that awaits us. Let's keep our perspective clear and focused on what is really important: eternal life and our future hope.

"May the God of peace himself sanctify you wholly; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls is faithful, and He will do it." 1 Thess. 5: 23-24

Learn What Pleases the Lord!

"Walk as children of light (for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true), and try to learn what is **pleasing to the Lord.**" Ephesians 5: 8-10

It should be the goal of every Christian to please the Lord, but we cannot do this unless we know what is pleasing to Him. The main source to learn what pleases Him is the Bible, but we also have the Holy Spirit and our conscience to guide us. It is a good thing to seek God to find out what pleases Him, and to read the scriptures with this intention in mind.

In general, the father and child relationship is a good guide for us. We know that a father is pleased by a wise and well behaved son or daughter who listens well to instructions and follows closely what they are told to do. The book of Proverbs brings out this idea of the Lord being like a wise Father instructing His children:

"Hear, my children, the instruction of a father, and give attention to know understanding; for I give you good doctrine; do not forsake my law." Prov. 4:1

And this about how a wise son pleases his father:

"A wise son makes a glad father, but a foolish son is the grief of his mother." Prov. 10:1

This may seem simple or obvious, that God is pleased with our wisdom, understanding and obedience to His commandments, but it is the lack of focus on these simple things that has gotten many well meaning believers into trouble over the years (like the Pharisees during the time of Jesus).

We have a tendency to focus on what pleases other men, instead of what pleases God, or we focus more on what feeds our own flesh and pleases us. We easily get distracted and turn our focus to

secondary things. The Gospel of Mark has a great guide for what should be the focus of our attention to please God and do what is most important to Him:

“Then one of the scribes came, and having heard them reasoning together, perceiving that He had answered them well, asked Him, ‘Which is the first (foremost) commandment of all?’ Jesus answered him, ‘The first of all commandments is: “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.” This is the first commandment. And the second, like it, is this: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” There is no other commandment greater than these.’ So the scribe said to Him, ‘Well said, Teacher, You have spoken the truth, for there is one God, and there is no other but He. And to love Him with all the heart, all the understanding, with all the soul, and with all the strength, and to love one’s neighbor as oneself, is more than all the whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.’ Now when Jesus saw that he answered wisely, He said to him, ‘You are not far from the kingdom of God.’” Mark 12: 28-34

You will notice that the scribe’s wise answer included the point that having this understanding that there is only one God, and having a love for God and neighbor is more important than offerings and sacrifice, indicating that even back then there was an issue with people focusing on the wrong things when attempting to please God.

We must also recognize that God is Spirit and therefore we must be spiritual and understand the things of the Spirit in order to please God. Being spiritual requires faith.

“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.” Hebrews 11: 6

It is very clear in the scriptures that our carnality, or our focus on the things of this physical world that feed our carnal nature, is displeasing to God. Removing the things of this world from our hearts and focusing on the things of the Spirit, or being spiritually minded, is pleasing to Him.

“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. Because the carnal (fleshly) 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.**” Romans 8: 5-8

“Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world – the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life – is not of the Father but of the world.” 1 John 2: 15-16

This makes perfect, logical, sense because if we are carnally minded and without true faith, we become foolish and are unable to follow God’s instructions (or even see and hear them), and cannot walk in true love. But if we exercise our faith, and turn from the things of this world in our hearts, and focus on the spiritual promises that God has given to us, and long for heaven, then we can see and perceive the truth, and are empowered to walk in love with the law written on our hearts, therefore pleasing Him.

“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.” Galatians 5: 16-17

When we focus our hearts on the things of God, the things of the Spirit, and His power and influence in our lives, and through our faith begin to walk in the Spirit, we then are able to see the truth from God’s perspective, and can honor Him and give thanks for what He is doing in our lives.

In Psalm 50, the Lord makes it clear that He doesn’t need anything from us, but He expects from us thankfulness, obedience to what we have committed to Him, and that we call upon Him for help so that He can be the glorified when He delivers us from our troubles and meets our needs.

“If I were hungry, I would not tell you; for the world is Mine, and all its fullness. Will I eat the flesh of bulls, or drink the blood of goats? Offer to God thanksgiving, and pay your vows to the Most High. Call upon Me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify Me.” Ps. 50: 12-15

And so we see that it pleases God that we are thankful, and we should be thankful often, for the food that we eat and even the air that we breathe, we should not take it for granted. And we should thank God for the many things that He does for us throughout our lives.

It is not wise for us to make vows to the Lord, but if we do, we should fulfill them. For example, if you are married, you made of vow before God that needs to be honored completely until death.

We see also that God is pleased when we come to Him. He wants us to make Him our God and not to substitute His place as God in our life with either our own power or thoughts, or with other men or other manmade organizations or institutions. He alone is our deliver and help in our time of need. He needs to be honored as such and then rightfully glorified when He delivers us from our situations.

Pleasing the Lord takes some effort and requires our attention. Paul the apostle makes this clear in his teachings:

“But I want you to be without care (concern). He who is unmarried cares for (or is concerned about) the things of the Lord – how he may **please the Lord**. But he who is married cares about the things of the world – how he may please his wife.” 1 Cor. 7: 32-33

“You therefore must endure hardship as a good soldier of Jesus Christ. No one engaged in warfare entangles himself with the affairs of this life, that he may **please him** who enlisted him as a soldier.” 2 Timothy 4: 3-4

We see, then, that as beloved children we should be focused on making sure that our lives and actions are pleasing to our Father in heaven. We need therefore to be obedient to His instructions and commands, but this requires that we turn from this world and focus our minds and hearts on the things of the Spirit, becoming spiritually minded. Walking in the spirit will allow us to love God fully and to love our neighbors, as we have been instructed to do. The Lord needs nothing from us, but instead desires that we are thankful to Him for the things He does in our lives, honoring Him as our God, and looking to

Him in our time of need, and glorifying Him for His help and deliverance. It requires some effort on our part to not only learn what pleases Him, but to keep focused on what is pleasing to God rather than what pleases us or other men.

Consider this exhortation from the word from Paul's letter to the Thessalonians:

"Finally then, brethren, we urge and exhort in the Lord Jesus that you should abound more and more, just as you received from us how you ought to walk and to **please God**; for you know what commandments we gave you through the Lord Jesus." 1 Thessalonians 4: 1-2

Conclusion: Walk in the Spirit!

"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." (Galatians 5: 16 & 17, NKJV)

In my humble opinion, the most glaring void in today's western Christian churches is their inability to walk in the spirit. The root of all of the failures and problems in Christian's lives is their carnality. The enemy has been able to remove the concept of walking in the spirit by undermining the core truths of internal circumcision of the heart and focusing our hope on the promises of God. Without the ability to walk in the spirit, we are unable to walk in Godly love. We must turn back to true spirituality. We must learn to die to this world and to die to our flesh. When we are internally changed from being carnally minded to being spiritually minded, we will have a renewed hunger for the Word of God, and this in turn will feed our spirit, strengthen our faith, and cause a spiral of spiritual growth and maturity.

Although many Christians claim to be "filled with the Spirit" or "baptized with the Holy Spirit", I don't see the fruit. If this was true than there would be more evidence shown in the Church, not as miracles or signs and wonders, but by transformed lives that are holy and blameless, walking as Jesus and the early apostles walked, and in the power and anointing of the Holy Spirit.

I would encourage you again to seek the infilling of the Holy Spirit with the evidence of speaking in tongues. God is faithful and will give you what is needed in your life.

In conclusion, let me summarize what it means to walk in the spirit. I'll attempt to encapsulate what I have already explained above about the important principles and key truths that constitute walking in the spirit and how they are tied directly to our ability to truly love God and one another.

It is the Spirit that produces love, along with all the other fruits of the Spirit, and therefore we must make sure that our spirit is healthy and functioning as it should, in unison with the Holy Spirit so that we produce much spiritual fruit

Spiritual Love

We are exhorted by the Scriptures to become more like Jesus, to live and act as He lived. Ultimately, we are exhorted to truly love God and truly love one another, as Jesus did. I remind you that the Scriptures tell us that loving God and our neighbors is the fulfillment of all the law and the prophets, and that love is the ultimate goal.

“Owe no one anything except to love one another, for he who loves another has fulfilled the law. For the commandments, ‘You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not bear false witness, You shall not covet,’ and if there is any other commandment, are all summed up in this saying, namely, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ Love does no harm to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfillment of the law.” (Romans 13: 8-10, NKJV)

So why is this so hard? Why can’t we just love everybody? What is stopping us? The truth is that we cannot have the deep abiding love that fulfills the law if we are walking in the flesh. People in the world don’t understand this. They don’t understand the dynamics of this. They are determined to love others, they set a goal to do it, they “will” to do it, they sing songs about doing it, but they can’t do it. They start out with some shallow acts of love, attempting to be nice and kind to others, but when it comes down to really loving in a deep way they always fail. Why? It’s because they are not walking in the Spirit.

I have made this observation over the years with people. I have noted that the external display that people put on is very different than what is actually happening in their lives and homes. If you see them as they really are, you get a different picture than the impression you get from their public facade of kindness and love. I have met neighbors who seemed to be very friendly and kind and giving, but when a situation came about that really put them to the test, their true nature came out, their flesh, and love failed. Circumstances exposed their true nature; they went from friendly neighbors to enemies.

We are also told in the Bible that God is love, and that God is Spirit (see 1 John 4). My point is that the source of true love is to become spiritual. We need to understand what it means to walk in the Spirit so that we can have the godly love that the Scriptures define. Also, we need to understand what it means to walk in the flesh, since it is the opposite of walking in the Spirit.

Setting our minds on our Living Hope

I remind you that the definition of words is important. The world likes to define words like love, spirit, flesh, and lust, and so do people in the churches, but how do the Scriptures define these words; this is what is important. We also need the Holy Spirit to help with these definitions.

In Romans chapter 8, as we have seen previously, we find a definition of walking in the Spirit and in the flesh:

“For those who live according to the flesh (i.e. walk in the flesh) set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit (i.e walk in the spirit), (set their minds on) the things of the Spirit.” Romans 8:5

In these verses we see that what we “set our minds on” is important and the key to whether we are in the flesh or in the Spirit. Also, in the verses quoted above from Galatians chapter 5, we see the word “lust” used. Lust is defined as a strong, overmastering, passionate desire or craving. When we lust, we are strongly and passionately setting our minds or affections on something, either spiritual or fleshly. And so if we want to know if we are walking in the spirit or in the flesh we must ask ourselves: What is the focus of our affections? What are we longing for? Where do our passions lie? And then once we answer those questions, we then should determine if these things are spiritual or fleshly.

In determining if something is spiritual or fleshly, we must define what these terms mean from the Scriptures. It is clear to me from the Scriptures that anything that is associated with this physical world and this physical world system is of the flesh or fleshly. The idea of “flesh” in the Scriptures is more than just the fleshly sins like sexual immorality, greed, envy; these are the fruits of the flesh. In the scriptures we are told to die to our flesh, and to put to death what is fleshly in us, but this death involves more than just dealing with the deeds of the flesh. Consider this verse in Colossians:

“Therefore, if you died with Christ from the basic principles (rudiments or system) of the world, why, as though living in the world, do you subject yourselves to regulations” Colossians 2: 20

This verse suggests that we should have died to or have been separated from the system of the world. This is part of dying to our flesh. And also in the epistle of John:

“Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world – the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life – is not of the Father but is of the world.” 1 John 2: 15-16

Later in Galatians chapter 5 it says this:

“And those who are Christ’s have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.” Galatians 5: 24

We must be very careful about what we set our passions and desires on. If we are setting them on anything that has to do with this world, or is associated with this life on earth, it is fleshly. This is a stumbling block for many Christians. They would say, “What’s wrong with having a passionate desire for my husband or wife, my children, my job, my ministry, or any other seemingly “good” desire. The concern is about how strong of a focus these things are in your life. Are they the center of your affection? Do they encompass your future hope? These things are temporary and they could disappear at any time. Consider what happened to Job when he lost everything. His response was to fall down and worship God and say:

“Naked I came from my mother’s womb; Naked I shall return there. The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; Blessed be the name of the Lord.” Job 1: 21

If you can truly see yourself having this same attitude upon the loss of an earthly item, then you can conclude that your desires are not too strong towards this item, but if you cannot, then you have a root cause of fleshly passion that will be contrary to the Spirit and will be a hindrance to love.

Consider again the directive of the Scriptures in Colossians 3:

“If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth. For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory.” Colossians 3: 1-4

This is not optional. Here we are clearly shown what to set our mind on – what is spiritual – the things that do not have to do with this temporary world system on the earth, but have to do with the unseen, immortal, eternal system in heaven that we will one day become a part of through our acceptance as God’s children by the sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross. We are to live and act as if we are part of this heavenly system even now, as citizens of heaven!

This is why setting our hope on the promises of God that were presented to us through His Messiah, Jesus Christ, is so important. This hope should be our passion. It should be what our mind is set upon constantly. It should be the source of our happiness and our rejoicing. It should be the focus of our energy. This is how we “walk in the Spirit”, setting our minds on these spiritual things instead of the hopes and pleasures that this world has to offer.

Does this mean that we can have no pleasure in this life? Does this mean that we should have no desires associated with this world? I don’t believe that the Scripture is saying that we should be totally devoid of earthly pleasure or desires, but I would caution you here. Our flesh and our hearts are deceptive. The caution is about “strong” desires, that is, our lusts or passions, the type that consumes our life and captures our attention and affections. We need to guard our hearts and minds, and ask the Holy Spirit to guide our affections properly. Our conscience will witness with our spirit and the Holy Spirit to make us aware of the things of this world that have become too important to our hearts and minds and interfere with our spiritual walk. I have found that when I become depressed or “blue” or discontented with my circumstances, I can trace it back to allowing my heart to be set too strongly on something in this world. I then must put that thing to death and re-focus my heart on heaven, the promises, and my spiritual treasures.

If you have lived for any length of time on this earth, you quickly realize that the pleasures that this world offers are deceptive. They quickly diminish and lose their allure. I can remember being a part of the drinking and party scene. I found myself with the same people doing the same things. It quickly became boring and lost its value. Much of the attraction is from enhancing the anticipation: “won’t it be great when we get there...” and “I’m so looking forward to this weekend..”, only to find that it’s really not all that fantastic. Or then we need to drum up the pleasure by reminiscing: “...wasn’t it funny when he or she did this”, but the reality was that it wasn’t much of anything. Sure there are times when we enjoy ourselves, but this enjoyment last for only a short time. The Scriptures suggests that the flesh is never completely satisfied; it always needs more. How true this is.

When we focus on the Spirit, we bear the fruit of the Spirit.

“but the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, long-suffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law.” Galatians 5:22&23

Notice that love is a fruit of the Spirit, and that all of the other listed fruits are related to love. This means that the Spirit will produce these things. We as Christians need to know how to become spiritual and make sure that we are producing this fruit abundantly like a healthy tree produces good fruit.

Exercise your Faith to become Spiritual

In order to be Spiritual, we must also have faith, for how can we place our hope in these unseen promises unless we exercise our faith. Also, we need to walk in the reality of these promises. This is another part of being spiritual.

There are many examples in the scriptures of men of faith and how they walk in the spirit. Hebrews chapter 11 lists many of them. This is why reading the Word is so critical to our ability to keep walking in the Spirit, to our endurance. The Word of God teaches us how we should walk, how we should think and consider our situation in this world, in other words, how to be “in” this world but not “of” this world.

The 23rd Psalm is a famous psalm of David, who was a shepherd as a youth. In this psalm he writes about how he considers the Lord to be his shepherd and how he views his life and walk in the light of this truth. This psalm is a great example of thinking spiritually.

Consider David’s thoughts in the psalm: He sees God as keeping, guiding, leading and protecting him during his life, and this leadership and guidance produces a peace and security, and also restores his soul. Not only do we need to have our minds set on our heavenly hope, but we must also find our confidence and contentment from spiritual things and not earthly things. What can be more valuable than this godly peace and comfort that can take us through even the greatest evil or most fearful situation? Even our enemies will be put to shame by the Lord in our presence. And the final verse ties these truths back into the hope of eternal life with the Lord: “...and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

In closing, consider this parable told by Jesus as recorded in the Gospel of Luke:

“He also spoke this parable: ‘A certain *man* had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. Then he said to the keeper of his vineyard, “Look, for three years I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree and find none. Cut it down; why does it use up the ground?” But he answered and said to him, “Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and fertilize *it*. And if it bears fruit, *well*. But if not, after that you can cut it down.” ’ ” Luke 13: 6-9

This parable emphasizes that when a tree is not bearing fruit it is a problem with the roots, and with the proper care and fertilization it is possible to change and to bring forth the necessary fruit. The same is true in our lives and our ability to produce spiritual fruit. My hope is that I have given you the means to “fertilize” your life as to bear the required fruits of the Spirit.

I hope that I have stirred up your interest in knowing how to walk in the spirit, and how to put to death any fleshly thoughts that will conflict with your spiritual walk. Remember that our goal is love, the Christ-like love that is defined in the Scriptures. Also, we are being prepared for the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ, to be accepted as His holy and blameless bride.

I have attempted in these pages to explain clearly and simplistically the deep internal change that is required to transform us into true children of the living God, holy and acceptable to him, born again of the Spirit, walking in love. May the Lord bless you richly in the days ahead so as to put into practice these truths, and may you produce much fruit.

“Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.” Romans 12: 1-2