

A Life in Christ

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Chapter 1

The Life We Have Been Given

A life in Christ is the greatest fulfillment a person can ever know. The words of encouragement that would begin this discourse of such a life would be the assurance that God has left nothing undone in preparing us for the day unto which He has called us. What has come to us from God is a full measure of strength and light. It is not merely religion; for if religion is all we have received, then we are drinking from an empty cup. Through faith, we have encountered Christ and our life became more than a moment in time.

For the Christian then, born of God, there has been ignited within, a fire fueled from an eternal source. However, far too many experience far too little of that raging flame and long for the comforting warmth of Christ within them.

To that end be assured, it is not difficult to kindle the flame. The scriptures urge us to stir up the gift of God within us. It takes but a small spark to ignite a massive fire when the conditions have been created for it. Wet wood bears little flame, but a combustible element in the right conditions is waiting to erupt because it is inherent to its nature. So is every last person born of God and filled with His Spirit. When it ignites, when the embers are stoked, the fire of God is contagious to those who hunger for its light. One person, alight with the brilliance of His glory has the ability to ignite and fan the flame in others. One of the terms we use to describe this occurrence is “revival”.

For true revival to spring forth, we cannot desire schemes, devise plans, create programs, employ gimmicks or institute our own movements of God and expect to see the results we desire. In fact, the incessant implementation of these things by ambitious men only serves to further distance the Body of Christ from partaking of the life God intends.

The truth of the matter is that the change we seek, whether we speak in regards to ourselves personally or the church corporately, is not as far away as we might think. The word is nigh you, in your heart and in your mouth. You see, revival is not a formula, nor is it a method properly implemented. The voice of God brings all revival. It is never manufactured, but originates in the choice we make every moment as to whether we will believe God or believe ourselves. It lies in whether we will trust in that which God has assured us is true, or trust in our experience and our interpretation of that experience.

Experience is a fine teacher. She holds back no lessons and conceals no truth. As pure as her instruction is though, she cannot teach you all things since she is limited by your capacity to receive her wisdom, or the framework through which you interpret her lessons. Therefore, experience cannot be the sole, ultimate source of truth because we can misinterpret the meaning.

If you measure truth solely, or primarily, by your experience and your interpretation of that experience, then you become the source of truth. When you make yourself the source of truth, it is like fashioning an idol in your own image. If our own rhetoric becomes our reality, we have situated ourselves in a hopeless place.

Revival is sourced in the truth- not dogma, tradition or our false conclusions of truth. Within truth, truth that is from God and truth that is God, we always find revival. If we are not experiencing revival, if we are not experiencing freedom, we cannot be abiding in the truth. God's word always brings life and freedom- period. It is the truth that makes us free.

There are those who do not abide in the truth, then question the surety of God's promises because of what their life becomes. The same holds true within the church at large. Christians set themselves aside to a lie, then flounder in the dryness of a lifeless soil. Eventually, they give up to this condition, considering it to be a God ordained event. This is not the life He intends.

Within God's kingdom, it is not uncommon for people to go from despair, hopelessness or spiritual anguish, to all out revival in their spirit and those changes occur between breaths in a moment of time. All of that is a result of renewed perception of the truth that is in Jesus Christ. Such perception de-clutters the convoluted thinking that creeps into our heart and mind without notice.

When Jesus prayed to The Father and declared, "Your word is truth", and made known to us also that His words are Spirit and life, what He revealed, in part, is that truth is not simply facts. Though informative, bearing the brand of wisdom, truth originates in God. Ultimately, what it discloses to us is the very person of Christ because He is the truth.

In knowing the truth, it becomes evident to us that there is not more spiritual strength available to us now than when we first came to Christ, nor has there been differing measures of spiritual strength through the course of history. As long as men can be saved, revival exists in the Earth. As long as God extends the salvation of Jesus Christ to mankind, revival is inherent in the offer.

So then, revival is not a privilege withheld, it is a reality resisted. Revival flows like a river, it never stops. What prevents it is that we will not drink from it, or we resist drinking from it because we prefer our own broken cisterns. We prefer the bitter water of our own wells which we have dug for ourselves. But, the source of revival is a spring not of our own making. It flourishes, not because we make it

happen, but because it is already happening and, in truth, has never ceased from the day salvation poured from heaven like rain. Where we look for it makes all the difference in determining if we will find it. We will not find revival in front of the television, we will not find it in the ballot box, nor will it come to us because we make a full exercise of our rightful, Christian duties. Neither is revival the lifeless illusion of emotionalism. Revival is the vibrancy and fullness of life that only comes from God. It goes with you wherever your foot may tread if that life is resident within you.

Revival then, is only as far away as the heart that is prepared to receive it. The Bible declares in Proverbs 4:23 that out of the heart spring the issues of life. When something is done in the heart, it is produced in the actions, the substance of our life. What your heart desires is what you pursue, what you pursue is what you will serve. What you serve will define your life. So again, whatever grows in the heart is produced in the life.

You will find God when you seek Him with all of your heart. Revival begins in the heart. Maturity occurs in the heart that desires Christ more than anything else. Simply put, it is no more complicated than that; which makes it a complicated matter indeed.

The choice of whether we will seek Him with all our heart falls to us. We are compelled to do so because that is the way God has sought us. That is how we, who were once enemies, have become His friends; we who were once strangers, have become His children. Christ is the full expression of The Father's heart, the full expression of His love. Through Christ, God has searched for each of us with all His heart.

It should be clear then that what you choose is what you want and what you want is what you pursue. That choice begins in the deep recesses of the heart. When the heart is in the hand of God, it is a mighty weapon. Once in the hand of God, it is conditioned to receive the fullest extent of what He intends.

In Hebrews chapter 10 we are told:

¹⁹ Therefore, brethren, having boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus, ²⁰ by a new and living way which He consecrated for us, through the veil, that is, His flesh, ²¹ and having a High Priest over the house of God, ²² 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.

In addition, we are told in 1 John chapter 3:

¹⁹ And by this we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before Him. ²⁰ For if our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and knows all

things. ²¹ *Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence toward God.*

How we approach God is affected by our heart. When the conscience is pure, the heart is not condemned and will therefore engage in relationship with Him in such a way that reflects the absence of condemnation. Full of confidence before a perfectly holy God, we hold no reservation to enter when our heart does not condemn us. Are we clean because we think we are clean or because God says we are clean? Certainly it is because God says we are clean. However, if the heart is condemned, it will not fully engage with a loving, holy God because it has assessed itself as unclean.

The tangle of such a web inhibits the fullness of life intended by God, not because it is withheld, but because the heart shuts itself off from the wellspring of life. Out of the heart spring the issues of life. It is meant to be a fountain with flowing streams of living water. But, condemnation sits as a mighty stone upon it, capping the flow.

Therefore, whatever exists in the heart shall surely be manifest in the life. If the heart is capped by condemnation, if it is burdened with a darkened lie, the fruit of that lie will inhabit every corner of our existence. What it produces is perpetual sadness, loneliness, a sense of worthlessness, or all manner of hooks meant to barb into our soul and draw us away from the source of life.

For the lonely heart, life is a broken mystery. Loneliness, however, is not simply experienced through isolation from human contact. Some of the loneliest souls are constantly surrounded by other people because their sense of loneliness has ripened in the field of their heart. What a terrible torment to feel so desperately alone, with unspoken pain, in a room full of mirth and laughter. Sometimes people hurt so deeply that they purposely harden their heart because they have determined it is better to not feel at all than to continue experiencing such inexpressible pain within their soul. In truth, the heart can only bear so much.

Many of us know what it is like to sneak into the back row of a church at the last minute hoping no one sees us. As we sit there, our heart anguishes between the wish that no one speak to us and the longing that someone will. We know what it is like to sit through a service in desperate hope that we will hear something that relieves the burden of our soul.

Through Jesus Christ we have received everything that pertains to life and Godliness. What we have with God must be guarded in every way. Whatever springs up in our heart that quenches or restrains the flow of His life must be removed without confusing the source. To misidentify what is choking or restraining the flow of life does not relieve the problem. The parable of the Sower shows us those prominent things that keep the word from bearing fruit such as

being deceived by riches, the cares of this life, passionate desire for other things, shrinking back from God when affliction arises because of the word, and lack of understanding. All of those things have an effect, in different ways, on the full bearing of fruit in our heart.

Take for example the lack of understanding. We can lack understanding for a number of reasons. The least common reason is that it is too complicated. More common is the fact that we simply do not want to understand, or the word of God is contrary to a mindset we already possess. Sometimes people have a loyalty to something else and to receive the word would necessitate an abandonment of that loyalty. For them, the truth is not important enough to make such a change.

Instead, the heart is hardened so that it will not allow the word to penetrate the soil. As a result, it becomes dry and fallow. Tares, weeds and bramble spring up in the soil instead. The truth of the matter is that tares can grow in hardened soil, but good seed cannot. In fact, tares such as bitterness, anger, hatred, and envy all grow better, perhaps exclusively, in hardened soil.

Sometimes people receive the word with joy, but shrink back from God because of the affliction or persecution that arises because of the word. We will respond to persecution and resistance by either hardening our hearts to the word and bending towards the demands of men, or we will harden our hearts to the persecution and bend towards the word.

We all need encouragement at times. Even the strongest soul can be worn down by some of the futilities life requires. Distracted and disillusioned, the mind grasps to regain its footing in a steady place. The heart longs to be rekindled from weariness. Places such as these use distinct colors to paint in reminiscent hues what truly brings us life.

For those who do not continue in God's word, who hear but do not respond, or do not receive the word into their heart for whatever reason, they walk away and immediately lose perception of who they truly are. But, for those who continue in His word, they are blessed in all they do. That contrast shows clearly that if we forget who we are, if we lose the perception of Christ in us, then it is soon regained by hearing the truth, receiving it into our heart, and then responding.

As the heart refocuses, our steps are shifted into eternal paths, and the Holy Spirit whispers reminders of what and whom we are committed to. In His great love, He knows that we are indispensably dependent upon Him to turn us in the way we should go, to lead us into all truth. It is by His effective power that we rise, time and again, from the doldrums of our days. Moreover, it is in the warm, sometimes unexpected whisper that says, "This way my child" that we find the greatest encouragement of all.

You cannot have revival within a church, home, or heart until all of it belongs to God. If you want change, if you want revival, want Him and nothing

else. Sadly, that is greatly discomfoting to many who are called by His name. For them, it is too great a price to pay for the deal of lifetime. Far too many seek to walk with Him possessing a desire, an attitude that it is better to keep Him at arm's length. By doing so, He's close enough in case one needs help, but far enough away that one retains some measure of autonomy; which is, of course, an illusion.

Another example of how a lack of understanding keeps the word from taking root in our heart is the fact that oftentimes people fear the nearness of God out of concern over His intent or methods. Even as Christians, we sometimes struggle with the misguided perception that for God to change us, or change our circumstances, there will need to be some major, perhaps painful overhaul. The very thought is exasperating and to a certain degree can be frightening. Such a perspective is followed by questions like, "What will God have to do to me in order to make me better?", or "What kind of affliction will I have to go through to get away from the sin in my life?" Where we desire to be in God, where we know God wants us to be, can seem so distant at times that we wonder how we will ever find our way there. Deep within the recesses of our heart, we want change, we want transformation, we want the revival we have heard of for so long but never tasted.

Our change, our alteration of course, is no less than the result of the provocative action of God. We are drawn from a place of pitiful loss by the sudden appearance of truth, bearing the banner of hope. It is the flicker of an eternal flame that draws our attention to repentance and the change which God brings thereafter.

Let it be understood then that repentance is a beginning. At the heart of all repentance which leads to true transformation is the accompanying perception of God. He is the glimmering light in the dark distance that provokes our first step toward Him. He is the dancing glow of orange embers on the horizon that we come to long for in the harsh winds of winter.

Therefore, an accurate assessment of true repentance is understood not only by where we have left, but unto whom we have arrived. It is a marvelous quest that is God in the beginning, God in the end, and God every step in between. Repentance prepares the heart to be transformed, but transformation occurs from the presence of the Lord.

¹⁷ *Now the Lord is the Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty.*

¹⁸ *But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord. (2 Corinthians 3:14-18)*

The verses leading up to this passage explain how Moses illuminated the glory of the Lord from his face. That illumination occurred as a result of Moses beholding His glory, and thereby being transformed by the very presence of The Living God. Paul goes on to explain that because the children of Israel could not bear to look upon the glory of God shining from the face of Moses, he wore a veil over his face. In so doing, the children of Israel were inhibited from not only beholding the glory of God, but being transformed by it. According to Paul, that veil is taken away in Christ. He goes on to explain that as we behold with unveiled face as in a mirror, we are transformed into the same image we behold, just as Moses. As Moses beheld the glory of God, it shone from his face as though a reflection of that same glory shining back at God. The statement that we are being changed from glory to glory is a declaration of, a comparison to, that very same event with Moses. The intention of the statement about being changed from glory to glory is not so much about gradual, incremental changes as it is about transformation which results from the glory of God radiating to us, and consequently, from us. As the scripture plainly states, we are transformed by The Spirit of the Lord into the same image from glory to glory.

Transformation occurs, not by turning or repentance, but by the glory of the Lord. Repentance prepares the heart to be transformed, but transformation occurs from the presence of God. The new man is created by God, not made by man and it is truly righteous and holy in His sight because it is an expression of His own person and image within us.

One only needs to consider how communion and interaction with Him has so altered and empowered us in times past. There is no vestige of anything impure that does not dissolve to nothing at the sound of His voice. When we hear Him speak, when we find ourselves enveloped in His love and the wonder of His presence, then doubt seems to wane like shadows from the noon sun. Then it becomes laughable, even ludicrous, when men declare "God can't".

We are changed in every part by the perfection Jesus Christ has accomplished on our behalf. Nothing has been left undone to create the opportunity for communion with God at the deepest level. The residue of everything unclean has been washed by the pure blood of a perfect sacrifice so that full entrance to the innermost place is made. Within the picture of the tabernacle, it was necessary for every part to be clean for God to dwell in the innermost place. That innermost place is within us and nothing is deficient in His offering.

We read in John 6:63:

⁶³ It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing. The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life.

His word is so much more than a collection of facts that if assembled in the proper order, feed the intellectual mind; His words are spirit and life. What that means is the word does not produce itself through your flesh or your natural faculties. It penetrates to the deepest part of your being, into your spirit, into your heart, and produces everlasting life on the inside of you.

A significant result is that it changes your answer to the question, "What do you want?" If you have feasted on the finest cuisine known to man, it is difficult to return to a diet of tasteless food that is less than ordinary. When you have tasted of the goodness of God, the richness of life that is only in Him, it is difficult to settle for ordinary, natural things. What becomes the longing of your heart instead is the joyous presence of your Father that abides with you always. In His presence, you begin to comprehend those things which most people spend a lifetime looking for.

When we experience physical hunger, there are pangs within us which give us indication of the need for nourishment. Our need for His word brings with it pangs of its own. A significant difference between physical and spiritual hunger is that we understand when we are experiencing physical hunger all too well. But, the source of hunger within the sea of souls across the face of the earth for spiritual life is often unrecognized. Though people possess such hunger for spiritual life, they neither understand it, nor what they need to fill it.

God understands all too well what we need. What he has provided for us in Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of our singular, greatest need before our realization of it. The Lord has never condemned us for needing a savior. In His grace, He makes every attempt to thoroughly convince us of that need, but He has never condemned us, or ridiculed us for it.

Instead, in Christ, He has expressed the limitless, passionate care He has in His heart for those, who by nature, have no heart towards Him. Jesus Christ is the heart of the message God has given to man. If He is not the heart of the message, the message is heartless and cruel. If Christ is not the heart of the message, then the heart of God cannot be revealed.

Possessing the wealth of Heaven's splendor, Jesus gave all that He had that we might gain all that He is. All that He is, is more than enough. All that He is not is nothing worth having.

Within the gospel, it is a wondrous mystery that such a simple message unfolds into a brilliant tapestry, revealing heavens wealth. The gospel is a message of hope to hopeless men. It is an offer from God Himself to trade us beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning. The incomparable sound of eternal liberty rings out from the echoing chime of the gospel bell.

Ephesians 1:10 tells us that in the dispensation of the fullness of time, all things have been gathered together into Him. At the point of His greatest weakness; bruised, bleeding, beaten and dying- He gathered into Himself, by His

will and because of His love, all things. Everything in Heaven, everything in Earth, sin, death, every person born or yet to be born, all things within the folds of time and time itself were gathered into Him like a swirling, darkened storm being pulled into the vortex of a force greater than itself. He is the source of life.

Planted in the hearts of men, the gospel of Jesus Christ is the seed from which all spiritual life springs. To the intent that for those who believe the gospel, Christ is formed in us. Hence, the apex of human existence and experience is that Christ Himself, the source of life, lives within us. What else could we possibly need? What else could we possibly be searching for? This reality is so clearly revealed in Galatians 2:20 which reads:

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.

There is perhaps nowhere in scripture that gives such clear definition in so few words as to what it means to be a Christian. In this verse, you have an explanation of how the gospel works. There is a revelation of what God does in us, what He does to us through the death, burial and resurrection of His Son. We are shown with clarity the end result which God intends.

Once again, the Gospel reveals to us what was accomplished in Jesus Christ through His death, burial and resurrection. Throughout the entirety of the writings of the Apostles, the ultimate result of the gospel concerning us in this life is that Christ should be formed in us. The living God makes us one spirit with Him and the fullness of His life, His power, His nature empowers us, flows forth from within us. Christ in you- leading, governing, and empowering you- is the dictate and source of life by which you live. Within that existence is true and perfect rest in Him. In fact, it is the only place of rest for the soul of man.

If I, in my natural ability, fail in every aspect of life by human standards, but Christ truly lives in me, then I am the greatest of successes. If I achieve the highest accomplishments and everything I touch in this world turns to gold, yet Christ does not live in me, then I am the most dismal of failures. True reward is not the dark commodities and decaying treasure of a dying world. With the Lord is the light of life and in that light there is neither sorrow, nor regret. His possession is love and through righteousness he dispenses grace. The incomparable value of His Kingdom is the only commodity worth trading; the abundance of His presence the only treasure worth possessing.

Most people will not pay a large sum unless they know the value of what they are buying. The mystery of the Kingdom of God is that you cannot truly

know the immense value of the pearl until after you buy it with all you possess. It will never be a reality at arm's length.

However, when you buy it with all you possess, what comes into your possession are riches sourced in God that touch and beautifully alter every part of your existence. For example, when His love is experienced in truth, such love is like the refreshing wind of a warm spring breeze. Gently, it brushes across the spirit and soul of a man. The touch of His love promotes and engenders deep peace, steadiness in the face of unpleasant things in a woefully unpleasant world. At the same time, God's perfect love is so powerful, it conquered death, vanquished the power and sting of sin, casts out fear with all malice and makes us stand complete in Christ. It is a force against which no foe can stand.

Furthermore, it stops being only an ideal, a cliché we speak about from time to time. In Christ, He has made it so that the reality of His presence and the fruit thereof, is more apparent and of greater depth than the most intimate of human relationships- though the world cannot see Him. Within the hallowedness of who He is, who we are is changed in every way.

Within the church, we speak often of transformation. Frequently, we do so in terms of events, as though the situations of life or the trials we face are something God sends to change us. What is often forgotten is that the situations and trials we experience are nothing new to mankind. Since Adam fell, man has faced affliction. Those afflictions never carried with them the capacity to transform us in the manner God intends. While it is true that many people only come to an end of themselves and turn to God in the dark hours of life, the difficulties faced are not the source of change. If God could accomplish spiritual transformation through common affliction, why would He feel the need to send His Son?

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. ² 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 12:1-2)

As this scripture so beautifully declares, transformation occurs through renewal. Paul writes "be transformed by the renewing of your mind." In addition, he explains an ever important result such transformation has in that it enables us to prove the will of God. Through transformation that results from renewal, we prove what the full and complete will of God is.

The word "prove" expresses the idea of testing, then approving. It is the capacity to evaluate the purity of something so that it can then be confirmed for

use. What is communicated in this word is the idea that as we walk the corridors of this age and face decisions, ideologies or circumstances, we are able to put those things to the test. We test them to discover whether they bear the purity and excellence of God's will, then live in those things that do. The renewing of our mind is transformative, in part, because it aligns our thinking, our perspectives, the deepest sense of our being with what is already true in God. We stand in the will of God because we are renewed.

What he is speaking of is a mind that is no longer engaged in the realities of life through the limited perceptions of the human mind. In other places within his writings, Paul uses the term “spiritually minded” to describe this same occurrence. Therefore, a renewed mind is to be understood as something completely new and different from what it had been previously. Ultimately, it is a way of thinking, a manner of perception that has become like God’s; that understands life through Him.

So then, it would become obvious that this concept of renewal to which Paul refers is not simply reconditioned thinking. What is being referred to is not merely the acquisition of new facts, but the oneness of mind and thought we gain from our unity with Christ. We have come to not just know new things, but we have become something all together new through the magnificent work of His cross, and the power of His resurrection. Obviously then, a true perception of transformation begins at the cross of Jesus Christ.

In order to truly grasp the miracle of the cross, it helps to first grasp the desperation of the human condition apart from Christ. Jesus made this declaration in John 8:31-36:

³¹ Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed Him, “If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. ³² And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.”

³³ They answered Him, “We are Abraham’s descendants, and have never been in bondage to anyone. How can You say, ‘You will be made free’?”

³⁴ Jesus answered them, “Most assuredly, I say to you, whoever commits sin is a slave of sin. ³⁵ And a slave does not abide in the house forever, but a son abides forever. ³⁶ Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed.

God seeks to make us free. By coming to know the truth that is Jesus Christ, that freedom is found. What He seeks to make us free from is sin and the ravages of it. That is made clear in verse 34 when he says “whoever commits sin is a slave of sin.”

If you ever read an accurate description of what slavery is like, you will come to discover that it is about much more than forced labor. Slavery is about

afflicting a human being in such a way that they are robbed of everything. Not only can there be severe, physical abuse, slavery intends to leave a person as something less than a human being. Those who have been kept in bondage by it not only lose their families, but it also seeks to take their dignity, their self respect and the significance of their identity as a person. Slavery has at its core the awful intention of reducing a person to less than nothing. Sin is exactly the same.

Furthermore, those who have subjected others to slavery could only do so with a complete absence of conscience. Sin is exactly the same. Without conscience, it brings misery to everyone it touches. If you doubt it, you only need to look at the effects it has had on our world, on people that you know, and within your own life.

The way sin has manifest itself in your life, and the effects it has had, differs from the way it has manifest in the lives of your family, friends, neighbors or community. Sin has many faces, but it only has one child- his name is death. Regardless of the specific way it has infected each person, its ultimate intention and end is our destruction.

Without God, man has no capacity to live any differently than within the corruption of a fallen world. Therefore, when we see people overcome with specific sins which are decimating them, we do well to see them, not just within the context of their sin, but according to the context of their need for a savior.

We can preach against sin and not preach the gospel. To lay such a burden on people is akin to a task master requiring a crop from his servants but providing no field in which to plant, no tools to till the ground, and no seed to sow. Regardless of the demands, regardless of the threats, the servant will never produce what is required. Some enemies are not overcome by sheer will and determination. Some enemies are not subdued because we have determined to not give up until they are defeated. However, when we preach the gospel, victory over sin, freedom from its chains, abandonment of it as a master is an inherent part of the message.

When we speak of hell, it is usually in reference to fire, brimstone and eternal torment. Those things are realities that should not be denied within sound teaching. But, the truth is, those things are inconsequential compared to the true loss of such a fate. True loss, true hopelessness, the anguish of eternal damnation is eternal separation from God. The scripture teaches that every good and perfect gift comes down from The Father. Whatever joys we experience in this life, even if we do not walk with God, are part of our existence because of the work of God amongst mankind in this world. In a sense, heaven is shadowed for us ever so slightly by the warmth of our love towards our children, by the solace of a warm fire on a cold, winter night, by the majesty of a mountain range that captures our breath. Life is filled with good things from God. When a person is lost eternally, all of the goodness that God has ever expressed to them is lost for them forever.

Never again will they feel love or joy. Never again will they know the blessing of something so common as human contact and friendship, nor will they ever again sense, in any capacity, the voice or presence of God that has reached for them all their life.

As we consider the people we come in contact with, we must bear in mind that if they are living separate from God, they are experiencing all too well the shadows of an eternal existence apart from God. They feel it every day, though they do not necessarily understand it. What they must know is that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is the light in the darkness which their soul so desperately longs for.

Man, apart from God, is a pitiful thing. His capacity to perceive his own condition is hindered by the limitations imposed upon him by the sin which blinds his mind to God. When you speak of Spiritual things to the carnal mind, it is foolishness to it because there is no apparatus whereby it can grasp that reality. There is no capacity to perceive the things of The Spirit.

Because there is no perception, they will spend their lives waiting and hoping for light to shine from a source that cannot give it. Having heard the gospel, but choosing to reject it, they will continue to feast on forbidden fruit, pretending to delight in the taste of sorrow and death.

Unlike forbidden fruit, the gospel produces life and change within our innermost being. We cease from the failed endeavor of seeking encouragement in death, for there is no encouragement in death, only in life. The rich intent of God is that we are transformed into the image of His Son, without blemish and without condemnation.

It cannot be emphasized enough that transformation truly occurs when absent the weight of condemnation. No one ever changes at the deepest level by being condemned. We are changed at the deepest level because of Christ who is in us. We are changed at the deepest level because we are crucified with Him, leaving every vestige of the sin that enslaved us hanging on the cross. In Him, we stand complete, having been raised to newness of life through the glory of His resurrection. Through this gospel, sin is meant to no longer have dominion over us, nor keep us bound under the weight of condemnation.

Concerning condemnation, man-made religion teaches otherwise, even amongst those confessing faith in Jesus Christ. Some Christians only feel good when they feel guilty. They only feel secure when they feel condemned. Condemnation in the conscience is the fruit of doubt, while at the same time it feeds doubt. Ironically enough, this creates a cycle. A person stumbles into sin, or constantly revisits certain sins. Then, they experience prolonged condemnation in their conscience because of those actions. That very same condemnation creates a foothold for sin, which continuously manifests itself in the life because it is fed by the condemnation. The more one struggles with the sin, the deeper the

condemnation; hence, the deeper the condemnation, the deeper the root of sin. So it goes, on and on, while the life is destroyed.

The ultimate source of that cycle is doubt in the sufficiency of the cross of Christ. Usually, a person bears guilt for sin as their own pitiful attempt to atone for it. Such attempts are entirely self-focused. The principle reason people make such attempts to atone for their sin is because of the reasoning in their double mind which insists that God requires that in addition to the blood of Christ. Put in other terms, they are not sure if the blood of Christ, by itself, is enough to satisfy what God requires from them. That is doubt.

James 1:6-7 tells us that what things we ask for, we are to ask in faith without doubt or wavering. Furthermore, the one who wavers shall not receive anything from God. It seems evident that within the body of Christ, doubt is one of the primary reasons we struggle spiritually. Doubt is a stagnant pool from which so many drink, the waters of which poison and paralyze the soul. Because of it, so many are inhibited from living in the fullness of life Jesus promises us. It is a gaze that is fixed on something other than God.

When doubt comes to visit, he brings an acquaintance with him named fear. Fear is a thief that steals away our perceptions of the goodness and promises of God. It robs us of love, joy, peace, and leaves us desperate in a darkened, dingy room void of comfort. Lies, accusations, and a description of every bad situation that could ever happen to us is what this villain leaves behind.

Adam was placed where there was no shame before his creator. He dwelt openly and freely in the full presence of a pure and holy God. However, when he partook of the tree and died spiritually, both his conscience and his thoughts changed. Afterward, when he heard the steps of God, he hid himself because of his nakedness, or more accurately his doubt, his fear, and shame at his nakedness. God's response, the question He asked, is profound, "Who told you that you were naked?" The question infers that it was not He who had revealed nakedness to Adam. In fact, no one laid accusation at their feet concerning their nakedness, not even the serpent. It was a condemned conscience before God, filled with fear and riddled with doubt.

Just as Adam, you will hide from the presence of God in a downward spiral of guilt when nakedness becomes a giant in your thoughts. If our thoughts are of a natural origin, viewed through the lens of who we were before we were placed in Christ, then we will make ourselves guilty and accuse ourselves continuously before God. Because of our shame, we find nakedness in ourselves all the time. Child of God, who told you that you were naked? There is neither virtue nor freedom in accusing ourselves of things that God does not.

When framed in false religious virtue, condemnation becomes an expected part of life. As already stated, some Christians only feel good when they feel

guilty. Ironically enough, they will begin to feel guilty for not feeling guilty in moments when they forget the wretchedness they constantly accuse themselves of. Condemnation becomes comfortable, normal. In reality, it is the spice of religion and the bread of self righteousness. For some, righteousness is equivalent to self abasement, not divine justification through Jesus Christ.

These words are meant for the Christian who has become famished in the journey, longing for true meat and nourishment. Yet, they find themselves eating berries in the bramble being scarred by the thorns. For you to impose on yourself, or someone else imposing on you what God does not require will always bring condemnation.

So goes the never-ending battle in the minds of men unless the conscience is clean. A clean conscience allows us to give ourselves permission to gain the full access unto God which He has offered and provided for us.

Doubt, and the defiled conscience that comes from it, forbids access to God. Be encouraged in knowing there is no miracle needed to move past doubt. Understand that doubt is not something that is cast out of you; it is something you release by laying hold of the truth. Its origins are in thoughts issuing forth from a mind waiting to be renewed. The deadliest deeds ever committed began with one thought. Every doubt that produces death and condemnation is the same.

Shall we then concede our ground, even in small measures, to the voice of condemnation? To which voice shall we give heed? Which declaration shall proceed from our own lips?

It is amazing how clear our vision becomes, how stabilized our thinking becomes when it is no longer veiled by condemnation. How high a peak it is we ascend to when we no longer equate humility with guilt, but with the greatness of God instead.

Consider what a blessing it was for Lazarus to walk by his tomb on occasion. No evidence could be given him, nor argument made to dissuade him from the reality of God. There was no doubt for he only needed to pass his tomb. For us, there have been places where God has met us in our death, delivered us from our tomb. These are places where we have seen the glory of God and it has raised us up. When life rises up to challenge us, when doubt and unbelief press against us, we need only take a walk past our tomb to possess all the evidence we will ever need. Only believe, and you will see the glory of God. Only believe, and you will find an undivided focus of purpose and strength.

We do not grope about in an unaided search for truth. It is God Who brings us to the perception of what is true in Him and gives us the ability to set our mind on those things. The scripture assures us in Isaiah 26:3, "You will keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on you because he trusts in you." In the Hebrew, there is a double usage of the word "shalom" in this verse which is

translated “perfect peace”. That wording is meant to emphasize the completeness of the peace we are kept in by God when we, by faith, have been transformed by renewal.

Such transformation produces fruit in us that strengthen us. For example, the peace of God which passes all understanding is one such fruit. Peace, as a word and as a concept, has an endless array of meaning to people. To one, it may be defined in as narrow of terms as the absence of war. To another, it may be conceptualized in serene settings overlooking quiet waters as the soothing song of a lonely robin calls them away to another place. To another still, it is an evening around a warm fire in the company of even warmer companionship. As delightful as these things are, they are but small streams and tributaries to a greater, everlasting river. It is a river with a raging flow and cool, crisp waters that fill the soul.

God, in His wisdom and by His nature, bestows peace- produces peace within the deepest places of His people. As a fruit springing forth from Him, it is one of the greatest delicacies we shall ever find the privilege to partake of. Yet, in its essence, it is more than the quiet moment. Peace is a key means by which The Lord of Heaven and Earth establishes and maintains His rule within us. Furthermore, it is a key means by which He protects the sacredness of our fellowship.

There is no magic formula by which the peace of God is attained nor is there anything that can compare. Without it, we cannot be fully governed by God because scripture says "let the peace of God rule in your heart." Therefore, the perfect, manifest peace of God is a golden instrument by which He sounds our advance and gives us direction.

Without His peace that passes all understanding, we stand in terrible places of vulnerability for the scripture also says "the peace of God shall guard your hearts and minds." Resting in Him, the peace of God stands as a sentinel against the wiles of the enemy and assault of the world. That protective friend is a sure guard which the wise man learns to depend upon, stand behind, and take refuge within.

Passing through the habitation of peace, we enter into His rest. What we must avoid is the misinterpretation of what rest is. Simply defined, the place of rest is where we have ceased from our own works and entered into His. Lack of understanding of His rest can result in us becoming less responsive to the voice of God. Rest in Christ is not complacency, nor is it a passive, unfocused, nonchalant way of life. The place of rest is the place of power. Rest is a nectar, a rich nourishment that comes from the presence of God.

Consider the promise of a land flowing with milk and honey given to the children of Israel when they came out of Egypt. That land is a picture of the rest

God intends. You may recall there were giants in the land, but they were dead long before the Israelites took up swords against them.

We look around and see glimpses of hell in this world. Yet we look around the same world and see glimpses of heaven. The testimony of eternity is all around us. What it bears witness to is the rest created for us despite the giants who tell us otherwise.

The peace the world gives is rooted in circumstance. As circumstance changes and fluctuates, so does the peace the world offers- which is actually no peace at all. The peace that is from Christ is His peace, inherent to His nature and rooted in Him. Such peace as that is unchanging, just as He is.

When peace has no place, when we are longing for it but cannot find it, that elusiveness is a sure indication of our present condition. Never is a man so weary than when he has had no rest. Three days without sleep and a man will find that he longs for nothing more. It will occupy every thought. For the spiritual man who has tasted the wonder of His peace, even a moment apart from it draws out of him the deepest longings for God.

The world demands we relinquish the truth and conform to its lie. Carnal men offer their acceptance if we will surrender just a little of what God has said. When we compromise the truth, we sell people our peace for their favor.

Amongst the views of man and his limited comprehension, God is, without doubt, a controversy. There are endless questions as to why certain things are the way they are, and certain questions as to why God would allow those things to be. Men question Him, doubt Him, accuse Him and rail against Him as they refuse any comfort of Him in the midst of their own limitations. So great is the war that rages against the word of God. So great is the word of God that overcomes the world. Within it is the revelation of Christ.

The Bible is a spiritual book. What you need from it, such as the rich of fruit of peace, does not come because of good, natural disciplines. It must be taught to you by the Holy Spirit. When we live by The Spirit, when we hear the promises of God, it awakens our senses, our spirit with excitement at the possibilities within God.

For some who confess Christ, when they hear the promises of God what passes through the heaviness of their mind is a certain measure of skepticism. They began to play the cards they hide in their pocket that reasons out why such things are unrealistic or unlikely. For them, Godliness is a goal never attained and Satan remains a foe to be feared.

How shall Satan hold dominion over us when his power has been utterly cast down by Jesus Christ? We find our refuge behind a torn veil in the innermost place with God. No serpent may tread there, nor darkness cause His light to flee. Satan is an offense. He is the dark, ancient plague against the soul of man and God

has sent His light against him. Perceptions change depending on the view from which you observe. Standing in the beauty of His sacred temple, we come to behold the trembling of a foe we once thought mighty. We come to understand that the flaming sword of God has reduced him to little more than dust and ash.

Though our vision is obscured to a certain degree in this life, there is no doubt that each man will pass into eternity. When they do, when the dimly lit glass of this life is shattered and they find an unlimited, full comprehension of the majesty, glory and incomprehensible goodness of The Living God, they will gladly bow in wonder before One so glorious. Everyone will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

Chapter 2

Living in Christ

The job of a teacher within the Body of Christ is to impart to the hearers what is needed for them to be taught by the Lord themselves. Never was it God's desire that His people, those that are called by His name, suckle nourishment from another person when He has prepared a feasting table for their fulfillment. That does not remove the design of God in establishing relationships within the Body of Christ that bring us encouragement, strength, or allows God to speak to us through those relationships. With that said, those relationships were never meant to supplant our ultimate source, which is The Lord Himself.

The intent of the gospel in this life concerning those who have been born of God is that Christ should live in us. He does not do so as some abstract, mythical idea. Rather, He lives in us as a true, living force governing our lives, leading us, directing us, expressing Himself to us and through us.

God's intent for us is not that we should live the best we can by whatever moral code we understand. His intent is for us to be the expression of His love, life and nature as a result of the oneness of Spirit we have with Him. The difference between those two manners of life is immense, I dare say incalculable.

As Christians, we have the opportunity to hear preaching and sermons at will. Not only is it available to us every Sunday, but we may access sermons at any time by radio, internet or television. As beneficial as that may be for us, the most impactful sermons do not occur in a pulpit. The greatest sermon ever preached is the truth declared in your life, through your life- the evidence of the manifestation of the Sons of God bearing the fruit of their Father. Your life is your sermon and through it God declares Himself to a world in darkness.

Know also that your life is your ministry and your ministry is your life. From the moment you are born again until you pass from this life, your ministry is established within you. You carry that service to God everywhere your foot treads. Sometimes, our vision of ministry surrounds the events that occur at our church building. Sometimes, our vision of ministry is a grand plan of service that awaits us at some point in the future. The truth of the matter is your ministry is before you with every breath you draw. It is given for you today and its impact is now. Ministry is not necessarily the full time occupation of a select, called few.

Ministry is the expression of God through you to a dying world, using the gifts he has given you for that purpose. Ministry is also the strengthening and encouragement of the body of Christ within this world through the gifts He has placed within you.

It is an unfortunate reality that oftentimes, we as Christians become so enamored with the plans we imagine for tomorrow, that we fail to apprehend the plans God has prepared for today. We can become so consumed with the idea of going to distant lands and reaching thousands for Christ, that we lose sight of the one God has placed in front of us in this very moment.

If Christ is within you, then wherever you go, revival goes with you. There is a miracle waiting on the inside of you. It is greater than you can ever imagine and scarcely depends upon your natural abilities.

When we preach, when we share our testimony, when we declare the goodness of God and live by The Spirit, we can impact others in ways that we do not always perceive. What we are called to do is be prepared for the day in which we find ourselves, yield to the leading of God, and use the gifts we have been given by The Spirit.

Some years ago, I was in an Easter service at a large church. As you would expect, it was packed because of the fact it was Easter. As the service was coming to an end, the entire audience was standing while the Pastor closed in prayer. Suddenly, there was a frantic commotion on the row behind us because a man had collapsed.

For everyone standing in the vicinity, there was a certain degree of angst and uncertainty as to what to do for the man besides calling 911. His family was in full panic, crying out and asking him what was wrong, but there was no response.

At that moment, I saw a woman walking towards the scene. The expression on her face and her demeanor was something I will never forget. She stepped into a scene of pandemonium with complete confidence and the way she carried herself affected everyone involved. As it turned out, she had some measure of medical training, though the extent of the training was unclear. Regardless, when she stepped into the situation, bringing the skill and confidence she possessed because of that training, the panic subsided and the cries quieted. Because she was well trained, she knew exactly what to do and the manner in which she did it had an effect on everyone.

In 2 Timothy 3:16-17 we read these words:

All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, ¹⁷ that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.

This passage is not a list of things we gain from the scriptures as much as it is an explanation of the progressive effect of His living word revealed in scripture. We are taught, line upon line, doctrine that is true in Jesus Christ. That doctrine then creates reproof, or proves to us what is true in our life and what is not. As that truth is revealed, understood and received, correction occurs. The ultimate accomplishment of this process is that we are instructed in righteousness. That is, we receive a complete and thorough education in the righteousness of God imputed to us through Jesus Christ and His righteous nature of which we become partakers. To give an analogy, if doctrine were one class attended on one day in college, instruction in righteousness is a P.H.D. Having been so, thoroughly educated as Sons of God, we are then equipped to respond with confidence to every circumstance that screams with panic from the back of the room.

The scripture itself reveals that the purpose is not that we should find eternal life within those pages, but that those words should testify to us of Jesus Christ. The ultimate intent of those words, which are Spirit and life, is not to give us practical principles to live by and a moral code to observe, though we do find such value within them. The ultimate intent of the scripture is to awaken our senses to the person, presence and rule of Christ. They testify to us of the very essence of who He is so that we may come to know Him, to enjoy rich communion with Him, and follow Him as Lord of our lives.

In this we become thoroughly instructed, perceptive of the realities of the Spirit, functioning as mature Sons of God in the Earth. There is no greater achievement within the human existence than to live in Christ, to find our life in Him. Everything we do as a result of that becomes part of the joy of the journey and we cease to seek our meaning within the standards of value this world and this life establish apart from Him.

However, do not think for a moment that this life will not rise up in opposition to your faith. Every day life will ask you whether you believe what you confess. In your response you will never lie. It is possible to mask your answer to people, but you will not lie to life when it asks you, nor God who sees the true condition of your heart. Whether we set our confidence on God, on His word or not, is how we answer the question. Whether we yield to the governing of the Spirit, or the demands of the world, will determine what is produced in our life.

¹⁶ I say then: Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh. ¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.

¹⁹ Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, ²⁰ idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies,

outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, ²¹ envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told you in time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

²² But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law. ²⁴ And those who are Christ's have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. ²⁵ If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit. Galatians. 5:16-25

When you consider a tree that produces a desirable fruit, how is that fruit brought forth? The fruit you see with your eyes, hanging on a tree, existed within that tree before it ever grew on the branch. That fruit was produced visibly, tangibly, because of the nature and essence of what the tree was.

If you take a seed out of an apple, plant it properly and in the right conditions, you will soon see a sprig shoot from the ground and eventually grow to a mature tree that bears fruit in its season. When you planted that seed which you took from an apple, you had every expectation that an apple tree would grow. Never would you have expected to walk into your garden and find oranges hanging from the tree. From the moment it was planted, the expectation was for apples. That expectation was based upon the nature and essence of the seed planted. Expectation concerning the nature of the seed was sourced in the nature of the tree from which it was produced.

Within that tree, within its design and genetic makeup, were all of the capabilities, all the mechanisms necessary to produce fruit. So then, what was within its nature was produced on its branch.

Concerning what The Spirit desires to produce in us, there is a distinction between fruit and works. When Paul describes this list of fruit in Galatians, many of those fruit are not describing an action taken. For example, consider the fruit of joy. Joy is not a work, neither is it something you do in and of itself. While it certainly has a determining impact on what you do and how you do it, joy is not an action. Joy is a fruit of The Spirit, produced in us by Him. It is called the fruit of The Spirit because joy unspeakable and full of glory is inherent within the nature of God.

Scripture teaches that the joy of The Lord is our strength. If you have no joy, you have no strength- at least not the kind of strength that originates in God. Furthermore, joy is not produced by simply having a positive attitude. It is the joy of The Lord that is your strength.

What's more, you should not confuse joy with fickle, human emotion that rises and falls like the tide. The intention of its production in us is not a fluctuation

based on changing circumstances. Neither should we expect joy to disappear in times of difficulty. In fact, it is in times of difficulty that we most need it.

Consider those to whom Peter writes in 1 Peter 1:6-8. Though these believers were at that time grieved by intense trials, they still rejoiced with inexpressible joy full of glory. How they acted, how they responded, what they did in the midst of great affliction had everything to do with what Christ was producing of himself in them. His joy was their strength.

Ultimately, bearing fruit is not about how moral a life we live. Do not allow that statement to create confusion. The suggestion is not that we should live an immoral life. Clearly God would not have us indulge ourselves in adultery, fornication or any manner of such things. What is being suggested is that the production of God's fruit within is more than establishing a moral compass or providing a code for morality. Consider it in this light- would you say that the absence of joy is immoral? Would a lack of peace be immoral? There are scores of Christians that observe moral codes of some kind, but do not abide in Him so they do not produce fruit.

If a vine shoots forth a branch, is there a duality to their existence? Does the branch exist in any way separate from the vine? Certainly it does not. Every ounce of life that flows through the branch is sourced in the vine that has produced it. Does the branch bear something different than what the vine is? Certainly it does not. If a grapevine issues forth branches filled with grapes, it will not produce a single branch that yields another kind of fruit. Every branch will produce grapes because they are one with the vine. The branch abides in the vine and the vine abides in the branch.

What is produced in our life, our existence, our nature is the result of a life lived in God. By this we bear fruit that is pleasing to God and to us for that matter. How delightful is the taste of God's fruit to those who feast on it!

So then we know that God is not simply seeking for you to change your actions, He is purposed to change your nature. It is the false guise of religion that demands change by effort. It is an inaccurate view of repentance to esteem it to be a forced change of behaviors or works. What He commands us to do is bear fruit only He can produce. Our behavior changes because we are transformed by Him. We come to live differently as a result of a nature that is changed by Christ Himself within us. If you want the unequalled wealth that God has provided in Jesus Christ, then you can have it. It is produced within you by His word finding entrance into a heart that is fully prepared to receive it and yield to Him.

When you look into His word and respond to it, you will discover who you truly are because you will discover who God meant for you to be. Some people spend a lifetime looking for themselves- trying to discover their destiny or purpose. Wandering as through a desert with no compass, they aimlessly pursue in the

desperate hope that tomorrow will offer them the discovery which today has denied.

The search for your destiny is not all together a pursuit of the future. There is an eternal reward for us and we do well to fix our eyes on it. However, in this life, you are equipped and called to this day; to this hour. We can only operate in the gifts God has given us now, we can only fulfill our destiny today. Today we follow God, and tomorrow we will do the same.

The path of God for us is usually measured, not in miles, but a single step. With one step at a time, we walk on the water and find our destiny under our feet. So often, Christians are anxiously awaiting the grand plan while failing to realize that every step with God is the very destiny they are looking for. Stop waiting for God to use you and start using what God has given you. Occupy the land He has set before you with the weapons you hold in your hand. As you do, God will lead your steps into a land flowing with milk and honey, and you will ever increase in awareness of how to use the gifts you possess from Him.

Knowing then what God has placed in your heart, put your hand to the plow and never look back again. Commit yourself to the pursuit of the richness of the land before you. As human beings, we sometimes have a tendency to look back on the land of regret and envy the fields we did not harvest. But, faith toward God is forward facing. Do not sink in the mud of a river called yesterday. Whatever you may esteem as the failures of your past, or the opportunities missed, has little bearing on the pursuit of what lies before you except in regard to the wisdom gained from the lessons of days gone by.

When God gives instruction to do something, when the path is revealed, then the door is open to pursue that path. For example, in Acts chapter 16 the revelation of where God specifically wanted Paul to go was given within the context, as a result of Paul's relentless pursuit of the vision God had given him. The passage reads thus:

⁶ Now when they had gone through Phrygia and the region of Galatia, they were forbidden by the Holy Spirit to preach the word in Asia. ⁷ After they had come to Mysia, they tried to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit^[a] did not permit them. ⁸ So passing by Mysia, they came down to Troas. ⁹ And a vision appeared to Paul in the night. A man of Macedonia stood and pleaded with him, saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." ¹⁰ Now after he had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go to Macedonia, concluding that the Lord had called us to preach the gospel to them.

Paul determined to go in a certain direction in pursuit of the call; first to Asia, then Mysia, and afterward Bythynia. It was then that God gave revelation of

the path which led in a different direction. There was no error on Paul's part in making a determination to go a certain way. He was pressing towards the call of God. But, the full revelation of the next step was given within the context of his movement, as he stepped toward his calling.

A person will not walk with God for long before a sense of calling burgeons within them. There is a common testimony amongst many Christians who desire to pursue the vision God has put in their heart, but scarcely find the satisfaction of doing so. The longer we fail to pursue that vision, the more we ache for our calling.

Bear in mind also, our destiny and calling in life is not ultimately about the accomplishment of a task or the arrival at a destination. It is entirely about us being conformed to the image of His Son, bearing the fruit of His Spirit, and God being glorified in the Earth through us. Let Christ come forth in you in every aspect of life. Let His light be the light that shines from your face.

The condition of our heart in pursuit of these things is paramount. Consider this passage from Psalm 91:

*¹⁴ "Because he has set his love upon Me, therefore I will deliver him;
I will set him on high, because he has known My name.*

*¹⁵ He shall call upon Me, and I will answer him;
I will be with him in trouble;
I will deliver him and honor him.*

*¹⁶ With long life I will satisfy him,
And show him My salvation."*

Notice that the scripture does not indicate a desire for honor from God, a desire to be set on high, so he loved God in an effort to gain such exaltation. In all our endeavors, on the path we walk with God, the true and meaningful origin is love affixed to our Father which does not seek its own. Through such love we are yielded to Him, not in the form of a slave, but in the delight of a son. This observation is made to point out an upside down tendency we can have to seek exaltation from God for natural, self willed reasons. What is rooted in a love for Him has, as a central purpose, something more.

If we go a step further, the understanding becomes clear that the degree to which we function in the authority of God, in our calling, is in direct proportion to the degree in which we are yielded to Him. The humbling of ourselves, the yielding of ourselves under His hand is in direct proportion to the degree in which our desires are sourced in love for Him.

Therefore, a stumbling block exists with far too much commonality amongst us. Many Christians have an idea of calling that is fueled by selfish ambitions or

desires to be exalted. Perhaps the most common indicator is an over exaggerated focus on some grand ministry waiting down the road. While it is true that God gives us vision of the path in the distance, ambition blinds us to the reality that we have arrived at our calling today. As Children of God, there is no place that our feet tread that our ministry is not present with us. Your life is your ministry and your ministry is your life. The grand plan of our own ambitions usually blinds us to that truth and in a sense, deadens us to the grand plan that is before us today. Self centered ambitions distort the call of God.

The love of God alters the longing of the heart from a question of what can I gain of myself to what can I give of myself. The remembrance of your first love will put your gifts and calling into perspective. There is contentment in accepting that if it is only for His pleasure it is enough, even if no one else sees. Until it is first and foremost for His pleasure, until the use of it is yielded to His discretion, it cannot become a benefit to others; otherwise, it is driven by selfish ambition. There are many things you ask for which God wants you to have. But, we do not receive it because of the motivations of our heart, desiring to consume it on ourselves for our own purposes. Do not be motivated by the accomplishment of a task, but the fulfillment of God's will and pleasure. For in what is pleasing to Him we find the ultimate fulfillment of ourselves; we find the answer to our meaning.

The answers we receive from God have always been true in God. His is not a new answer to a new question. All of His works were finished before the foundation of the Earth was laid. When we find revelation, healing, when we find direction- it is found in Christ because the availability of it has always existed for us in Him so that it might be done in the Earth as it is in Heaven. Everything we receive by God, though it is manifest in the natural, is eternal in its origin. All things consist in Him.

In His light, we discover hidden riches and indescribable gifts. Furthermore, in His presence is where we come to truly understand who we are and what has been placed on the inside of us.

Your destiny is discovered in the things God has entrusted to you to multiply on His behalf. The gift reveals the purpose. If someone gives you a fishing pole, there is little chance you will use it for any purpose other than fishing unless you are ignorant of what it is.

By His Spirit, He has given gifts to us. Those gifts, because of their purpose, give us perspective to our calling. For us to gain understanding of the use of the gift, we search His word and the Spirit reveals it. That revelation, at least in part, will be given to us as we commit our self to the use of our gifts and actually begin to do so.

Consider Abraham if you will, in light of the pursuit of your calling. In Romans chapter 4 we are told:

*19 and not being weak in faith, he did not consider his own body, already dead (since he was about a hundred years old) and the deadness of Sarah's womb
20 He did not waver at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strengthened in faith, giving glory to God.*

The object of his gaze was not himself, nor did he consider the frailties of his aging body. Instead, he was strong in faith, giving glory to God. Who he was in the natural was irrelevant in terms of fulfillment of the promise. Neither did he feel the need for a self assessment as to whether he was worthy to receive such promise from God.

Trapped within natural perceptions, many people assess God's promise to them exactly the opposite as Abraham. They base the fulfillment of God's promise on who they are as a person. In addition, they gauge whether they can walk out God's calling based on what they assess their abilities to be or not be. Moses questioned his calling because he stuttered, Jeremiah because he was young, Gideon because of social standing. Throughout scripture and down the line of history, countless people were used mightily by God simply by taking their eyes off themselves.

The Bible says that Abraham's faith was strong, giving glory to God. Abraham believed God for no other reason than because God said. There was no self awareness in his faith, but was based solely on who God is. Faith is always a response to promise. It is not independent in its origin or function, otherwise it is not faith toward God. In other words, we do not arrive at a conclusion based on our reason and logic that God should or will do a certain thing. Then, after we have arrived at that conclusion, have an expectation for God to perform based on our conclusion. Disillusionment will be the inevitable fruit of such misgivings. In all reality, that manner of approach is what scripture terms as tempting God.

Ponder for a moment the account in Mark chapter 4 of Peter walking on the water. This is, without question, one of the most notable events in scripture. We do well to observe that it is not the storm, Peter on the water, or even Jesus on the water to which God would have our eyes drawn. The focal point, the central crux of the matter is revealed in the statement, "Be of good cheer, it is I."

What is being said is, "Be filled with comfort, courage and cheer. There is nothing to be afraid of." The reason for that is because of the statement "It is I." A simple survey of the Greek reveals that the literal translation of that statement is "I AM." In that moment came the profound and priceless revelation that their eyes beheld the self existent, almighty God manifest in the flesh before them. Peter then responded to the invitation of His word to walk on the water with a true perspective of exactly who Jesus was. Unto us has now come the same reality.

When everything else is stripped away and the means by which we see is faith, then our eyes are opened to things we never thought possible. Faith is the vision by which we view the substance of what is eternal. Moreover, it is the means by which we discern The Spirit and the will of God. It is the vision by which we see the living God.

Perhaps you have heard the saying, “seeing is believing”. That is not how it works with God. In the Kingdom of God, believing is seeing. The Bible tells us that we walk by faith not by sight. There is no vision of eternal things without faith, neither is there perception of God. Faith is not the screw you turn- it is the lens that you look through. Its vision is through the heart, not the eye. The object of its gaze is the difference between steadfast faith and crashing waves on the sea of doubt and unbelief.

In the previous chapter it was noted how Lazarus could pass his tomb and find encouragement from the place which God had raised him from. The same held true for his sisters, Mary and Martha, who found encouragement every time their eyes beheld their brother alive before them. Just before Lazarus was raised from the dead, Jesus made the statement to Martha, “Did I not say to you that if you would believe, you would see the glory of God?” The irony is that scores of people witnessed this event. Those who looked through the lens of faith saw the glory of God. Those who did not were offended by the miracle and sought to destroy Jesus and Lazarus because of it. Without faith, there is absolutely no vision of God, no perception of His glory. Without faith, a tomb is only a tomb, and it can never be seen as anything more.

The idea of being in relationship with God is communicated often in churches, which is proper and right that it should be. That is what we seek, to know the one true God, and Jesus Christ whom He sent. The fruit of such a relationship is the true riches of life. Trust is a key foundation for every relationship. When we trust someone, our tendency, our inherent attitude towards that person is to always be fully ready to believe what they say. That readiness to believe plays out in how we respond to what that person tells us as well as our confidence in them as an individual; in what we are convinced is unwavering goodwill towards us. That entire process is the essence of what we call faith and it represents a major determination of what the nature of our relationship with God will be.

Also know that faith is not blind. Such a statement does not suggest that when we come to faith in Jesus Christ we somehow have the capacity to see all of life’s answers in a moment of time. Neither does it suggest we become all knowing, or understand every step of the journey from now until we pass from this life. Nonetheless, it is not blind. The action of faith is not represented by a

visually darkened pursuit into the unknown. Put in other terms, it is not a guess as to who God is or what He would have us do.

Faith is and always will be a response to God, a response to His word. Consider what the scripture says, "Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God." It does not come any other way. There is no self initiation involved because it is a response to the eternal word of God which is Spirit and life. When we no longer endeavor to see God through our efforts to be righteous or the limitations of our natural mind, the means by which we see and perceive everything that is real and right in God is faith. Faith is the eyes by which we view the substance of what is eternal and by which we discern the Spirit and will of God.

The divine requirement of faith towards God defies and contradicts all the complexities of human psyche. A man's mind continually persuades him to set his confidence only on the realities accessible by his natural senses. None of those senses are capable of ascent into the realities of heaven. Those very same senses are incapable of manufacturing true, Godly faith.

The escape from such a dilemma is found in the eternal word of God. Faith comes by hearing, hearing by the word of God. In no way, shape or form does God pleasing faith originate with man. We came to possess it because God has expressed it to us within the realm of the spiritual and unseen. By no means should that dishearten us. What it means is that even this most basic requirement He has entrusted into His own hand. We, as the sheep of His pasture, restfully respond to the vibrant tones of life uttered into us by God. It is through faith that the seed of life takes root in us.

Faith is set in the place where it is first and last. The righteousness of God is revealed, imputed, known and walked in, exclusively and entirely by faith. The only context through which the righteousness of God is known is faith, from first to last, beginning to end. Apprehension of the eternal and the riches of Heaven is by faith alone, by faith entirely. If pursued by any other means, it is not revealed.

Concerning the life we then come to live, The Bible opens the eyes of understanding to the fact that the just shall live by faith. Such is the habit of their life, the normal means of existence, and not simply a place they visit only when they need something from God. For the just, faith is not a source of wealth they reach into only in times when life has left them impoverished. It is their home and a way of life. It is a virtue and action of value in God's eyes that is priceless.

Possessing such a manner of life is the only means by which we can relate to God. Faith is a passionate pursuit of Him, not a dead resignation. Vibrancy of faith is not simply the acceptance of an unseen reality, but the pursuit and apprehension of one. Through it, we touch what is true in God. When we do, it

brings into us all the fullness which is in Him. When we touch the truth by faith, it forever alters the course of our life.

While we certainly do not know the end from the beginning, God faithfully makes our path clear in the moment before us. Inspired, responsive to His word, we make the effort of faith and are greeted by the power of grace. The path then becomes clear, but it must be followed.

God has an innate ability to speak in clear pictures and words that produce understanding within us. He is more than capable of helping us know what we need to know and never fails to reveal what is needed in its time. Comfort is found once we perceive that God often puts the answer in place, within our reach, before we know which question to ask. There is great relief in knowing He is God. There is great relief in knowing that the circumstances of our lives do not outrun Him, that He has perfect knowledge of our limitations of perception.

It is also a great relief to know that before God, it is acceptable to be human. That luxury is not always afforded us by other people, though it is one of our greatest needs. Within our natural ability, we are weak creatures that lack omniscience, trapped in the moments of time through which we pass. Not only are we unable to see the beginning from the end, we often have difficulty fully processing today. All of that should make us exceedingly glad. Liberating is the realization that we have no responsibility to understand all life's mysteries, nor interpret the meaning of every situation we encounter. The meaning of some things are hidden behind the gulf of eternity while the meaning of other things we have the joy to discover in this life. In the end, it all means one thing. God is God, and that is a tremendous relief.

Having confidence in this fact is helpful as we perceive God's ways. Within His Kingdom loss is gain and gain is loss. Response in the moments produces rest for a lifetime. To delightfully yield to the grasp of grace is to find freedom of movement behind the torn veil. It is a wondrous mystery that so often the ways of God and His grace are revealed by means of contradiction. Not that God contradicts Himself, but the normal patterns of human expectation and reason.

In like manner does the effectiveness of His power work in us. He makes us strong when we are not, victorious when we have lost. When captured by lies, we were led to the circle of truth because while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. The deepest complexities of Heaven unfold from the simplicity of the gospel. The gospel itself is so simple a child can understand it through simple faith. Yet, the highest human intellect cannot begin to process nor comprehend the perfection of the work of Christ.

When uncertain of God's path, you could look at the ways of man and do the opposite- you would seldom be wrong. However, there is a better way. Return to the simplicity of your faith that has brought you thus far, and will surely carry you

home. Within the simplicity of faith we find a resting place, a warm bed where we are covered and comforted by the promise and grace of God. It is the only sure footing on which we will ever stand- all else is sinking sand and shifting soils.

When we are tried, it is our faith that life demands we relinquish. The grace of God, through faith, is the mountain upon which we stand when life floods the valley. The clarity of our view upon that peak brings into focus what cannot be seen otherwise.

By faith, we come to understand we are clean before God- made so by one who is exceedingly great and assured by the sound of a voice that loves us. How clean is clean? Can we accept, by faith, that we are entirely clean in the present if washed in the blood of The Lamb?

The reflection of our face, staring back at us from the pool of His shed blood shows no stain. It takes no effort, no exhaustive work on our part to view such reflections. Vision is the only requirement. The ability to perceive the intricate construction of Divine accomplishment reassures us time and again of our standing.

It is the voice of accusation, filled with malice, that would foray into our conscience in an attempt to disrupt harmony and fellowship with God. Careless creeds and silly efforts of man's tradition serve only to deepen the plunder of our reward. We are challenged on every side, even by well intentioned friends at times, to relinquish faith in Divine accomplishment.

What hinders us from the fullest vision of that which is true in God, of what is possible in Him, is a perspective in our hearts that separates itself from what is possible with God. Such a separation occurs most often because of the very things Jesus told us about in the Parable of the Sower- trials, cares of this life, deceitfulness of riches, and lack of understanding. Supplemental to that is the reality that sometimes people are searching more for reasons to doubt than to believe.

All things are possible with God. That beautiful truth has been the mantra on the lips of Christians for centuries. If perceived, truly perceived then responded to, it emboldens us; it makes us unconquerable. Where many stumble is when that truth arrives at their own doorstep. There is a general acceptance of such a declaration as it relates to others. It is nigh to fantasy or wild imagination when it is viewed in relation to ourselves. We concede the ease with which He founded the earth, set the stars in their place, raised Christ from the dead or miraculously touches people around us. However, when it becomes personal, when it relates to His capacity to totally alter or transform every aspect of our being, we choke on carnal, self centered thorns. If all things are possible with God, then all things are possible with God in us. When that becomes real, we cease to struggle spiritually and we become a miracle.

Though frequently the object of scorn, Peter's denial should serve as a tremendous encouragement. In fact, the seemingly endless wavering of all the disciples deserves our careful consideration. The fact of the matter is, most Christians have found their ship tossed to and fro in the sea of unbelief. We are in good company.

It can be said that sometimes the best way to tell a story is to begin at the end and work backwards. The sovereignty and power of God is demonstrated in that the disciples were not only established eventually, but these very same men in whom we see their failures, became pillars to generations. Being established is what God has in mind for us as well. We shall anchor our ship in the restful harbor of grace. Let the crashing waves rise as they may, we shall not waver in the tide. Make no mistake, if you continue to sail in the sea of unbelief, you will sink in the waters thereof. But, if you can believe, only believe, there are no waters on which you cannot walk if Christ bid you come.

Against that truth will life, people, trials and even the devil wage war and demand the relinquishing of faith on your part. As we abide in His word, by faith, our thoughts are established. The deadliest deeds ever committed began with one thought. The same can be said of faith that moves mountains.

If your thoughts lead you to the place where you fear what man can do to you or if you fear what man can take from you, you will fear man and not God. If it is our habit to seek the approval of men, then it is impossible for us to believe. Consequently, if we cannot believe, we cannot fulfill what is the most elementary of Divine interests. If we cannot believe because of our inappropriate esteem for friends, coworkers, spouses, Pastors- then we are trapped before we even begin. All of it is initiated with a thought and the source of that thought. As long as your thoughts are consumed by people's opinions of you and how they will react to your obedience of God, you will never have the capacity, focus or determination to obey what God has called you to do.

When our thoughts become sourced in something other than the truth, it changes how we relate to God. When things change in our relationship with Him, it is not God who changes. There is not an alteration of His love, good intent or faithful promise to us. What changes is that we will not abide in what has been freely given to us because our vision has been darkened by a lie.

As an example, we can come to believe the assertion that in yielding fully to God, we lose something of ourselves because we are no longer in control- as if we ever were. When that occurs, the mentality can subtly become such that we want God to be God, but we want Him to act according to our expectations. It is a battle for control with the living God based on a lie which took root in our thoughts.

Encouragement comes in knowing that God is greater than our thoughts. Because we can identify the points of battle does not mean the war is not won. If

our sins, weaknesses or failures stopped God, the world would have ended long ago and no one would be saved. By His grace, he raises our eyes to an upward gaze which makes for planted feet and a steadiness of focus towards those things which are richest.

As we grow in The Lord, we learn to weigh every thought against the truth we know and bring every thought captive to the obedience of Christ. With spiritual maturity we learn to establish our thoughts through the normal habit of waiting on God.

Waiting on God is a way of life, not the implementation of a method. Simply put, it is setting your gaze, your mind, your attention on the living God until you see Him move or hear Him speak. Nothing about it is complacent, but rather it ushers us into perfect paths. Jesus said "I only do those things I see my Father do." That is why we wait on God, so that we might do what we see our Father do. We wait so that our spiritual senses become trained to the voice and movement of our Father.

The life we have in this world is a gift. When experienced through Christ and in Christ, life is seasoned full of flavor. At the same time, this world will dangle dainty distractions in front of our nose to draw attention away from our true source of life. Waiting on God creates an environment, an awareness of our connection with God that allows Him to sort through those distractions. Having sorted through them, He helps us refocus on where priority should lie. Put another way, waiting on God offers to Him the opportunity to gain the ground of our heart and mind so that the fruit of His Spirit may flourish there.

When we hunger for bread, it is from a place of need or lack. Our hunger is created by the body's need for nourishment and energy. In essence, there has been a decrease in us that has created that hunger. However, it is different when we hunger for God in many respects. Hunger for God increases in a place of plenty. What that means is that the presence, the rest, the life of God creates in us an insatiable appetite for Him as we partake and taste of those things. That which is in Him fills us, yet there is no end to the bounty of our feast at His table. The more we partake, the greater our desire to partake- the deeper our hunger though we are filled. In our longing for more of God comes deeper contentment as we grow in Him.

There is a familiar passage in Isaiah 40:30-31 which says:

*Even the youths shall faint and be weary,
And the young men shall utterly fall,
³¹ But those who wait on the Lord
Shall renew their strength;
They shall mount up with wings like eagles,*

*They shall run and not be weary,
They shall walk and not faint.*

No one anticipates rest as much as when they are desperately weary. No one hesitates to continue on more than when ominous woods are what lie ahead. Yet, our greatest testimonies are often the tales of what we find as we pass through places we least wanted to go. Under the dark canopy of the woods, frightened by unfamiliar sounds, we find hidden trails that reveal majestic scenes of beauty only when once they are traveled.

If we wait on God, listen to His voice- if we will abide in His resting place as we traverse these trails, wonderful things happen. So often, it is in the dark that His pure word brings the greatest illumination. It is in peril that His pure word becomes an impenetrable shield from present danger. It is in the press that his pure word produces excellent fruit and new wine.

As human beings, it is normal that we long for the other side of the woods- for bright skies and green pastures. Hope is, after all, a tremendous motivator. Whether we find ourselves in dark woods or green fields, God's objective is the same. That objective is that Christ should be formed in us and we find the power of His rest to be our home. Increased is the volume of Heaven's sound to the quieted soul, waiting on God.

Even the strongest and fittest amongst us grow weary eventually. For us, as human beings, natural strength and resolve has a limitation that ends at a circumstance greater than the sum of our strength.

With God, it is not so. He does not grow faint, nor does He grow weary. There is no circumstance greater than the sum His strength or length of time that can outlast His resolve. What's more, God is not driven by the same urgencies that often fuel our passions or pursuits, nor is He constrained by the timelines we create or expect. Everything is made beautiful in its season.

As we wait, then restfully respond, we gain unwavering focus. That focus brings boldness, the same boldness we see in the nature of Jesus Christ. His boldness is audacity without arrogance, conviction without compromise, and unwavering intent to obey God regardless of cost. Within His nature, boldness is not part time. You will not be bashful, shy and fearful as a normal pattern of life, and then turn on the boldness for your faith in certain circumstances. You are either bold or you are not.

The boldness we gain translates into the way we relate to God, particularly in our prayer life. That does not suggest we become impudent, demanding or prideful in how we approach God, but bold in the fact that we can. Even the scriptures admonish us to come **boldly** to the throne of grace to find help in time of need.

James 5:16-18

¹⁶ Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much. ¹⁷ Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain; and it did not rain on the land for three years and six months. ¹⁸ And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth produced its fruit.

We are heard, not because of how passionate we pray, how loud we cry out or how many words we use. We are heard because we are righteous before Him. We are heard because He has given us the right, as His children, to come boldly into the innermost place and make our requests known to him. We may very well pray with passion because of the fire of God within us. In fact, the righteousness we have received often stirs those passions and fervency in prayer. But with that said, it is not why we are heard.

James makes reference to Elijah and the encounter he had with the priests of Baal on Mount Carmel. The story is found in 1Kings chapter 18. At the time of this encounter, Israel had been in a horrible drought for three and a half years. This drought began when Elijah declared it because of the wickedness of the nation. That wickedness was fostered by the king who reigned over Israel at the time whose name was Ahab and his wicked wife Jezebel.

Elijah reappears on the scene after three and a half years, issues a challenge to the four hundred and fifty priests of Baal, and meets them on the mount. The challenge was for them to pray to Baal, and he would pray to The Lord. Whoever answered by fire was God. So it was that the priests of Baal prayed from morning to evening, thrashed about, cried out, cut themselves and implemented all manner things in an attempt to conjure Baal. Yet, when they were done, no one heard and no one answered.

The first thing Elijah did was gathered the people and rebuilt the altar of The Lord. After he built the altar with twelve stones, he dug a trench around the altar, placed the wood and then laid the sacrifice on the altar. What he did after that is of extreme importance. He took four vats of water, and poured them on the altar three times. In essence one vat was poured on the altar for each of the tribes of Israel, just as the altar was made of twelve stones for the same reason.

The reason why pouring twelve, huge vats of water on the altar was so important is because Israel had been in severe drought for three and a half years. Water was the most precious, sought after and valuable commodity in all the land- they were desperate for it. To them, water was their greatest need. Elijah took what they longed for the most, what represented survival to them, and poured it out as an offering to God.

Then he prayed, and this was the extent of his prayer:

“Lord God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that You are God in Israel and I am Your servant, and that I have done all these things at Your word. ³⁷ Hear me, O Lord, hear me, that this people may know that You are the Lord God, and that You have turned their hearts back to You again.”

As soon as he finished praying, fire fell from heaven and consumed the sacrifice. God took up by fire the stones, the wood, the bull, the dust and the water. What He left behind was revival. The people cried out to the Lord, turned to Him, and put away Baal.

Several things are noteworthy of this account, not the least of which is the fact that in our prayer to God, we are never outnumbered. It does not matter what the odds are we face or perceive. If God is with us, we are the majority.

Also of great importance is understanding that God is not conjured. Unlike the priests of Baal, Elijah spent more time preparing his heart and the hearts of the people, than he actually did praying. His prayer was all together unlike that of the priests of Baal. There was no rolling about or vain efforts to gain a response from God. First, the heart was prepared in obedience to the word that had been spoken to him- then he prayed. We see then that Elijah did not go to Carmel in an effort to get God to respond. Elijah went to Carmel in response to God and the content of the words of his prayer was few in number.

Jesus speaks to this in Matthew 6:5-8 which says:

⁵ “And when you pray, you shall not be like the hypocrites. For they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the corners of the streets, that they may be seen by men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. ⁶ But you, when you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly. And when you pray, do not use vain repetitions as the heathen do. For they think that they will be heard for their many words.

Noteworthy is the fact that prayer is an intimate thing, not about outward appearance, but that which occurs between you and God in secret- in the heart. Your reward will be open and God shall surely answer you before men. With that said, the greatest reward is the riches received from the presence of our Father in the secret place.

Jesus makes it clear in this passage that it is not about the volume of words, but the kind and their origin. One word, uttered in prayer by faith and with

sincerity of heart is of greater significance in the eyes of God than a million words breathed in vanity.

Prayer is not an incantation, nor is it something we utter to persuade God to bend a particular circumstance to an outcome based on our natural perspectives or desires. That statement does not negate the truth that we are encouraged to make our requests known to God and that we are to ask for things from Him by faith. It is meant to emphasize the fact that prevailing prayer begins with the condition of the heart, gains both perspective and motivation from the truth of His word, and finds its power when breathed out by The Spirit. As we learn from Elijah, it begins at the place of reconciliation God has provided. From there, it flows in an abundant, ever increasing river of life issuing forth from our innermost being. It flows from a place of worship.

*Our Father in heaven,
Hallowed be Your name.
¹⁰ Your kingdom come.
Your will be done
On earth as it is in heaven.
¹¹ Give us this day our daily bread.
¹² And forgive us our debts,
As we forgive our debtors.
¹³ And do not lead us into temptation,
But deliver us from the evil one.
For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.
Matthew 6:9-13*

What Jesus shows us in this prayer are not words that we are meant to simply recite. We are shown the nature of what prayer is. It begins with worship then moves to a seeking of God's will. From there it deals with some of the deepest, most complex issues and hindrances in the heart of people such as our need and concern over daily provision. In addition, it brings forth forgiveness and our need for deliverance from temptation. Finally, it ends once again with worship. The entirety of the prayer is encapsulated by worship and is uttered in a spirit of worship.

Prayer is also much more than going to God and making requests. There is a critical vitality found in presenting ourselves alone to God without an agenda. In other words, it is a time we set ourselves apart to commune with God and it is solely for Him. There is no agenda for Him to give a word so we have something to teach or prophesy. There is no agenda of obligation whereby we make it

something we do to fulfill our Christian duty. Instead, we set aside the difficulties of life and the needs that have come to occupy the forefront of our mind. In this time, we rest in the garden of God and our agenda is solely communing with Him, listening and responding. Within this place, the movements of our dance become His to lead and ours to follow. Those hours bring unto us stability, direction and peace. Only then are we prepared to advance in the battle. Only then are we equipped.

How burdensome it is when God becomes a side note in our life and ceases to be the meaning of it. We weary ourselves with the pursuits of this life and make time for God if we can. The most valuable time we have is that which is spent with God without an agenda. Priceless and pure is the occasion we present ourselves to God solely for His pleasure.

Sometimes, there are misperceptions we lean toward concerning how we interpret God's answer to our prayers. What we perceive as silence can be misinterpreted as "no". But, the silence itself is an answer declaring to us any number of things. Most commonly it is showing us our heart is not right, that we need renewal in our perceptions, or we have already received an answer but not responded to it. Whatever the case may be, it is ultimately the result of an effort to usher in our own expectations.

Prayer must become His dance to lead and cease to be nothing more than our agenda to demand. The music that provides the rhythms for our dance is love. When love is the actual, central, driving force, it changes the nature of all of our movements. This being so, it radically alters the nature of our requests and our desires as well.

Love not only changes the aim of our prayers, it deepens our senses to the realities of what cannot be seen as we pray. A heart filled with Divine love does not pray because it has to, nor does it pray because it is a duty, a debt we owe to God as service to Him. A heart filled with His love need not be coaxed to communion. In such a heart, there is a longing, a yearning for the continual, abiding presence of our Father speaking into the deepest parts of who we are- deep calling unto deep.

When the love of God is absent, or not central to our requests, even the noblest prayer is perilously in danger of becoming a selfish root producing the vile fruit of self will and all that is opposed to the nature of God. We increasingly find His will as we flourish in His love

According to Jesus, we express our love toward Him by keeping His commandments. However, keeping His commandments is about much more than simply what you do "for" Him. Many can be your works, laboring night and day, yet still find His inexpressible love far from you. Labor apart from His love and the light of your lamp shall surely grow dim and fade. Remain in His love and

joyfully give light to all who are in the house. When your journey is finished, and the days of this life are gone, only what is found in Him shall mean anything at all. The love of Christ compelled Paul to places such as Ephesus, Lystra and Derbe to spill his blood in their soil while he sowed the word of God in their hearts. What he sowed produced a harvest unto everlasting life. He was compelled by love.

Love is more than a virtue God possesses. He is love, both the embodiment of it and the origination. When Christ is formed in us, when it is His fruit being brought forth, love is the choicest of all. Divine love is, for us, an acquired virtue. Its seeds are scattered as The Holy Spirit, like a gentle breeze upon the golden plain, brushes across the spirit and soul of a man. Thus it becomes ever increasing.

Such love is not the substance of fancy tales or humanistic pretense. It is at once pure, practical and clothed in selflessness. The unconditional care of Divine love places the ultimate well being of another as its highest priority. Greater love has no man than this, that he should lay down his life for his friends. The love of God lays un-hewn stones on a perilous path that another may find passage. Those precious stones are purchased by the sacrifice of the one who loves. Never does it have as motivation the consideration of what self may gain in return. Rather, the rejoicing is solely based on the priceless benefit gained by another. For the love of Christ compels us and thus we come to live, no longer for ourselves, but for Him who died for us.

Chapter 3

Becoming Mature Sons

Jesus is the source of all meaning for us. Real, true fellowship with Him is what life is. Within that life, we find a source of wisdom that goes beyond our best reasoning.

The word of God rightly divided reveals Christ to us, thereby revealing Christ in us. What results is the increasing development of spiritual awareness and the exercise of our senses. Through use of our senses, we come to fully discern good and evil. Real change and growth happens here. Only what flows from Christ who is in us produces life and spiritual maturity. The flesh profits nothing.

Concerning maturity, Hebrews 5:12-14 gives us this insight:

¹² For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food. ¹³ For everyone who partakes only of milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. ¹⁴ But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.

As one gives thought to those words, we discover how ripe this passage is with revelation. Two specific phrases are the intended focus for our purposes. The first phrase is "by reason of use". What that phrase means is a pattern of life, or a habit. A habit is something that becomes part of your nature, something that has become entrenched in the way you think, the depths of your heart and by extension the actions of your life. In addition, a habit is a pattern of behavior which has been so regularly followed it almost becomes involuntary.

Allow me to share my testimony for a moment, for it very much relates to habits of life. I came to know The Lord on January 2nd, 1994. Until that time, my life was being overrun by darkness. Not only did I struggle with drug and alcohol abuse, I was burdened with deep depression and paranoia. Often, I heard voices and was losing a true perception of reality. Thoughts of suicide were not uncommon.

For two or three months before that wonderful night, I had been asking God for help, but nothing was changing. In fact, I was spiraling deeper and deeper into

darkness. On that night, God was merciful enough to allow me a momentary perception of the true condition of my life and what awaited me because of it.

In that moment of anguish, I prayed these words, "Lord, help me." Those words passing from my lips were issuing forth from every part of my heart. As soon as I uttered those words, God answered and for the first time in my life, I heard God and I knew it. Five words changed everything when he said, "You know what you must do." What He was showing me in that moment was to lay down the life I held to and follow Him. In a moment of time, I went from desperation and despair to an overwhelming sense of peace and clarity. Everything changed instantly and for the first time, I truly felt alive.

Up until that moment, I had been asking God to help me for several months. What I came to realize was God had been making known to me what was needed for my deliverance in all that time. There was nothing different I was shown in the months leading up to the night of my salvation than there was on that night. The difference was nothing more than the fact I was unwilling to relent from the life I lived. My way of life, and the habits which accompanied such a life, was all I knew. There was no comprehension of an alteration of the nature of my existence. I wanted help, but on my terms.

Oftentimes, people cry out to God asking Him to relieve them from the anguish of their bondage, but they do not want Him to take from them their chains. They want Him to take away the anguish of a life apart from Him, the coldness of a life without Him, but they do not want Him to take away the things that are causing such misery. What they seek is a cure for the symptom so they can continue to live in the disease. The reason such disillusionment exists is because it has become habit to live in the mire. There is no perception of a life that differs from the habits and observances that they, and everyone else they associate with, are trapped within. It is the habit of their life.

Until the habits change, the circumstances will not. It does not work in reverse order. Generally speaking, there is not a change of circumstance and then a change of habit. This is a key reason why we fall into the same snare, over and over again, because we are unwilling to relinquish the habits, the patterns of our life, and exchange them for God's pattern of life.

When we are stagnant and not maturing as individuals, or as the Body of Christ corporately, it is seldom, perhaps never, due to a lack of revelation from God. Most often, by the time we reach the mire of spiritual desperation, God has already revealed to us what we must do. Not what we should do, nor what we ought to do, but what we must do. Our problem is that we set aside that revelation and do not act upon it, even hardening our heart against it, because it conflicts with our agenda, with our desires- with our habits.

We choose instead to paint our own picture, to create a portrait of ourselves based on an image of what we believe will bring us fulfillment. The truth of the matter is that the self painted portrait is the biggest lie we have ever allowed ourselves to believe. The self painted portrait is a blend of colors we mix by our own hand then apply upon our own canvas. Regardless of how we mix those colors, or apply them to the canvas, what it produces is a hideous shade of gray; an image which is without form or substance.

In plain English, the stagnant, dry, spiritual state we find ourselves in has everything to do with our preference for, our cleaving to the image we have created of what our lives should be. We are not, by the Spirit, sensing the masterful revelation of God, the leading of God, and then responding. We are not moved by the Spirit because we have entrenched ourselves in religious traditions that define to us what church is, or we have entrenched ourselves in the habits of humanity and eat of the only fruit that can come of it.

What we discover in the passage from Hebrews is that maturity in God also produces a habit. This habit affects and changes all other habits. This habit is what Hebrews 5 refers to when it uses the phrase "senses exercised." What that means is that you are living by the sense of the Spirit, the awareness of Christ who is in you, governing your life. Maturity produces a habitual use of the senses of your spirit, the gifts of God, the perceptions of the Holy Spirit by whom we know what is real and what has its origins in God.

When speaking of spiritual maturity, we make reference to a person that no longer lives with typical, human constraints. Does that mean spiritual maturity is a manner of life in which we no longer make errors in judgment or bad decisions? Certainly it does not. We do not arrive at a place of omniscience simply because we arrive at a place of spiritual maturity. It does not remove the constraints of typical human limitations, but it does take us beyond them. It takes us beyond what we are limited to within ourselves and we cease living in such a way that only our natural senses govern how we think, feel or act. We cease considering ourselves limited to what we can perceive or accomplish on our own, by our own abilities. The spiritually mature perceives reality through God and is empowered in this life by The Spirit of God, the power of God at work within.

Do not think either that perfection, or maturity, is the place where there is nothing left for you to uncover; that you have discovered all the deep things of God. Spiritual maturity is the place where you actually begin to make those deeper, richer discoveries. When we are mature in The Lord, the deeper things of Heaven become more and more apparent, they are known in a more intimate way, because they are seen, received and comprehended through God.

With that said, how we steward what has been given to us has an effect on how we grow and what we gain. What is the image we have created, the lie we tell

ourselves that keeps us choking on thorns in the bramble? How long will we choke on those thorns before we consent to the revelation of what we know we must do, and bow to the sovereignty of God who is greater than all?

There is nothing God has left undone, nor limit to the wisdom He offers us. The fullness He has granted to us of Himself is limited only by the willingness of our heart to receive it. When we harden our heart, it numbs our senses to His leading, and chokes out flourishing vines of spiritual fruit. As we are taught, the cares of this life, the deceitfulness of riches and the unwillingness to endure persecution for the word are key sources that cause us to harden our heart, to resist the entrance and rule of His word within. The condition of the heart is vital to thriving, spiritual growth.

Therefore, maturity exists within the person whose habit of life is to sense, then respond, to The Spirit. When that becomes our manner of life, His word finds entrance into the heart, and the abounding fruit of His Spirit is produced in the sum and substance of our life. What we come to know is that His fruit is not only for our enjoyment and fulfillment, but it also draws us into a His nature and brings us under His governance.

For example, the peace of God is a delightful fruit of which we become partakers by His Spirit. As we partake, peace abides, filling every sense of your being while making you aware of God in truth. Not to be confused with vain emotionalism, it can be produced only by the One of whom it is inherent to His nature. No human being is able to produce something so magnificent in and of himself or herself. What we are instructed to do from the scriptures is, “Let the Peace of God rule in your heart.” (Colossians 3:15)

His peace then becomes a guiding force within our lives. When we abide in what is true in Him, peace is ever present. When we wander from the truth, we begin to lose a sense of His peace which is meant to be an indicator to us. What it shows is that we have veered in a direction that is no longer under the coolness of the cloud which leads us in the desert.

Where His presence is, His peace abides. Where His peace is, you'll find His presence. When you sense His peace parting, there is no need to panic. Instead, do as the scripture says and pursue it swiftly that you may acquire it- follow the cloud. Remember, He gave us His peace as a means to guide, direct and control our path. People, circumstances, and life will attempt to talk you out of the path of peace. But the admonition of The Lord is to not turn from it. If you do not know what that peace, and His presence feels like, then turn your heart and eyes to Christ until you find it. You will know when you do- it is unmistakable

As another point of emphasis, let me say that the fruit of His Spirit is meant to be permanent. The point of view that seasons of dryness are normal occurrences instituted by God for a particular purpose is not all together accurate. It is common

that we, as Christians, experience seasons of drought. The reason for it has everything to do with the condition of our heart, with what we have received into our thinking that is not sourced in His word, and a need to return to the fountain of truth which always produces freedom and life.

The anointing, the presence of God does not rise and fall upon us as the tide- it abides like an endless ocean. Therein is an unplumbed depth with yet undiscovered wonders and beauty. No bounds are known within the fathoms. Taking this into consideration, our exploration of God, His immaculate gifts and the inheritance bestowed are riches that we have the joy to continuously discover. To call it a responsibility is not as clear an idea as considering it a privilege. We do not offer God a favor by "making a decision for Christ", or by offering Him time with us. Neither do we offer Him a favor by promoting His Kingdom agenda. The favor has been done for us and we do well to bear that in mind.

In doing this favor of offering unto man, with loving care, the riches of heaven, He does not do so with limitation in mind. It is not to be expected that we should dine with Him one day and starve the next. Neither is it normal that we should enjoy seasons of deep, abundant waters, and then endure seasons of dry, lifeless soil. Such experiences may be common, but they are not normal.

Jesus offers this promise, "I am the bread of life. He who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst" (John 6:35). We can have strong confidence that when our Lord says "never", it is exactly what He means.

Hardships will surely come, adversity will make itself known. Be that as it may, no circumstance can separate us from Him. The only way in which our fellowship is hindered is by stones, thorns and shallow ground. Well prepared soil, possessed with understanding, always produces fruit bearing trees that do not wither, and always prospers in Heaven's wealth.

From a purely natural perspective, such a reality can be difficult to envision. In Christ, the normal manner of life is to fix our gaze on things that are not seen instead of things that are (2 Cor. 4:18). Such a declaration could seem impossible to many, and to the natural mind it surely is. To the normal, human way of thinking, it is absolutely impossible. However, it is the habit of those that are spiritually mature to look at things not seen, to know and sense the reality of the eternal through the unfolding revelation of the Spirit of God.

The apparatus by which this vision occurs is faith. We walk by faith not by sight. Hebrews 11:1 tells us that faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things NOT SEEN. Another verse that speaks to this manner of life is in Galatians when Paul makes the audacious statement, "walk in The Spirit and you will not fulfill the lust of the flesh." It is the Spirit of God that illuminates our senses to behold what is true in God and empowers us to live out what He reveals.

The only deterrent to darkness is the presence of light. A man, trapped in an unlit, unfamiliar room will grope around in the dark, completely unaware of the contents or details of the room. While in total darkness, there is no capacity to see or understand where he finds himself. His senses are limited to the touch of his hand to find his way about. Such a plight is only alleviated when he finds the switch on the wall. The moment it is flipped the circuit closes, fills with power, and lights the room. Darkness has no choice but to recede.

Every Christian has likely suffered the plight of struggling and groping in the dark. Temptation, fleshly desires, and ultimately sin are not overcome by greater efforts of resistance. Mental toughness and discipline cannot uproot rotting tares. In fact, they often serve to hide our true condition because they increase the tendency to rely on our own abilities.

The only solution is the proximity of God. The only power capable of chasing away every vestige of darkness is His Spirit in whom we abide, and who abides in us. "Walk in The Spirit and you will not fulfill the lust of the flesh." There is no exception to the rule. There is no mandate that such proximity is limited, temporary or ever inaccessible.

When we are mature, walking in the Spirit, what we find occurring is darkness fleeing and righteousness springing forth as a fruit, not an effort. One of several scriptures that impart the understanding of righteousness as a fruit is Ephesians 5:9 which states, "for the fruit of the Spirit *is* in all goodness, righteousness, and truth". Righteousness as a concept of moment by moment, difficult decisions between right and wrong is inadequate to produce the confidence we need. If our righteousness is not His righteousness, is not from Him, then we have no righteousness at all, regardless of what decisions we make in the moments.

In the times when you have seemed closest to God, recall the extraordinary strength and resilience you had. Sinful behaviors that once seemed unconquerable came to be virtually non-existent in those seasons. In fact, the very thought of partaking in something you once could not escape became ridiculous to you.

If you have never found yourself so empowered by the person and presence of God, do you not think it is time you should? The lie is the suggestion that we cannot remain continuously in such fellowship with God. The lie is that we must, on occasion, flip the switch and stumble in the dark. We may stumble, and there is grace for us if we do. But, sowing corruption and reaping its fruit is not inevitable, nor is it required for the spiritually mature. There is the capacity within you, because of Christ who is in you, that those things should have no place at your table

Let us never- never- never come to a place of accepting, or expecting the malignancy of an existence apart from God. We are Children of light. Let us walk in the light so that it should be our continual habitation.

Walk in The Spirit and the flesh has no strength, having been crucified by Him. It is imperative that you abandon the erroneous thinking that overcoming the flesh is a battle of your own waging, an effort of your own will. If self discipline were sufficient to overcome the flesh, then Christ needed not to have come at all.

If you are gathered into this notion that part of the struggle of the Christian life is to "fight the flesh", then you have set in order a battle plan for your life that is destined for defeat. Fight the flesh and you will find yourself weary, tattered, torn, and most of all, spiritually exhausted. Walk in The Spirit and the flesh has no strength because it has been crucified with Christ. Again, we do not fight against the flesh to overcome it. Our battle is not to overcome the flesh; our calling is to walk in The Spirit, to come of full age, spiritually mature. Our destiny is to live as Sons of God. As Romans chapter 8 tells us, we have become heirs of God if indeed the Spirit of God is within us. We are heirs of life, heirs of salvation, heirs of all the riches of our Father.

I was in a meeting once enjoying a few moments of fellowship, when the subject of an inheritance which had been received by one of the brothers arose. His family owned one of the largest sugar cane plants in the country. That factory has been in his family for several generations. When his mother passed away a number of years ago, her children inherited her percentage of ownership in the business.

As a result of his inheritance in this business, he gets a check every year from the profits. Depending on how well the factory does in any given year, he receives a payment that equals a substantial sum of money. Every year, he receives those funds based solely on legal ownership that passed to him through inheritance.

As an heir, he does not have to call someone in a superior position and beg for the money. Neither is it necessary for him to wrestle with the uncertainty as to whether someone will decide to send him a check or keep those funds from him. As long as the factory is profitable, he receives payment and the only question is how much it will be. Furthermore, they do not call him from time to time and insist that if he wants to get paid, he needs to come to the factory and work a certain number of hours. It is not required he clean the toilets, sweep the floor or process sugar. The reason that demand is not made of him is because he is a son, because he is an heir. By legal right, he owns part of the business. That ownership was passed to him, and is the fruit of the labor and efforts of others who have gone before.

There are people employed by the factory who are paid a wage to arrive at work at a certain time and perform a particular job. If they abide by that, they receive their wage. If not, then there is no reward for them. Their financial reward is based entirely on the work they do at the factory.

On the other hand, his financial reward is based entirely on the inheritance he received as a son. A further benefit is that, as a son, he has the right to go to the factory from time to time and load barrels full of sugar onto his truck, bring it home, and enjoy it with his family. As a son, he has the right to access and partake of the fruit of what is produced by that factory.

This story is meant to provoke the understanding that when God says we became joint heirs with Christ, it means that we partake of the ownership, the inheritance he has bestowed upon us. We may choose to have a manner of life inconsistent with that of sons, but that is the fruit of our own doing. When you consider the story of the prodigal son, it is the perfect example of that truth (Luke chapter 15).

A son, an heir, who lived in the abundance of his father's house, put himself in the position of being little more than a beggar. He put himself in the position of a beggar by choosing to live apart from, outside of his Father's house. Consider how horrible this situation is, for he did not simply go live an immoral lifestyle. The prodigal took the riches passed to him by his father and used those things to fund an unrestrained pursuit of licentiousness and sin. The inheritance of the father was the very thing which enabled him to pursue everything that was contrary to the nature and ways of his father. It was a complete betrayal, a complete abandonment of his father. Ultimately, it made the son into a destitute, defiled beggar in a country filled with strangers.

Sons are not meant to be beggars. Why then do we reduce ourselves to the place where we beg strangers for far less than what we own, what we possess in our Father's house? The point of what is being said is to speak to much more than ungodly living. The problems for the younger son began when his desire became for the things outside The Father's house, for an existence independent of The Father Himself.

What lies outside His gates offers no increase for a son. What lies outside His gates will consume all that a son possesses of value and leave him in famine, leave him in want- leave him as a beggar.

There is a proverb that says "the poor makes an entreaty, but the rich answers roughly." There are a number of angles that you can look at that scripture, there are many things you can take from it. In essence, it contrasts the attitudes of those who lack with those who do not. Those who lack see what is possessed by those who do not, then make entreaty for what they desire while it is possessed by

another. Those who possess often answer the entreaty roughly, taking advantage of the lack and the desire of those who want what they have.

The greater meaning goes far beyond material possessions. It speaks to the beggarly mentality of one with no inheritance. Concerning Sons of God, it is heartbreaking to see them begging the world for bread. It is heartbreaking to see Sons of God whose desires have ventured outside the gate, who have been reduced to begging the world for what it possesses.

There is a difference between serving others as Sons of God and begging others for their bread. There is a difference between serving others as Sons of God and hiring ourselves out as cheap labor. As Christians, it is imperative that we walk in the inheritance we have received and stop thinking like a hired hand. As sons, it is foolish for us to sell our inheritance to those outside our Father's gate and then, after we have impoverished ourselves, beg them for a morsel of their scraps.

Allow me to approach the subject of who we are in Him from another perspective. In 2 Kings 13, we find this amazing event:

²⁰ Then Elisha died, and they buried him. And the raiding bands from Moab invaded the land in the spring of the year. ²¹ So it was, as they were burying a man, that suddenly they spied a band of raiders; and they put the man in the tomb of Elisha; and when the man was let down and touched the bones of Elisha, he revived and stood on his feet.

In this story, how much do we learn about what is necessary for us to do in order to get God to release His power? What sort of efforts did Elisha put forth to persuade God to raise this man from the dead? You do not need to put much thought into it before you realize that such questions are absurd considering the fact that Elisha was a corpse. A man was raised from the dead through Elisha, not because Elisha in that moment prayed hard enough, believed long enough, cried loud enough, or fasted a particular amount of time. This man was raised from the dead because of the power and anointing of God which rested upon Elisha by the will of God.

There is no limit to the possibilities, the power resident in the Children of God who have come to full age, who have come to maturity. Within them are streams in the desert, a river of life that flows from the throne of God and extends refreshing to every dry, weary soul that longs for more than what life has offered.

Our God is a consuming fire. His word, His presence is a reality within us that burns at temperatures unknown to natural men and indescribable in natural words. From such brilliant light we find cleansing, comfort and hope.

The decay and depravity of this present world around us has the potential at times to leave us discouraged, even confused. Redemption's light, shining bright, proves these things to be the dross that cleaves to the former vessel. All that is new, all that is pure which offers a view beyond a tainted world is evidenced by eternity residing in the Sons of God. Within every one of us who are born of God is a gift that must shine forth. Within every one of us is a calling that must be answered, a voice that must be heard. Within every one of us is a life that must be poured out.

Chapter 4

The Body of Christ

⁷ *But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift.*

⁸ *Therefore He says:*

*"When He ascended on high,
He led captivity captive,
And gave gifts to men."^[b]*

⁹ *(Now this, "He ascended"—what does it mean but that He also first^[c] descended into the lower parts of the earth? ¹⁰ He who descended is also the One who ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all things.)*

¹¹ *And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, ¹² for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, ¹³ till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; ¹⁴ that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting, ¹⁵ but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head—Christ—¹⁶ from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love. Ephesians 4:7-16*

The fellowship of the saints is a magnificent gift. Amongst one another we find encouragement, support and the joyful exploration of the deeper places in God. The Body of Christ joined together supplies unto itself what is needful for its own edification.

The gifts that are imparted by God, when administrated by the Holy Spirit, bear the intention of creating unity and function. What gifts we have, when ministered properly, will equip and build other people, not to mention the Body of Christ as a whole. The operation of those gifts knits us together, bringing unity of faith, unity of purpose, unity of heart.

Unity is a condition created in an environment prepared for its existence. More than learning how to "get along", unity creates function. Ephesians 4:16 tells us that a joint supplies into the body. A joint is where two distinct, separate parts

are bonded in such a way that it creates an operation which allows mobility. Mobility, when exercised, produces strength. There is not a part within the body that operates as it should independent of joints, independent of the connections it has with other parts.

When Hebrews tells us to not forsake the assembling of ourselves together, this is the idea being conveyed. Assembling is a collection of parts put together in such a way that it creates function. Unity is the harmonious movement of those parts in unison together, responding to the head which is Christ.

The church is a people, not a place. With that said, many Christians go to church and are involved at various levels of church activity. Though they continue this way for years, they never actually experience the enjoyment of true fellowship, of unity, of what it means to be assembled together. Our assembly is not merely about a weekly meeting or the place in which it is held. Being assembled together is about a people whose hearts and lives are intertwined by the thread of the person of Jesus Christ. It is lives enriched by our souls touching one another as a normal, consistent course of life. Such is a life in which we become gathered together in His name in small pockets and large, in planned and impromptu ways, in convenient and inconvenient times. We become acquainted with one another's successes and failures. We become one. In becoming one, we operate in the fullness of who we were made to be.

Those joints, accompanied by the presence of unity, create function within us and those around us. The function it creates is in accordance with the gifts and callings we have from God, not just the church programs that need someone to work them!

Allow me to digress for a moment while I speak to an unfortunate reality. So many people remain in divided, toxic environments for years in order to fulfill a false notion of obligation as to what it means to not forsake the assembling of ourselves together. It is a tremendous loss. The loss of spiritual health and growth because of such misunderstanding is not only unfortunate, it is sad. What's more, that loss is more common than we might care to admit.

If you were to make inquiry in many churches, the majority of the people there would acknowledge either a lack of understanding of the gifts God has given them, or an uncertainty of how to use those gifts. While it is true that such uncertainty can be attributed at times to a lack of priority or a lack of pursuit of the call of God, another significant source of our atrophy is something else. There is very little empowerment in the Body of Christ. Many Christians sit idly by, not because of a lack of desire to walk out what God has put in them, but a lack of opportunity. Many, if not all gifts, are designed to function through the unity of the Body of Christ. Most of those gifts will never come to fruition because of

religious systems that are in place which give preeminence to a few so they may build their own kingdoms.

The Body is meant to function exactly as that- a body. When we restrict ourselves to church environments that function in ways other than that, it restricts the full measure in which God is able to use us to benefit and bless other people.

Having tasted the heavenly gift, the priorities of the world take on a different meaning. The drive to further excel in the world's methods, to measure success by wealth, to acquiesce to human pressures to perform are, in part, the thorns that choke out the word. Those pressures to perform somehow find their way into our communion with God and one another. The same efforts to excel become the driving force behind our efforts. The same frustrations and discontentment spiritually are the inevitable result. Do it the world's way, you will get the world's fruit. These pressures to perform have become ingrained in the majority of our church culture.

In addressing these things, and the divisions which result from them, it is in no way my intent to condemn or lay accusation against those who are children of God, but find themselves subject to such systems. What I know to be true is that myriads of people abide there, with the deepest longings for renewal in their spirit, refreshing in their bones, but they never find it because they are bound with the obligations of manmade tradition.

Our true and singular source of strength is the tangible presence of the person of God communing with the deepest part of our being. In those depths, the fires of what we call true revival are stoked. The more we find our satisfaction solely in Christ, all the more can we distinguish the declaration of demise scrawled upon the decaying walls of this world.

Let us not expect a man, even a Godly man, to bring revival to us. Only the Spirit of God can ignite an eternal flame which ever burns. Our God truly is a consuming fire. Why would we want to be spoon fed from another that which we may feast freely of from our Father's table?

We must not look to one another, as human beings, for strength. Rather, we must look to God in each member, strengthening us all, uniting us all, making us one. My strength is not my brother, it is Christ in my brother. If my brother gives to me anything other than Christ, he gives me nothing.

That does not suggest a lack of need for one another- quite the opposite. Christ who is in us, will draw us together in ways we cannot even conceive apart from Him. Furthermore, it is His will and intention to do so. What His intention is not, is for us to look to other people for what can only be found in Him. Psalm 118:8 says, "It is better to trust in The Lord than to put confidence in man." This verse is reportedly the very center of the Bible. The message it bears is plain and straightforward. You can trust God or you can trust man, but you cannot do both.

Many of us carry the testimony of a miracle God has done in our life, our family or our home. We can also state in many of the times of great desperation which led up to that miracle, God helped us when man could not. Does that mean God does not use the hand of others to bring aid to people? Of course, it does not. What it means is that even those things are sourced in Him. With that in mind, if the center of our concern is what other people think of us, of our Lord, or of His word, then we have no center at all.

When our heart is true, we do not seek the honor of God for the sake of possessing the honor before men. Instead, we seek the honor for the sake of honoring the giver of all good things. Do not seek to be honored among men as though exaltation in their eyes and the pride of it mean anything. Honor from men is nothing, a fleeting wind that brushes across your face, passes by and is gone.

It is a sorrowful thing to see scores of Believers in atrophy, at least in part, because church leadership or church culture hangs chains of tradition on their necks, then ridicules them because they cannot walk under the weight of bondage. It is not unity to be in harmony with division. It is not unity to compromise with a lie. Some things are worth standing up for. Some things that we stand for will demand of us that we stand against other things. The harsh truth is that you will never remove division from the church world in this age. But, you can remove yourself from division and into unity.

I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, ² with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, ³ endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. ⁴ There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; ⁵ one Lord, one faith, one baptism; ⁶ one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all. Ephesians 4:1-6

Unity is a reflection of the nature of God being produced from within us by His Spirit. It is not sheer coincidence that many of the fruit of the Spirit identified in Galatians 5 are also listed in this passage. A call to unity goes beyond a pitiful human effort to simply get along. Unity is the ultimate demonstration of the oneness of God being produced in us corporately. Unity can be sourced only in God, thus the reason the scripture says "the unity of The Spirit." That unity is preserved by the overwhelming majesty of His peace that fashions two together and makes them one. Peace is a bond.

There is no separation in God. Within Him, there is not a conflicting purpose, thought or idea between Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Everything that God has ever spoken, thought or done has issued forth from a constant, unalterable

harmony that is at the core of His nature. So then, unity amongst us is that same harmony making many into one- one functioning body. His peace knits us together in heart and in mind without removing the distinction or the uniqueness of what each of us was created to be. In fact, the fullness of your gift can only arrive at its highest potential as a result of being joined together in unity.

If unity is God producing the oneness that is inherent to His nature within us corporately, what then is division?

¹¹ For it has been declared to me concerning you, my brethren, by those of Chloe's household, that there are contentions among you. ¹² Now I say this, that each of you says, "I am of Paul," or "I am of Apollos," or "I am of Cephas," or "I am of Christ." ¹³ Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? 1 Corinthians 1:10-13

And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual people but as to carnal, as to babes in Christ. ² I fed you with milk and not with solid food; for until now you were not able to receive it, and even now you are still not able; ³ for you are still carnal. For where there are envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like mere men? ⁴ For when one says, "I am of Paul," and another, "I am of Apollos," are you not carnal? 1 Corinthians 3:1-4

The reason for the division that existed within the Corinthian church was quite clear. At the heart of it were people that confessed Christ, but lived in and were governed by their carnality. Their perceptions were governed solely by their natural senses, their fleshly desires. As such, they were incapable of receiving spiritual things.

When people conduct themselves in such a way, governed by natural desires and producing the grievous works of the flesh, the inevitable result will always be division. Within the Corinthian church, they separated themselves into sects based upon which teacher they gave the greater credence to.

The letter of First Corinthians was written for the purpose of addressing and correcting the complicated, significant problems within that church. As a spiritual father to them, exercising love and concern, Paul found it necessary to address first, and with the greatest adamancy, the division that existed amongst them. It is a problem that has never gone away.

We see the replication of the division of the Corinthian church to this day. The name we ascribe to it is "denominations". A denomination is a group that has separated itself, set itself apart, or isolated itself. Often they are comprised of member churches which are obligated to adherence of whatever standard or bylaws

that particular denomination espouses. Most, if not all of those denominations, were created in some way by contentions or splits that happened within the church. Regardless of the name, those are organizations that are founded on or exist because of division.

Scripture says "a little leaven, leavens the whole lump." You cannot be immersed in an organization founded on division, and division not permeate into every aspect of what it becomes and everyone who touches it. Being founded on division, it is subsequently founded on carnality. As such, it will appeal to and provoke carnality, continually pressuring those within it to make a choice between it and unity, between it and the truth, between it and some of the deepest convictions of your heart.

Let me be clear about something else- division does not only haunt the halls of denominational churches. It is a bitter tare that can be found growing anywhere- denominational churches, non-denominational churches, home churches. The results will be the same in that it will force someone to choose between it and one another.

In order to make a tree into a useful bench, you must first take it out of the place where it grows and kill it. While that bench may serve you well in providing something beautiful and comfortable for your purposes, it will never again produce fruit. Carnal churches, filled with division, turn people into benches. Their efforts are concentrated on the fulfillment of their fleshly, self seeking desire. As a consequence, they take the people at their disposal and fashion them into instruments that suit their own design. In so doing, they limit, if not all together prohibit true fruitfulness and function in the body of Christ.

One of the ways you can recognize such motivations is their focus. Their drive often centers around how many people can they get into the seats and of those people that are in the seats, how many can be convinced to give regularly into the offering basket.

Division has other faces as well. Every carnal doctrine appeals to carnality. It often stirs a sense of superiority over other believers, and appeals to ambitions fueled by self interest and pride. Anyone who has been a Christian for any length of time has witnessed some variant of a message proclaiming a new move of God. It is often presented as new revelation, superior methods, a godlier leader, or similar things. These people gather a following by compulsion, insisting that others get on board or be left behind because they are declaring what God is really doing in the earth today. That type of poison has been at the heart of a great deal of the division that has plagued us. Carnal men build their own kingdoms to gather tribute to themselves.

The message of the gospel and the intent of God within that message, which is Christ in you, are not hidden mysteries. They are clearly revealed. What it reveals is plainly communicated and God is not withholding information. Therefore, when someone brings to your ears the assertion that they possess hidden, secret knowledge- special knowledge- be careful! Such declarations should raise the warning flag as high on the mast as it can fly. Special knowledge, as it were, is the lie by which Satan deceived Adam and Eve and is a tool he uses to this day.

All of these sources of division are tools used by the enemy or taken up by men which are meant to appeal to carnality. Thus, they become a source of poison amongst us. Consider what the scripture says:

Where do wars and fights come from among you? Do they not come from your desires for pleasure that war in your members? ² You lust and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and war. Yet you do not have because you do not ask. ³ You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures. ⁴ Adulterers and adulteresses! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. (James 4:1-4)

What James makes clear to us is that every war ever waged, whether it was nations rising against each other, personal disputes amongst neighbors, or divisions within the church, was provoked by desires for pleasure within the heart of one or more parties involved.

Pleasure, as used in this verse, is an interesting word in the Greek. This word is where we get the English word "hedonism." Hedonism is a manner of life in which the thoughts, actions and motives revolve around a person's own self gratification. In other words, they seek fulfillment in life by satisfying whatever desires for pleasure they have. That desire is not limited to sexual pleasures, but would include desires for power, wealth, frivolity or anything else that the heart may wish to obtain. For such people, the apprehension of those things becomes the meaning of life in a sense. Everything revolves around fulfilling those desires.

Something that James tells us is that hedonism, desires for pleasure, is one of the reasons we ask for things from God and do not receive. The motivation for our request is a desire to fulfill those pleasures. We want God to broker our hedonism.

Those same desires are at the heart of every contention that rages amongst us and every division between us. Therefore, it could be understood that unity begins in the heart of each member of the Body of Christ being shaped by, and bearing the fruit of our God.

In drawing attention to these things, the attempt is by no means an effort to patronize you with some empty doctrine which gives you two easy steps to unity,

wrapped in a bow, and presented for your enjoyment. The reasons for division boil down to the carnality of man and the source of unity being the oneness of God. How deep a well that is to drink from?!

To be drawn into unity, we must be drawn out of division if that is where we find ourselves. The two cannot coexist. When we come to Christ, we are to be separate from the world. We do so because what is in the world- the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, the pride of life, is an enemy of what is in God and thereby of God Himself. If then we draw away from carnal environments or desires, such movement cannot be considered divisive unless we are moving into further division.

In fact, the scripture admonishes us with these words:

¹⁷ Now I urge you, brethren, note those who cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them. ¹⁸ For those who are such do not serve our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly, and by smooth words and flattering speech deceive the hearts of the simple. (Romans 16:17-18)

There is appropriateness in separating from darkness. Never- again I say never should we separate our heart from the pursuit of unity with other believers, even if they remain in divisive environments. If they choose to allow that divisive environment to bring separation between you, that is beyond your control. Regardless, you keep your heart pursuing unity with that person without subjecting your heart to an instrument of division.

While we may find ourselves in the unfortunate position of needing to avoid divisive people, we must guard our heart against becoming the same. People cannot help but war with one another if the peace of God does not rule in their hearts. We are drawn into those wars, we can become instruments of division ourselves, when we lay aside His peace and draw swords for the battle.

There is an amazing verse which states:

The eyes of The Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth that He may show himself strong on behalf of him whose heart is loyal to Him. (2 Chronicles 16:9)

God is seeking to show Himself strong on behalf of a people who are loyal to Him- not the world, not their denominations, not religious traditions, not their own self interests- to Him.

I witnessed the illustration of this once when I heard a man say something that I found both remarkable and challenging. What he said was, "Even if I knew that God was going to send me to hell, I would still serve Him." There is no question in my mind that this man was as sincere as he could possibly be. Most

people do not understand that. Usually, they have no grasp of such loyalty to God because their heart is divided against Him. Only a humble man can say such a thing and mean it because there is no division in His heart. By the way, Job says something similar when he states, "though He slay me, yet will I serve Him."

Despite the theological angles and objections one might point to in regard to that statement so many years ago, the condition of the heart in making such a statement is evident. First, in serving Him he might come to know, if but for a moment, the deep richness of the immeasurable goodness of God. Second, simply put, God is just worthy of all my heart and there is no object of desire that can fill it with what it needs apart from Him. A person who makes such statements as that man does not serve God for the fulfillment of His own pleasures, though there is indescribable pleasure born as reward for doing so.

Humbled under the hand of God is the most comfortable place there is. Pride will not allow such rest because gain is the great reward, gathering to oneself every pleasure to be pursued. If God does not give him what he wants, what he expects, then he will search for a source that will- more power, more people, more money, more influence and that as fast as he can obtain it. The desires of his heart rule his life and how dare God attempt to interfere. Friendship with the world is an enemy of God and it is at enmity with the unity which is in Him.

Unity is rooted in the life of God and kindles revival amongst us. Revival at the core is a burning fire, and the flame thereof rages from the living Christ Himself within us, which consumes outward until all we are is engulfed. The scent of that burning lamp becomes an irresistible aroma filling the air, drawing others thereby. Having been drawn, a flame is ignited within them inwardly. Having been brought to life, and tasted the heavenly gift, nothing else will do and no one else can satisfy.

What we are becoming is more than we can conceive. God's ultimate intention towards His church will be achieved.

²⁵ Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, ²⁶ that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, ²⁷ 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)

Notice that she does not present herself to Him as glorious, without spot or wrinkle. Instead, he presents her to Himself in such a condition. Notice also that the manner in which she is brought into that condition is not through a willful change of her actions. Instead, she is made holy, blameless, glorious, without blemish, exclusively by Christ giving Himself for her and subsequently by the

word He speaks, "The washing of water by the word." Her actions and activities are produced by what he has said and originate, are sourced in Him. Therefore, listen yourself to the voice of Him who speaks and you will find His life being produced in you.

Let us also never forget that we exist in the earth as the Body of Christ, at least in part, to be a blessing. We do not buy from God, or solicit from God blessings for people. We are the body of Christ. We have received of His fullness and grace for grace. We are not buying from God, we are distributing for God according to the riches of His Kingdom granted to us.

In this day, in this hour, we must find our way into peaceful paths, and leave behind the tumult of a war waged by the dark desires of man. Let us instead embrace the unity of His Spirit, bound by peace, founded on the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ. When the storm comes and the winds beat against us, we shall not be tossed about. Instead, we shall stand in that day in unity. By Him, in Him and through Him shall we, as one man, find strength to declare the day- and overcome.

Afterward

It is my desire the reader understand that the intent of this book is to be a blessing to the Body of Christ, without financial cost to anyone who may benefit from its content. As such, I offer it as a gift to you personally and anyone else that you may wish to share it with. This work is purposely self- published.

As I have prayed about The Lord's will concerning how to cover the costs of printing and distribution, I have become convinced that those costs will fall to me as much as I am able, and those within the Body of Christ to whom He speaks to aid in its distribution.

If you wish to offer comments, ask questions, or are led to aid in printing and distribution costs, please feel free to email me at:

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