

# MORE

A GUIDE TO GREATER DEVOTION

KEN GURLEY



# PREFACE

---

Welcome to the new small group devotion, MORE.

This material is designed to take you deeper and higher into all God has for you. For the enemy in spiritual growth is the status quo. The moment we think we have arrived is the very moment we are sliding backwards. Always thirst and believe for more in God.

How is this material used? Each chapter has leaders notes, student handouts, discussion questions and a video teaching session (if utilized). The study can be utilized by an individual, a small group, or a Bible class.

This study is not for everyone. It is for the person who knows little about God and His Word; it is for the person who has walked with God and studied the Bible for many years. Each of us will find something MORE in the pages to follow.

A word about Bible translations. At First Church we either use the King James or New King James versions, with other translations sprinkled in when clarity is needed. For this study, I've borrowed heavily from other translations including the New International Version, English Standard Version, New Living Translation, and the Amplified Bible. Hopefully, the use of these other translations will provide clarity especially to those less familiar with biblical language.

If you have any questions, we're here to serve. Always reach for MORE!

May God bless you!



First Church of Pearland

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

---

5	Experience More: Introduction
11	Walking With God: Worship
22	Unchain Your Heart: Freedom
34	One With Him: Oneness
48	God's Crown: Holiness
61	The Higher Order: Change
75	Cross-Bearing: Sacrifice
89	People Of The Book: The Word
100	The Secret Place: Prayer
111	Embrace The Unbelievable: Faith
123	Celebrate Unity: Unity
134	Hands In The Harvest: Service
142	The Wedding Approaches: Anticipation
152	Summary

# INTRODUCTION

---

Many people grow older, but they never grow up.

They mark time, but they never make history.

They earn money, but they leave no legacy.

They breathe air, but they inspire no one.

Simply stated: Some people don't grow.

Such individuals are like that generation in the Wilderness who had enough fear to leave Egypt, but not enough faith to enter the Promised Land. They have the unique ability to turn an eleven day walk—how long it takes to get from Egypt to Canaan—into a forty-year funeral procession (Deuteronomy 1:2, Joshua 5:6).

The dates for their birth and death are the same on their tombstones. They were born, but they never really started living.

We see this same tendency in churches. People experience God, but they never become godly. They grow accustomed to church, but never become the church — the “called out” ones (*ekklesia*, Greek). They hear and obey the Gospel, but they never pick up a cross and follow Jesus. They go under the water, but old ways and sins still cling to them. They are born of the Spirit, but never live and walk in the Spirit.

If we are totally transparent and vulnerable, we would admit to seeing this resistance to growth in ourselves. We purpose each New Year that things will be different. Yet, our efforts soon fall short. We lapse back into old habits of thought, speech, and behavior. We fasten onto the next move of the Spirit, the next revival, the latest message or fad, and hope these will bring us the change we need. Each passing day we grow more frustrated. We are not soaring with the eagles. Rather, we find ourselves like the disrupted flock of pigeons: we are stirred, but not changed.

How can we shake free from who and what we are and become who and what God means for us to be? How can we exit the doldrums of our status quo and find meaningful growth in our lives and relationships? How can we overcome the inertia of years of disappointment and recapture the prevailing force God meant for us to have and be? How can we be less human beings and more human “becomings?”

How can we grow in God?

For many years, I’ve searched for answers to this very question. This question burned a hole in my heart in my professional years working in finance. In that phase of my life I worked obscene hours but tried to stay rooted in prayer, God’s Word, and ministry in the local church. My concern was that I didn’t see growth in my own life; my consolation was that few seemed to be doing any better. (Yes, misery *does* love company).

I thought my spiritual growth would accelerate once I hung up my professional career and launched full-time in the ministry. Time and circumstances quickly disabused me of that notion. Full-time ministry quite often vacillates between greasing squeaky wheels and fighting raging fires. Weary and scorched, my time with God became a quest for answers to the latest question, need, or dilemma.

All the while, I searched for solutions. My search quickly revealed that I was not alone. This quest for growth has been sought countless times in as many different ways. Its commonness and frequency reveal a deep-seated hunger within each of us to become all we can be in God.

How this question is answered will determine whether growth can and will take place. Some choose to answer this question of growth in an escapist sense: “To grow in God, you must separate yourself from all others, focus on God and discipline yourself.” This cloistered method of spiritual growth has lofty aspirations, but eventually leads to isolation and stagnation. While there may be

times of solitude—we see such times in the life of Jesus and others in Scripture—God typically chooses to use our interactions with people and circumstances, combined with intervals of prayer and study to help us grow.

On the opposite extreme, some choose to answer this in a passive sense: “Plants and animals simply grow. So too should we grow. Just relax and let growth happen.” I call this the “Let-It-Be” philosophy to spiritual growth. Left to our own tendencies, however, there is little hope for spiritual growth. Spiritual growth is not automatic. It does not just happen.

For those who have been around church for most of their lives, we tend to believe that spiritual growth occurs solely in a dramatic, instantaneous fashion. We speak of God doing a “quick work” in the Last Days (Romans 9:28) and point to the many times God moved in miraculous fashion upon the Earth. We recall frequently our beginnings on the Day of Pentecost and how it all happened with a “Suddenly” (Acts 2:1-2). Although generalizations are dangerous, some of us are more into events, than process. Consequently, we are always looking for the next big event rather than seeking systematic changes in our lives.

Our growth in God has an instantaneous aspect. When a person is born again, he is a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17). God remarkably and radically changes a person’s heart and makes him capable of living to please Him. Yet, growth does not stop there. There is also an ongoing work in a person’s life to make him more like the Lord, so he may progress from strength to strength, faith to faith, and glory to glory (Psalm 84:7, Romans 1:17, 2 Corinthians 3:18).

At this point, you may be saying, “Thanks for all the information, but will you please get back to the question: ‘How can I grow in God?’”

The single-word answer to how we grow in God is found in the book’s title: MORE.

The expanded answer to that question is the premise behind this entire course. As you progress through these chapters, you will discover twelve ways to grow in God. I encourage you to appropriate each and to be diligent in your application.

There is MORE. And you can EXPERIENCE MORE.

These twelve objectives are well-worn paths, but oddly enough often overlooked in our pursuit of God. Perhaps because these are not the culmination of man’s efforts but of the Spirit’s drawing.

Others have discovered these and have benefited from them. God is no Respector of persons (Acts 10:34). What He did for them, He will do for you.

These dozen paths are not incidental. Rather, they are intentional.

They are fundamental to our faith and to our new identity in Christ. From the 1st Century Church to the 21st Century Church, men and women have found MORE of God in their own lives through following these paths.

First Church is — if anything — intentional in what we do. We let go of the secondary to lay hold on the primary. We relinquish what feels good for what is in fact good. We do not do everything we can do, we focus on those things we must do.

The First Church in the Bible walked with Jesus, grew in Him, experienced more of Him, and He transformed their lives. Today's First Church seeks to restore what that yesterday's first church had and MORE.

Following one of His beloved parables of the lamp and the bushel basket, Jesus said this:

Mark 4:24

*Take heed what you hear.*

*With the same measure you use,*

*it will be measured to you;*

*and to you who hear, MORE will be given.*

That's a promise. If you open up your heart to God, more will be given to you.

Experience MORE!



## **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

1. If you were to rate your growth in God on a scale from 1 to 10, how do you see yourself growing?
2. What is the top barrier in your own life to not growing in God as you much as He wants you to grow?
3. Discuss possible indicators of growing God. What signs of spiritual growth do you see in your own life?
4. Name one person in the Bible and one person you know personally who inspire you to growth. Why do these inspire you?
5. What areas of spiritual growth would you like to see further development in your life?



# WORSHIP

---

## WALKING WITH GOD

*We encourage you as believers to excel in love even MORE.*

**(1 Thessalonians 4:10)**

Why were we put here?

Until we find our divine purpose, we truly do not know how to live. We are map-less in an uncharted wilderness, not knowing where to go or what to do. We must know why we are put here to know where we are going.

The simple answer: we were created for worship. We breathe, live, walk, talk and work for one reason: to be in relationship with the One who made us and gave us life.

Speaking through Isaiah, God said His purpose in creating us is to bring glory and praise to Himself (Isaiah 43:7, 21). We breathe to give that same breath back to Him in praise (Psalm 150:6). We were created for good works and to walk in His ways (Ephesians 2:10). Our thoughts, actions, and words are meant to elevate Him and what He has done in our lives (Colossians 3:2-5).

Worship is not confined to church services, worship is our entire life. How we live, what we say, what we do, who we interact with — worship is all of this and more.

So, what does this look like? Perhaps, the greatest glimpse of this life of worship was seen in the all-too-brief picture provided in the Garden of Eden. There, God placed the first man and woman He

made. For an undisclosed amount of time, Adam and Eve walked with God “in the garden in the cool of the day” (Genesis 3:8). Worship then is walking with God.

God created us to walk with Him through all the days of our lives. This walking relationship involves companionship, dialogue, closeness, decision-making, and shared interests. God wants to walk with each of us.

Besides Adam, there were at least three men in Genesis, the opening book of the Bible, who had a similar worshipful relationship with God:

- Enoch walked with God (Genesis 5:22-24).
- Noah walked with God (Genesis 6:9).
- Abraham walked with God (Genesis 17:1).

Lest we think this phenomenon is found only in the Old Testament, we find this replicated in the New Testament. The Apostle Paul had much to say about our walk with God. He tells us to:

- Walk in the steps of the faith (Romans 4:12).
- Walk in newness of life (Romans 6:4).
- Walk not according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit (Romans 8:1).
- Walk in love (Ephesians 5:2).
- Walk in light, not darkness (Ephesians 5:8).
- Walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing Him (Colossians 1:10).
- Walk by faith, not by sight (2 Corinthians 5:7).

The Apostle John devotes some time to this same practice of walking with the Lord:

- Walk in the light as Jesus is in the light (1 John 1:7).
- Walk just as Jesus walked (1 John 2:6).
- Walk according to the Lord’s commandments (2 John 1:6).
- Walk in truth (3 John 1:3).

Our life with God is more than a passive state. We are to walk with Him day by day. The longer we walk with Him, the more we know Him. The longer we walk with Him, the more we grow like Him.

## The One Walking By Your Side

So, who is He? Who is this One walking by your side?

How you define who He is also determines how you can know Him.

- Some say, “God is nature.” To know Him then would be to get outdoors and be one with nature.
- Some say, “God is mystery.” To know Him then would be to revel in esoteric rituals and arcane philosophies.
- Some say, “God is many.” To know *Him* then is to know *them* — the supposed, many variations of God.
- We say, “God is One.” To know Him then is to discover the One true and living God.

God’s Word will not fail us here. Through careful study, the Bible answers the questions: “Who is God?” and “How can I know Him?”

First, consider this. The opening words of the Bible say, “In the beginning God...” (Genesis 1:1). The writer offers no disclaimers, no qualifiers, no arguments for God’s existence. He starts with the profound declaration of faith: God is.

This is important. The writer of Hebrews says:

Hebrews 11:6

*... He who comes to God must believe that He is,  
and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.*

How can a person believe God is? Each person has been given a “measure of faith” (Romans 12:3). A person may not initially have enough faith to move mountains, but he has enough faith to believe that God is.

Once we establish God’s existence, then we are able to understand more about Him: who He is and how He relates to us. Although there are some 1,000 names and descriptions given of God in the Bible, there are five definitive statements about Him that we should consider:

1. God is One (Deuteronomy 6:4).
2. God is Spirit (John 4:24).

3. God is Light (1 John 1:5).
4. God is Holy (1 Peter 1:16).
5. God is Love (1 John 4:16).

The fifth statement is of interest to each of us since we exist to worship God. Our Lord does not just love; He is Love.

1 John 4:16

*God is love, and he who abides in love  
abides in God, and God in him.*

In this verse, we see not only that God is love, we also see that the more we walk with Him, we are changed to be like Him. His love fills us. This is a powerful principle of worship: so long as we walk with Him, we become like Him.

**God's Identity: Love.**

Love is not just verb, it's a noun. When spoke of God, it's a proper noun. God is Love.

To say the word, "Love" is to invite confusion. Love to many today is a synonym with lust.

C. S. Lewis of *The Chronicles of Narnia* fame once described "Four Loves" using four separate Greek words translated as love.

1. *Storge* is used for empathy or sympathy.
2. *Philia* is used for friendship or brotherly affection.
3. *Eros* is an erotic attraction or lust.
4. *Agape* is unconditional devotion.

When the New Testament describes God's love, *agape* is the word normally used. Lewis said that the first three loves are natural; *agape* however is divine. The essence of *agape* love is benevolence and willful delight in the object of such love. *Agape* love is that described by Paul in the thirteen chapter of 1 Corinthians: faithful, kind, not easily provoked, and lasting. So long as we walk with God, we follow the "MORE excellent way" (1 Corinthians 12:31).

Divine love isn't a sappy, sentimental emotion. God chooses to love the unlovable and the unlovely because that's who He is. Actions follow identity; the God who is Love proves it with His love. In demonstrating His love to sinners, He's just being true to His very nature (Romans 5:8).

In the third chapter of Ephesians, Paul tackles the vast subject of God's love. He quickly gets lost in the immensity of it all.

Ephesians 3:18

*I pray that you will be able to understand how wide  
and how long and how high and how deep His love is.*

Four dimensions are given for God's love.

1. WIDTH. His love is wider than any distance we could flee from His presence (Psalm 139:7-12). It's wide enough to cover the entire human family yesterday, today and forever (Ephesians 3:14). His sacrifice at Calvary made forgiveness within the reach of those near or far.
2. LENGTH. His love journeys behind us and embraced us before we were born (Psalm 139:13-16). His love journeys before us and reaches into eternity (Psalm 136, Romans 8:38-39).
3. HEIGHT. His love is higher than the distance from heaven to earth (Philippians 2:5-11). God's love extends beyond the galaxies billions of light-years away. It's taller than any sin, any problem, any struggle we experience.
4. DEPTH. His love is deeper than Hell itself (Psalm 139:1-6). It's deep enough to penetrate beneath the fifth rib into our heart and bring healing and wholeness. It's not a mile wide and an inch thick, it plumbs to the depths and essence of who we are and who He means us to be.

Three dimensions will usually suffice in man's world; but in God's world Paul threw in an extra dimension—a fourth dimension—to indicate this profound truth: God's love is beyond our comprehension.

As Paul said:

Ephesians 3:19

*His love goes beyond anything we can understand.*

We catch glimpses of the incomprehensible power of love now and then. Such as when Shelby Carter, a mother in Illinois, reacted so courageously when fire broke out in her home. She did something so selfless that the firefighters who later responded to the call were stunned. As the unexpected fire swept into the room where Shelby was with her 12-day old daughter, Keana, the mother acted based on her love. She had only one minute to act before she and her newborn would perish from smoke inhalation. She broke the upstairs window, strapped her baby into her car seat and as carefully as she could dropped her baby into a pile of leaves and debris on the ground below. This was her last act. The mother did not survive the fire, but her daughter did (Peter Holley, *Washington Post*, February 2, 2017.)

Jesus said:

John 15:13

*Greater love has no one than this,  
than to lay down one's life for his friends.*

A mother's love is beautiful, yet God's love goes one step further than this. At the Cross, Jesus did not sacrifice His life for friends, but for those who were His enemies (Romans 5:7-10). Greater love....

Years ago, someone discovered words scrawled on the wall of an insane asylum. Later, these words became lyrics to a song:

*The love of God is greater far  
than tongue or pen can ever tell;  
It goes beyond the highest star  
and reaches to the lowest hell.  
Could we with ink the ocean fill,  
and were the skies of parchment made;  
Were every stalk on earth a quill,  
and every man a scribe by trade.*



To write the love of God above,  
would drain the ocean dry;  
Nor could the scroll contain the whole,  
though stretched from sky to sky.  
O love of God, how rich and pure,  
how measureless and strong;  
It shall for evermore endure,  
the Saints' and Angels' song.

(--The Love of God, Frederick M. Lehman)

Such love...

### **To Walk With God, We Should Be Filled With His Love.**

That was Paul's prayer.

Ephesians 3:17

*I pray that you will be filled with love.*

When you are filled with God's love, you will love like He does.

How does God love?

- He loves first. He does not wait for people to love Him; He shows His love to them first (1 John 4:19). In the same sense, we should forgive those who hurt us before they ask for it, be kind to those who treat us poorly, and shower affection on the less fortunate. That's what God does. That's what His love will help us do.
- He loves up close. In Luke 5, a leper approached Jesus asking to be healed. Jesus could have pronounced healing from a distance. Yet, Jesus drew near and embraced the man before He healed him. Divine love does not reside in an ivory tower but condescends and draws near to the one in need.
- He loves specifically. It's easy to say we should love all the people of the world, but what God asks is for us to love specific people and that's usually where human love breaks down: not in theory,

but in practice. *Agape* or divine love embraces the totality of humanity, the entire world (John 3:16), but God also shows that same love in one personal, specific encounter after another. He helps us love specifically.

- He loves in spite. In spite of our problems, our hang-ups, and our deficiencies; God loves us. So too should we love others.

#### Romans 5:8

*God demonstrates His own love toward us,  
in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*

Divine love overlooks peoples' faults to see their needs. Believers who want more of God will be filled with more of His love. And MORE love is always the answer, the rising tide to any and all problems we face. We show love to all people, even to those who hate us. In so doing, we overcome evil with good (Romans 12:20-21).

A good illustration of this is found in our Lord's story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). Jesus told this story in response to a question asked and answered by a lawyer. The man asked Jesus what he had to do to inherit eternal life. Jesus asked Him how the Law would answer this question. The man responded that he should love God and his neighbor as himself. But then the lawyer asked, "Who is my neighbor?" In other words, the lawyer wished to narrow the scope of the people he should love as himself.

Jesus said that a man walking from Jerusalem to Jericho was assaulted, beaten, robbed and left for dead along the roadside. Two men in quick succession, a priest and a Levite, came along, saw the beaten man, and passed by on the other side of the road. A third man, a Samaritan, saw the fallen man and came to his side of the road. Mercy moved him to bandage the man, load him on his own donkey, and carry him to an inn where he could convalesce. If this wasn't enough, the Samaritan paid the innkeeper and offered to pay more if it was insufficient for the wounded man's care.

The telling of this story was in itself telling. Priests and Levites, the religious of their day, were placed in a bad light while the Samaritan, the outcast of his day, was placed in a good light. Jesus

asked the lawyer and His hearers to be like the Samaritan who truly was a neighbor in this situation. Any wounded person is our neighbor. We should love the one who needs it the most.

Worship is a walk of love. If we haven't learned to love, we haven't learned to live. If we haven't received or shown love, then it matters little what else we do or believe. As children of God, we are to receive and to show His love. We will be known for the love we show to each other (John 13:35).

We have seen that God loves first, up close, specifically and in spite. There's one more way God loves. As the story of the Good Samaritan suggests, divine love acts and is willing to carry those who need it (Deuteronomy 1:31, Isaiah 46:4).

A month before Hannah Peterson's wedding in Ontario, Canada, she was involved in a bad car accident. She broke several ribs and her pelvis. A kidney was punctured. She suffered partial hearing loss and a concussion.

All invited guests expected the wedding to be postponed. Yet, Hannah insisted that it continue. Nothing would stop her big day and her outdoor wedding.

The guests gathered in the picturesque garden watched as Hannah's father rolled her in a wheelchair down a grass-carpeted aisle. At a prearranged point, the wheels ceased to roll. Stuart, Hannah's fiancé, stepped off the platform and made his way past family and well-wishers to where the girl of his dreams sat awaiting him.

He carefully lifted his bride from the wheelchair and carried her down the remainder of the aisle to the platform. Stuart stood before the preacher holding Hannah in his arms until it was time for the vows. Then, Hannah insisted upon standing and together they faced each other pledging their life one to another (*Inside Edition*, October 13, 2016).

Love condescends from the platform. Love ignores brokenness. Love lifts the fallen. Love helps us stand again.

To have MORE in this life, we must have MORE of God and more of His love. We should experience it, practice it, and grow in it. Each day we walk with Him, His love should grow in our lives. We see as He sees; we treat people as He treats them.

If we do this, we can say with Paul:

Romans 8:38-39

*For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

Love is a powerful thing. Let's excel in His love even MORE.

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

1. We are put here for worship. Discuss what that means in your own walk with God and personal life.
2. Worship is "Worth-Ship." How does walking worthy before God please Him and bless you?
3. How does understanding and dwelling upon the statement "God is Love" help you in your walk with God?
4. How does divine love differ from the world's definition of love?
5. Discuss the different characters of the Parable of the Good Samaritan. What qualities are to be embraced and what are to be avoided in each character?



# FREEDOM

---

## UNCHAIN YOUR HEART

*There will be MORE joy in heaven over  
one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine  
just persons who need no repentance.*

*(Luke 15:7)*

Steele Smith was a seemingly ordinary boy. He looked like other boys his age. However, looks can be deceiving, because Steele was not like other boys.

His body was at war with itself. Within his six-year old frame lurked a host of debilitating diseases, five of which could possibly end in death. Of greatest concern, however, to his large team of doctors was a medical enigma: Steele's heart was turning to stone.

In 1998, an article appeared in the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* entitled, “The Mystery of the Hardening Heart.” When Steele was only a year old, doctors found a large piece of calcium in the right ventricle of his heart. The hardening had begun. By the age of four, calcium had nearly encased his heart. His heart was gradually and incrementally turning to stone.

The doctors at the Children’s Hospital of Wisconsin searched the medical textbooks for anything remotely similar to Steele’s case. Rather than presenting the symptoms of a single disease, the calcification of his heart was the result of numerous disease systems and his body’s reactions to therapy.

By Christmas 2000, Steele had succumbed to these diseases. He died three days after his sixth birthday. He died of a heart that slowly hardened and became encased with stone.

While remarkably sad and rare, it’s suggestive of a greater and far more common problem to us in this series, not the hardening of a physical heart issue but of a spiritual one. How is your heart today?

### **Let’s Talk Hearts**

The Bible has a lot to say about our heart and its usage does not primarily refer to the four-chambered organ that pumps blood through miles of blood vessels in our body. The heart in Scripture is the inner you or person within. It’s the spiritual part of you that responds to or rejects God.

- With the heart, a person loves (1 Peter 1:22).
- With the same heart, a person can hate (Psalm 105:25).
- Joy can flood a person’s heart (Ecclesiastes 2:10).
- The same heart can be overwhelmed with sorrow (John 16:6).
- A heart can grow bitter (Ezekiel 27:31).
- A heart can grow peaceful (Colossians 3:15).
- The heart can know terrifying fear (Amos 2:16).
- The same heart can find bracing courage (Genesis 42:28).

The heart in the Bible and within each of us ponders, perceives, believes, knows, imagines, and decides. The heart of man is that part of us which reaches out for God (Romans 10:10, Hebrews 10:22).

From God's Word, it's hard to come to any other conclusion than the heart is who you and I truly are. The heart is the real you; it's the real me. The heart is:

- The person behind the persona.
- The character in back of the charisma.
- The face behind the façade.
- The man behind the mask.
- The substance, not the image.
- The reality, not the reputation.
- The value behind the validation.

The heart is all of these things.

And one more thing about the heart... Because of man's Fall in the Garden, the heart always comes equipped with chains. The heart of man is wicked, devoid of God, in bondage and difficult to remedy (Jeremiah 17:9). The heart of man needs help.

Jesus said:

Matthew 15:19

*Out of the heart proceed evil thoughts,  
murders, adulteries, fornications,  
thefts, false witness, blasphemies.*

Not a beautiful picture, is it? As calendars are divided before and after Christ, B.C. and A.D., the heart before Christ is a bleak landscape:



- A heart of stone (Ezekiel 11:19).
- A heart totally given over to things of this world (1 John 2:15).
- A heart that devises wicked plans (Proverbs 6:18).
- A heart that is bitter (Jeremiah 4:18).
- A heart that is hardened (Ephesians 4:18).
- A heart that bears the weight of sin's chains (Psalm 116:16).

## **SIN CHAINS OUR HEARTS**

Sin is the cause and curse of the burdened heart. Sin begets sin. Each day another link of weight and oppression gets added to the heavy chains that encircle our hardened hearts.

How much do sin's chains weigh? A valid question, I think. We can't describe their weight in terms of ounces, pounds or tons. We describe them in terms of how much they weigh us down and keep us from excelling. We describe them in terms of what opportunities and relationships have been robbed from us: the "wouldas," "couldas," and "shouldas." We describe them in terms of hurts, wounds and pains. By such descriptions, sin weighs an awful lot.

Famed abolitionist and personal friend to Lincoln, Frederick Douglass, described years after his freedom how hard it was for him to escape the chains of slavery into which he had been born. Douglass grew up a slave in Maryland in the early 19th Century. Taken from his mother when he was a child, he ate corn meal from a trough like swine. He worked from sunrise to sundown. He was whipped countless times. He was kicked and beaten once until he almost died.

Yet, even when freedom offered itself, the weight of those chains was so heavy that he struggled with the decision to escape to freedom. He wrote years later that he had two fears: the first was leaving behind his friends in tribulation. He said that "thousands would escape from slavery but for the strong cords of affection." His second fear was what would happen if he failed. Such a failure would seal his fate as a slave forever.

Years later, he remembered the day he made the decision to be free. On September 3, 1838, he said "I left my chains and succeeded in reaching New York." Asked how he felt, he said: "I felt like one who had escaped a den of lions" (*Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*).

For years he had delayed making the trip to freedom. Many people resist finding freedom today. They befriend their chains and grow accustomed to their presence. As Lord Byron recounted in the *Prisoner of Chillon*, some prisoners can even grow to love their chains and relish their despair. In that sense, the weight of sin is heavy; its presence seems unending; and its memory is lasting.

The Apostle Paul once defended himself by saying he had been in chains far more often than his critics (2 Corinthians 11:23). Yet, Paul flourished in spite of the chains. Many of his books in the New Testament were penned while he was in bondage. He once even sang and worshipped in chains. Yet, living in chains is not how God envisions your life. He came to set you free (John 8:32-36).

Why does He set us free? As odd as it sounds, He sets us free that we might be free.

Galatians 5:1

*It is for freedom that Christ has set us free.*

*Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.*

For freedom's sake, Jesus breaks the chains of sin. Jesus wants your heart freed from that oppressive weight so that you may live as He would have you to live.

### **Freedom is Near**

Redemption is the freedom of the unchained heart. I know we shy away from those long words that end with the letters "i-o-n." Yet, this is one word we should wrap our minds and hearts around.

What is redemption? The simplest explanation is the act of paying the price demanded to free a captive person. Our redemption is based on Jesus offering Himself as the redemption price at Calvary. From redemption flows all of the great words we use to describe what God does in our lives: justification, salvation, transformation, sanctification, glorification, and so forth.

But it all begins with redemption. Sometimes, things can be better caught than taught and seen than explained. The Apostle Paul is a case study of redemption. He called himself the chief of sinners. He considered it his greatest and lasting crime to have persecuted godly people. Like John Newton, the slave trader who found the Lord and wrote *Amazing Grace*, Heaven surprised this chief of sinners: the captain of the chained hearts. Paul was remarkably apprehended by God and changed.

A similar illustration is found in Psalm 18 when David was happy to be alive. God had delivered him from his nemesis Saul. He said that his enemies hit him when he was down, but God came to his rescue. One translation says, “I stood there saved — surprised to be loved” (Psalm 18:19).

Paul must have felt the same way. On a Damascus Road, Jesus appeared to Paul. He was surprised by grace. God actually sent a man named Grace (Ananias) to help Paul find redemption. Paul found an encompassing and overwhelming love, straight from God’s unfettered heart to his own chained heart.

The redeemed, unchained Paul would go onto become the Apostle of Grace (Ephesians 3:2). His goal was to make known the gospel of God’s saving grace (Acts 20:24). He would tell anyone who listed that Jesus had paid the price to free Paul’s chained heart and show him great grace. Paul was determined everyone should know about it.

The Hebrew word for grace is found only 68 times in the Old Testament. In the Four Gospels, the word grace and its derivatives appear a scant 13 times. But, then along comes Paul who in his writings employed the word grace 144 times—more than the rest of the Bible put together!

Virtually each and every epistle from Paul was signed by him with proclamations of grace. He was the one who wrote we are justified freely by God’s grace (Romans 3:24); that God is able to make grace abound to us (2 Corinthians 9:8); and that we are not under the law, but under grace (Romans 6:14). Inspired by the Spirit, he also wrote a verse that probably meant a lot to him personally: “where sin multiplied, grace multiplied even more.” (Romans 5:20). Even more...

The Book of Acts, the history book of the New Testament church, is roughly split between the ministries of the Apostle Peter and the Apostle Paul. Nearly the same number of chapters are devoted to these two men. Nearly the same number of miracles are performed by each. When the story shifts to Paul, however, a new word enters the church’s history book. That word is, of course, grace.

Paul called his message the Gospel of Grace. He also called it the “preaching of the Cross” (1 Cor 1:18). For Grace was seen in the price Jesus paid to redeem us.

Listen to what Paul said of this great freedom God affords to each of us:

- While we were yet sinners Christ died for us (Romans 5:8).

- When we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son (Romans 5:10).
- We have redemption through His blood (Ephesians 1:7).
- We are justified by His blood (Romans 5:9).
- We are reconciled in the body of His flesh, through death (Colossians 1:21,22).
- We have peace through the blood of His Cross (Colossians 1:20).
- We are made nigh by the blood of Christ (Ephesians 2:13).
- We are baptized into His death (Romans 6:3).
- We live no longer to ourselves but for the One who died for us (2 Corinthians 5:15).

Yes, freedom from those heart chains is available through Jesus, but how is it accessed and accepted?

### **The Process of Freedom**

When God purchased His people from Egyptian bondage, we see the divine pattern of redemption and deliverance. Their freedom required three significant elements: the blood of a spotless lamb had to be painted on the doors of their homes; they had to walk through the Red Sea; and they had to follow the heavenly fire that hovered over them. These three elements—blood, water and Spirit—are essential to freedom.

The Apostle John reinforced this process of freedom:

1 John 5:8

*There are three that bear witness on earth:*

*the Spirit, the water, and the blood;*

*and these three agree as one.*

Jesus paid the price for our freedom. So, it comes as no surprise that these same three elements are found in the Gospel of Grace: Christ's death (blood), His burial (water) and His resurrection (Spirit.)

Let's look at these three components of the Gospel and how we respond to each:

#### Christ's Blood: Our REPENTANCE

The blood Jesus shed at Calvary purchases our redemption. Without His death, our sin-chained heart would never be set free (Hebrews 9:22). We could not be forgiven. We could never experience lasting change.

How do we accept Jesus' sacrifice on Calvary? Jesus said for us to do this in two ways:

Mark 1:15

*Repent, and believe in the gospel.*

Repentance and faith are two sides of the same coin. In repentance, we are turning away from our sins. In faith, we are turning to God. The writer of Hebrews also describes the foundational principles of our repentance from "dead works" and turning in faith to the Living God (Hebrews 6:1).

Repentance means to make a 180 degree turn and move in an entirely different direction. Repentance involves heart-felt sorrow and remorse for our old way of living and a true and genuine desire to be changed. It's hard to turn away from sin unless you are fully convinced that God loves you, He died for you, and He wants to radically change your life. That's where faith comes in: to give you the firm expectation that old things can indeed pass away, and all things can become new.

How long does it take to repent and believe? When a person is sincerely desirous of change, it does not take long. It can happen in moments.

#### Water: BAPTISM

We read also that when Jesus died, both blood and water flowed (John 19:34). The blood is essential to our redemption and salvation, but so is the water.

Just prior to speaking those words we love in John 3:16, “For God so loved the world,” Jesus told a man named Nicodemus that he must be born again. This second birth, this spiritual birth, would be marked by water and Spirit (John 3:5).

Jesus said “whoever believes and is baptized” will be saved (Mark 16:16). When a person was baptized in the New Testament, they were immersed in water and the Name of Jesus was called over them:

- Paul was commanded to “be baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus” (Acts 8:16).
- Peter commanded Cornelius and his household to “be baptized in the name of the Lord” (Acts 10:48).
- The followers of John the Baptist “were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus” (Acts 19:5).

Paul said that we are buried with Jesus in baptism (Romans 6:4). The old man put to death in repentance is now laid to rest in a watery grave. Our past is buried. Our old chained lives are forgotten. A new person will emerge.

#### Spirit: SPIRIT BAPTISM

Before Jesus left His apostles, He told them to wait in Jerusalem until they received power from on high (Acts 1:8). The Church was born in Acts 2 when the Spirit fell from heaven and each person assembled spoke in other languages as prompted and enabled by the Spirit. 3,000 people were also baptized on that day. (This was the fulfillment of what Jesus said in John 3 that each person must be born of the water and Spirit).

On that day, the Apostle Peter said:

Acts 2:38

*Repent, and let every one of you be*

*baptized in the name of Jesus Christ*

*for the remission of sins; and you shall receive*

*the gift of the Holy Spirit.*

In this passage we see all three elements: repentance, indicating the death of the Lord Jesus Christ and the blood shed for our redemption; baptism in water calling on the Name of Jesus; and the

infilling of the Spirit of God. The blood, water and Spirit that brought Israel from Egyptian bondage is now made available to each person through obedience to the Gospel.

Freedom is possible. Paul said:

Romans 8:2

*The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus  
has made me free from the law of sin and death.*

Change is possible, but only through obedience to what God has commanded in Scripture.

Can God change me? Oh, Yes! He can.

How can I know He will release me from the chains on my life? The simple answer is: “Look around. He’s done it for so many. He will do it for you.”

Consider the future Apostle Paul. When Jesus found Him on the Damascus Road, he was a murderous, vindictive, hateful person. Grace found him and changed him into the greatest apostle the world had ever seen. He experienced the same process of redemption that is available to you and me:

- Paul repented (Acts 9:6).
- Paul was baptized in the Name of Jesus (Acts 9:17-18).
- Paul was filled with the Spirit (Acts 9:17, 13:9).

Paul’s life was changed; yours can change too!

This great change was seen centuries before by a prophet named Ezekiel. God spoke through this man saying:

Ezekiel 36:26-27

*26 I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit  
within you; I will take the heart of stone out  
of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.*

*27 I will put My Spirit within you....*

God will unchain your heart. He will transform a heart of stone into a heart of flesh. He will release you to be a new person.

Why not accept this change today? Embrace it and see what God has in store for you. He has MORE in store than you can imagine.

In Luke 15, the great “Lost and Found” chapter of the Bible, Jesus tells stories of lost things being found. In one of those stories, we read of the Shepherd who left 99 sheep to go find the one wayward sheep. Jesus said there is MORE joy in Heaven over one person who finds freedom than over 99 people who do not need repentance.

Make Heaven happy! Accept the change He has for you.

#### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

1. The human heart is obviously important to God. Describe your understanding of the heart and its impact on your daily walk with God.
2. Do you remember a time when your heart was chained by a sin? How did you overcome it?
3. For freedom’s sake, we have been set free. What does that mean to you?
4. How important is repentance to preparing the heart for all God has for you?
5. The Spirit of God sets us free. Have you been baptized with the Spirit?





# ONENESS

---

## ONE WITH HIM

*Jesus said to Simon Peter,  
“Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me  
MORE than these?”  
(John 21:15)*

### **Never Forget, It’s All About Jesus**

Years ago, at a labor convention in London, someone mentioned the church. The audience hissed and booed from the lowest floor to the highest balcony. When the confusion passed, someone spoke of Jesus of Nazareth. The same crowd began to applaud louder than they had previously booed.

Many people who don’t care for the church love Jesus. Religion has done little for them, but Jesus has done everything.

One Passover Feast, the religious group of people known as Pharisees were frustrated. Jews were required to come to Jerusalem three times a year for the significant feasts: Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles. Even though multitudes of worshippers had flocked to Jerusalem for this

particular feast, they didn't come seeking more-of-the same. They came with something or someone else in mind. They didn't seek religion, they sought a relationship. They didn't ask, "Where is Temple," instead they asked, "Where is Jesus?" The religiously-entrenched of that day said, "The world is gone after this man" (John 12:19).

It's the same today. For the few who seek rules and rituals, there are multitudes looking to know and be like Jesus. They don't look for the architecture—the house of God—they look for the builder, the God of the house.

And it's little wonder. The writer of Hebrews asserts that knowing Jesus is more important than knowing the trappings of religion. Writing to believers who thought that the Temple was the citadel of all true faith, the apostle said that Jesus is superior to such temporal things. In fact, the theme of Hebrews is GREATER. Or, you may as well say MORE.

- Jesus is greater than the angels, because He is King of Kings (Hebrews 1:4, 6, 8).
- Jesus is greater than Moses, because Moses was a servant of God, but Jesus is the Son of God: God in flesh (Hebrews 3:3-4).
- Jesus is greater than Joshua, because in Him is found true sabbath rest (Hebrews 4:8-9).
- Jesus is a greater priest than Aaron, because He is sinless and immortal (Hebrews 7:26-28).

Another theme of Hebrews is the word BETTER. It's used thirteen times in this book. It too is an equivalent of MORE. The apostle said that in Jesus we have a:

- Better salvation (6:9)
- Better hope (7:19)
- Better covenant (8:6)
- Better sacrifices (9:23)
- Better country (11:16)
- Better resurrection (11:35)
- Better blood, for the blood of Jesus speaks better things than the blood of Abel (12:24).

Greater.

Better.

More.

That's what Jesus is. To have a complete life, we need MORE of Him!

### **Let's Look To Jesus**

At the same feast when religious people grumbled about the winsomeness of Jesus, a group of Gentiles came to Jerusalem in search of the very same Jesus. Since they were not part of the chosen race, they couldn't enter the Temple. (\*In those days, Gentiles were permitted to believe in the God of Israel, but they were not given full access to worship Him or serve around the Temple.) Is it any wonder then that such people like ourselves were drawn less to the structure and more to the Foundation of the Church: Jesus Christ? Why learn the arcane ways of Temple worship when the True and Living God stands in front of you?

This group of Gentiles told the Apostle Philip: "Sir, we wish to see Jesus" (John 12:21).

They couldn't have approached a better, more understanding man. Years before Philip had met Jesus and raced to tell his friend Nathanael, "We have found Him!" (John 1:45). He was delighted to introduce them to Jesus.

- Could we step away from the confusion of so many denominations?
- Could we ignore the creeds, forms, rituals and rules for a moment?
- Could we sweep away the icons, idols and images?
- Can we just get back to Jesus?

Christianity is not a series of doctrines. Christianity is Jesus Christ.

It matters little to us at First Church what church you say you have belonged to. What matters to us is "To whom do you belong?" Do you belong to Jesus Christ?

Paul said at the outset of the Book of Romans:

Romans 1:6

*And you are included among those Gentiles  
who have been called to belong to Jesus Christ.*

Philip knew that intuitively. These Gentiles who searched for Jesus belonged to Jesus.

Let us journey back across the hilltops of time and see the One who loves, welcomes and changes. Let us answer the heart's cry of this world. Let us meet the One who is called the "Desire of All Nations" (Haggai 2:7). Let us see Jesus!

Why do you think this assembly continues to grow? It's not because of its location and beauty. It's because Jesus is exalted here, and people can find Him.

Jesus, the Light of the World.

Jesus, the Hope in the Darkness.

Jesus, the Author and Finisher of our Faith.

Jesus, the Healer of all diseases and the Deliverer from all issues.

We grow because they find Jesus here. What a privilege for all of us to say with Philip, "We have found Him!"

*We have found Him!*

- The most colossal Figure in history.
- The Giver of life, liberty, and salvation.
- The One who cleanses all iniquities.
- He's not a theory, not a theology—but a living reality.
- He saves, and He makes us over.
- He delivers people from pride and prejudice.

*We have found Him!*

- The Healer of all our diseases.
- The One whose compassions fail not.
- The Rescuer of the perishing.

We once floated down the giant river of human misery. The canyon walls got steeper; sin's cost grew ever higher. We heard the thundering roar of destruction ahead. But, then a Hand reached down—He saved us! We found Him — and He found us!

*We have found Him!*

- He's not the Jesus of History; He's the Right Now God.
- He's a very present help in the time of trouble.
- He's the One who stops by funeral homes and says, "Little girl, arise!" (Mark 5:41).
- He's the One who stops by tombs of a friend and says, "Lazarus, come forth!" (John 11:43).
- He's the One who walks across our difficulties and says, "It is I. Be not afraid!" (John 6:20).

*We have found Him!*

- The One who feeds five thousand without breaking a sweat.
- The One who built this Church next door to Hell's Gates.
- The One who sustains us.
- The One who blesses us.

*We have found Him!*

- Our Daystar; Our Daybreak; Our Dawn.
- Our Hope in a hopeless world.
- Our Help for a helpless life.
- He arises with healing in His wings.
- He's our present help—and our future hope!

*We have found Him!*

Can't you hear the hope in Philip's voice? "Nathanael, our days of looking are over. Our days of waiting are over. We have found Him!" (John 1:45).

And now that same Philip gets to introduce Jesus to a group of Gentiles. Philip knew Jesus. We need to know Him too.

### **Let's Get to Know Jesus**

Paul said at one time in his life and ministry that he purposed to forget all else but Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 2:2). That Paul could know Jesus was his highest and most solitary honor and pursuit (Philippians 3:10).

Unfortunately, that sentiment did not remain long after the death of Paul and the other apostles. Barely a century after their death, people begin to wrest away the simple truth of knowing Jesus in His fullness. Humanistic scholars, church councils and creeds distracted from the supremacy of Jesus in all things. Is it any wonder that today people are so confused about who God is and how Jesus fits into that picture?

Here at First Church, we don't look to creeds, councils or teachings that originated with men who had never been moved on by the Holy Spirit. Rather, we look to Jesus and the Apostles. The church was born amongst strict monotheists. Thomas could say of Jesus, "My Lord and My God" (John 20:28) and the other apostles would concur with that.

Here's what Paul said about Jesus:

1 Timothy 3:16

*Without controversy great is the mystery of godliness:*

*God was manifested in the flesh,*

*Justified in the Spirit,*

*Seen by angels,*

*Preached among the Gentiles,*

*Believed on in the world,*

*Received up in glory.*

Some say this passage of Scripture was the oldest hymn of the Christian church. If so, they about the true identity and lasting work of Jesus Christ: the one true God who came to our level when we couldn't get up to His.

Paul recognized the many prophecies about God coming to rescue this world. He saw in Jesus none other than the invisible God made visible. That unseen God was "manifested in flesh." He came to us, walked with us, and died for us.

Paul would say it even more plainly:

2 Corinthians 5:19

*God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself*

The angel called Jesus "Emmanuel" meaning God with us (Isaiah 7:14, Matthew 1:23). Jesus is both God and Man. He is not simply a part of God; He's the totality of God.

One anonymous writer said it like this:

*He came from the bosom of the Father*

*to the bosom of a woman.*

*He became the Son of man that we*

*might become sons of God.*

*He put on humanity that we might put on divinity.*

*He left the region where the rivers never freeze,*

*winds never blow, frost never bites, flowers never fade;*

*where there are no undertakers, no doctors needed, because no one is ever sick;*

*where graveyards never haunt, death never comes,*

*and where no funerals are ever conducted.*



Who is this Jesus? He's the only true and living God. He's the One who came to save us.

Don't let the terminology of Scripture confuse you. Of the many titles and names given to God in the Old Testament, there's only one saving Name of God and that is Jesus Christ (Acts 4:12).

Therefore:

- When we describe God as Father, we are saying He is the invisible supplier and Creator.
- When we describe God as Son, we mean that the invisible God became visible in Jesus.
- When we describe God as Holy Spirit, we describe Jesus in the present tense. His Spirit now dwells in us (Romans 8:9).

When Philip — there he is again— asked if Jesus would show them the Father. Jesus wondered that Philip didn't know who He really was. "Philip," Jesus said, "when you see me you see the Father" (John 14:9).

That's why John said if we accept the Son, we have the Father also. Because the invisible God is headquartered in Jesus Christ. (1 John 2:23).

Colossians 2:9-10

*In Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily;*

*and you are complete in Him, who is the head of all principality and power.*

Why is this important? Why do we make a big deal that Jesus is fully God?

Paul answers these questions. We can only be as complete as Jesus is. For our completion, our wholeness, our oneness is found only in Him.

### **Let's Be One in Him**

Paul constantly used expressions like "in Christ," "in Him," or "in the Lord." Some 164 times Paul spoke of this. It was as if Paul was struck with the fact that as God was in Christ; so too we should be in Christ.

Paul presented water baptism in Jesus name as being “in Christ” (Galatians 3:27). Water baptism is being baptized into Christ; Spirit baptism is “Christ in you” (Colossians 1:27). Obedience to the Gospel then is being one with Him.

- Oneness comes when we recognize who Jesus is: fully God.
- Oneness comes when we are baptized into His Name and filled with His Spirit.
- Oneness comes when we share His passions, His character, His teachings.
- Oneness comes when we love and live like Jesus.

Charles M. Sheldon wrote the bestselling, provocative book *In His Steps* in 1896. It has sold over 30 million copies and it tells the story of first a minister and then others who ask the question, “What would Jesus do?”

For many this introduced the concept of something we practice at First Church: a Jesus-Centered Life. The first component of our church’s DNA is LOVE. Not only should we love Jesus, we should let Jesus love others through us.

*Not merely in the words you say,  
Not only in your deeds confessed,  
But in the most unconscious way  
is Christ expressed.*

*Is it a beatific smile?  
A holy light upon your brow?  
Oh no! I felt his presence  
When you laughed just now.*

*To me, ’twas not the truth you taught,  
To you so clear, to me still dim,  
But when you came you brought  
A sense of him.*

*And from your eyes he beckons me  
And from your heart his love is shed,  
Till I lose sight of you and see  
The Christ instead.*

*(A. S. Wilson)*

One in Him...

We know the story of Simon Peter. He was the one who walked on water; declared Jesus to be God in flesh; marched into the Garden of Gethsemane with a sword in his hand bent on protecting Jesus. So many good qualities.

Simon Peter, however, was also the one who failed God. On the eve of Christ's crucifixion, he denied knowing the Lord just as Jesus had said he would. The denial would be evidenced by the crowing of a rooster. The Bible says Simon Peter looked up that night into the face of Jesus. Then, he ran away and wept bitterly.

After the Resurrection, Heaven told the women who saw Him to go tell Peter and the disciples to go to Galilee. There Jesus would meet them. Sure enough, while Simon Peter and some other disciples were back home fishing, he looked up and saw Jesus on the shore. This time he didn't try to walk on water. Miserable failure that he was, he simply dove in the water and swam to Jesus.

Later that evening before a campfire, Jesus addresses a fractured, broken man—a man who had boasted he would follow Jesus anywhere but failed to do so. Worse yet, he denied even knowing Jesus. Simon Peter was broken, incomplete and miserable. Fortunately, Jesus was and is complete. He was able then and now to make us One with Him where we can share in that completion.

Looking across the flames:

*John 21:15*

*Jesus said to Simon Peter,*

*“Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me more than these?”*

He would ask three times, once for each time Simon Peter denied the Lord. Each time, the apostle was given a chance to share in our Lord's great love.

Simon Peter needed that assurance of completion. He needed a “Jesus Emphasis” in his life. By it, he went on to become the chief apostle. Jesus is fully God and He’s able to make us fully one with Him.

For us to say Jesus is God or Jesus is Lord invites little persecution. But in those early days of Christianity, to say those words were a certain death sentence.

Christianity began in the era of the Roman Empire that practiced emperor worship. Each subject in that empire entering public events was required to praise Caesar by pinching a little incense, tossing it on the coals, and proclaiming “Caesar is Lord.” True believers of the primacy and divinity of Jesus Christ could not do that. They knew the strict monotheistic proclamation of Deuteronomy 6:4, that the Lord our God is One Lord. Jesus and Caesar could not both be Lords.

They chose Jesus. From Nero to Diocletian, ten Roman emperors would persecute the church for refusing to worship Caesar as Lord among other things. But, how could they do such a thing? They knew Jesus was the invisible God made visible for the purpose of redeeming them. If He died for them; how could they not die for Him?

When those insightful eyes reflecting the campfire zeroed in on Simon Peter, he knew that his fractured soul was being healed. It began with a question:

*John 21:17*

*Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me more than these?*

Who do you love the most? Do you love Jesus more than anything else? More than peer pressure, more than tradition, more than friendships? Simon Peter answered in the affirmative and that answer changed his world and affects us to this day.

What about you and me? Are we broken and miserable within? Perhaps we need to quit chasing theories about God and embrace Jesus Christ as fully God. Focus on Him alone and you will soon find health and wholeness coming into your life. For you are complete in Him.

Experience Oneness. Experience MORE.

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

1. The opening illustration spoke of the unpopularity of the church and the popularity of Jesus. In what ways do we believers disappoint the world's expectations?
2. The "Jesus-Emphasis" has been seen in the early church and in today's Bible-based churches. How important is it to keep Jesus front-and-center in everything we do and how can we accomplish this?
3. Some believers are hesitant to boldly proclaim, "Jesus is God." Why do you think that is?
4. The Name of Jesus is necessary for salvation (Acts 4:12). What does this mean to you and how is it applied in your daily life and walk with God?
5. Since completion is found in Jesus, how do other things tempt us from finding our fulfillment in the Lord?





# HOLINESS

---

## GOD'S CROWN

*I can guarantee that unless you live a life  
that has God's approval and do it MORE faithfully  
than the scribes and Pharisees,  
you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.*

*(Matthew 5:20)*

I don't know much about Joe Theismann.

I remember he was a great professional quarterback who played for Notre Dame in college and the Washington Redskins in the NFL. He won a couple of Super Bowls and appeared in several Pro Bowls.

I remember the sack by linebacker Lawrence Taylor that ended Theismann's career. But, outside of that, I know very little about him.

Sometime back, however, I read a statement he purportedly made during a divorce trial. The trial was fairly brutal since infidelity was alleged on Joe's part. When asked why he committed adultery,



Joe allegedly responded: “God wants Joe Theissman to be happy” (Lois Romano, *Washington Post*, December 7, 1994).

True or not, such a statement is typical of our day. People tend to weigh options based on momentary happiness rather than on lasting meaningfulness.

We should remember that God is less concerned with our happiness than He is with our holiness. God wants us to live purpose-filled lives that reflect Jesus to all who encounter us.

Our chief aim is to bring glory to God. God’s chief aim is to see His image in our lives. When both of these aims are met, we are able to worship Him in the beauty of holiness.

Hebrews 12:14-15

*14 Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord:*

*15 looking carefully lest anyone fall short of the grace of God;*

*lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble,*

*and by this many become defiled;*

Twin pursuits are outlined for us: pursue peace and holiness. Both go together and both should be pursued. In this chapter, we will focus on the latter.

### **Holiness Is God’s Crowning Attribute**

God is One. God is Love. God is All-Powerful. God is All-Knowing.

Of the countless attributes of our great, infinite God there is one that is completely otherworldly and foreign to us: His Holiness.

When Pharaoh’s army perished in the Red Sea, Moses praised God saying:

Exodus 15:11

*Who is like unto thee, O Lord, among the gods?*

*Who is like thee, glorious in holiness, fearful in praises, doing wonders?*

God is glorious in holiness. It’s what sets God apart from all others. It’s what makes Him unique.

In unending processions, the living creatures around God’s throne never cease nor tire of saying:

Revelation 4:8

*“Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty,  
Who was and is and is to come!”*

When Isaiah caught a glimpse of God’s throne room, he too noticed that six-winged angels encircled the throne:

Isaiah 6:3

*And one cried to another and said:  
“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts;  
The whole earth is full of His glory!”*

God’s holiness is then associated with His dominion and His glory. Stephen Charnock was a Puritan writer who studied the holiness of God and wrote extensively about it. He concluded that although Scripture uses many titles for God, one descriptive title is above all others: Holy.

*“The holiness of God is his glory and crown. It is the blessedness of His nature. It renders Him glorious in himself, and glorious to his creatures. “Holy” is more fixed as an epithet to His name than any other.*

*This is His greatest title of honor.”*

*—Stephen Charnock, "The Existence and Attributes of God"*

Charles Hodge leading theologian at Princeton University for many years agreed:

*“The holiness of God is not to be conceived of as one attribute among others.*

*It is rather a general term representing the conception  
of God’s consummate perfection and total glory.*

*It is His infinite moral perfection  
crowning His infinite intelligence and power.”*

*—Charles Hodge, Systematic Theology*

This idea of holiness as God’s crown was not lost on other scholars.

*“Holiness is the most sparkling jewel of God’s crown,  
it is the name by which He is known.”*

— Thomas Watson, Puritan preacher

These writers came about this conclusion through study of Scripture. In announcing His steadfast love for those who have slipped away from God, our Lord says through Isaiah:

*Isaiah 57:15*

*For thus says the High and Lofty One  
Who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy:  
“I dwell in the high and holy place,  
With him who has a contrite and humble spirit,  
To revive the spirit of the humble,  
And to revive the heart of the contrite ones.*

God lives in a high and holy place. He inhabits eternity. Holy is His Name.

When we call Him holy, we verbally crown Him to be uniquely God. We acknowledge that He is set apart. That our Lord is like none other, separate and apart from all else, the only supreme and unique Holy God.

The word holy—*qadash* (Hebrew), *hagios* (Greek)—clearly describes a God who is pure, unearthly, distinct, incomparable and hallowed. Of all His attributes, God’s holiness places Him in a company with Himself and Himself alone. No one or nothing measures up to His holiness.

Hannah cried to God:

*2 Samuel 2:2*

*No one is holy like the Lord,  
For there is none besides You,  
Nor is there any rock like our God.*

The Psalmist, not to be left out, sings and shouts the same:

*Psalm 111:9*

*Holy and awesome is His name.*

In the final book of the Bible, we read of not only angels, but the overcoming saints of God standing on a sea of glass mingled with fire, harps in their hands and songs on their lips. They sing the songs of Moses and the Lamb. In so doing, they proclaim:

Revelation 15:4

*Who shall not fear You, O Lord, and glorify Your name?*

*For You alone are holy.*

What does it mean that God is holy? It means He is right and will always do right. It means He's not tempted to sin and does not sin. It means everything He is and does is pure and not wicked.

How does this apply to us? Well, that's the real question.

### **God's Holiness Should Be Seen In Us**

We are to be "followers" of the Lord Jesus Christ. He is our Example and we are to walk in His steps (Matthew 16:24, John 13:13-16). In the Book of Acts, certain believers came to be called "Christians" or "Christ-followers" (Acts 11:26). They were imitators of Christ.

Paul said that he imitated the Lord (1 Corinthians 1:11) and asked us to do the same:

Ephesians 5:1

*Imitate God, therefore, in everything you do,*

*because you are his dear children.*

We are to imitate God in "everything," but most especially we are to be like Him in His holiness. In fact, it's non-negotiable with God.

1 Peter 15-16

*15 As He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct,*

*16 because it is written, "Be holy, for I am holy."*

Stop and think about that. Of all of the attributes of God, He commands us to become like Him in His crowning attribute? His holiness?

Our immediate response is, "No way. I can't do this." In a sense we are 100% right. We cannot do it on our own, but we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us (Philippians 4:13).

When you receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, you receive the Spirit of Holiness (Romans 1:4). God is not simply a noun; He's a verb. He's an action verb. God is working in you to accomplish His will!

1 Peter 2:9

*You are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation,  
His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him  
who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.*

Don't sell yourself short. God has higher plans for you than you can imagine. Rather than drifting into the path of least resistance, set your affections and gaze on Heaven.

*“When an observatory is about to be built,  
the site selected is always on some high mountain.*

*The aim is to find a place where there is a clear, unobstructed view of the heavens.*

*Similarly, faith requires for its heavenly vision the highlands of holiness and separation,  
the pure sky of a consecrated life.”*

—A. B. Simpson, *A Larger Christian Life*

Set your gaze on the heavens. Aim for a Christlike life filled and empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Paul compares Spirit-filled and empowered believers to heavenly bodies that reflect God's glory. The scientific term is albedo, a measurement of how much sunlight a celestial body reflects. The planet Venus has the highest albedo at .65. In other words, nearly 2/3 of the light of the sun that hits Venus is reflected. Our moon only has an albedo of .07, meaning only seven percent of sunlight is reflected from its surface.

You and I have a spiritual albedo. Our goal is to fully reflect God's glory to this world. As we do this, a change takes place in us. We are transformed with ever increasing glory. You are not the producer of light, but you are capable of transmitting it (Mark Batterson, *If: Trading Your If Only Regrets for God's What If Possibilities*, page 220.)

We cannot produce holiness, but we can reflect it. Numerous are the implications of becoming like God in His holiness. Holiness touches all areas of our lives: ethics, morals, speech, dress, hair, conduct, relationships, habits, and so forth.

A few of the profound impacts of holiness are worth examining.

Holiness identifies us. The word used most often to describe believers in the New Testament is saints or “holies.” Collectively, the saints are called the church, or the “called-out ones.” The vehicle through which a person is baptized into the Church is the Spirit of holiness (1 Corinthians 12:13). God’s intent is clear: He wants to form a holy people.

Holiness distinguishes the true from the false. Not only does holiness separate God’s people from the world, but it also clarifies the actual from the professing Christians, the true believers from the BINO’s (Believers-In-Name-Only.) John the Revelator saw this contrast in stark relief with the actual believers robed in fine linen and the professing believers decked out in gaudy garb (Revelation 17-19).

Holiness is integral to worship. According to our Lord, the greatest duty of man is to worship or glorify God. Man’s entire self is to be presented a living sacrifice, holy and without blemish before God. This worshipful presentation is both pleasing to God and demonstrates that a person is transformed by God.

Worship leads us to the “holy hill” and only the saints, the holy ones, are permitted there to receive the blessing of the Lord (Psalm 24:3-6). On at least four occasions in the Bible, God’s people are commanded to worship the Lord in the “beauty of holiness” or “holy array” (1 Chronicles 16:29, 2 Chronicles 20:21, Psalm 29:2, Psalm 96:9). The holy array depicts those who have “put off” the world and have “put on Christ.” Holiness is inseparable from worship, meaning that’s an integral part of why we are here.

Holiness is a part of salvation. Someone once said that salvation exists in three tenses: the past tense is justification; the present is sanctification; and the future is glorification. While overly simplistic, there is a certain prose to this. Sanctification, the process of becoming holy, is the Lord’s present work in the life of His children.

Jesus came to cleanse us from wickedness and to purify for Himself a special people eager to please Him (Titus 2:14). In the preceding verses, Paul says it was His Grace to leads us from ungodliness into a sober, righteous and godly lifestyle—all in anticipation of seeing Jesus someday (Titus 2:11-13). In other words, one day we are going to stand before the Holy God, we should then learn to live in His Holy Presence now in light of the day to come.

Holiness prepares us for the future.

A holy life is like a bridal gown. As a bride makes every effort to keep her gown clean and bright in anticipation of the wedding day, so saints are to live holy in readiness for His soon return (Revelation 3:4-5). Holiness serves a needful reminder that our citizenship is truly in heaven and not in this world.

We are commanded to cleanse ourselves of all filthiness of the flesh and spirit in preparation for Christ's coming (2 Corinthians 7:1). Those who do not believe in the Lord's soon return will neglect holiness, but those who believe they are married to a better hope than this world will strive to be ready for the midnight cry and His Return.

### **We Are To Pursue Holiness**

Remember the writer of Hebrews commanded us to pursue holiness without which no one will see the Lord (Hebrews 12:14). This pursuit of holiness cannot be rooted in self-improvement because nothing done solely through man's effort will please God. This pursuit of holiness recognizes that Jesus alone has the power to change our lives into His character and image.

Matthew 5:20

*I can guarantee that unless you live a life that has God's approval  
and do it MORE faithfully than the scribes and Pharisees,  
you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.*

So, the holy life we seek is not a mere "performance-based" religion where we check boxes on a never-ending checklist. No, there must be a new life working within us, the Spirit leading us into a holy life style.

Since God is working in us, we should work with Him (Philippians 2:12). We should permit Him to change us. We should cooperate with that change.

If it's not a performance-based, rule-keeping walk, then how do we pursue holiness?

First, we must have conviction.

We must believe that pursuing His holiness is worth it. We must be convinced that without this pursuit we will not see God. We must be fully persuaded that yielding our life to the Holy Spirit will take us to God and to His Throne.

How do we gain such convictions? By studying God's Word. By staying close to God. By letting God help us develop habits and ways of life that are pleasing to Him. By admitting that we are not our own any longer, but we were bought with a price at Calvary (1 Corinthians 6:20).

A recent Barna survey found that most Americans don't consider themselves to be holy. Three out of four Americans believe it's possible for people to be holy regardless of their past. But, only half of the adult population of America say they have ever met someone they considered holy. ("The Concept of Holiness Baffles Most Americans," [www.barna.org](http://www.barna.org)).

People do not drift toward holiness. Apart from grace-drawn effort, people do not gravitate toward godliness, prayer, obedience to Scripture, faith, and delight in the Lord. No, we do quite the opposite.

*We drift toward compromise and call it tolerance;*

*we drift toward disobedience and call it freedom;*

*we drift toward superstition and call it faith.*

*We cherish the indiscipline of lost self-control and call it relaxation;*

*we slouch toward prayerlessness and delude ourselves into thinking we have escaped legalism; we slide toward godlessness and convince ourselves we have been liberated.*

*—D. A. Carson, quoted in "Reflections," Christianity Today*

We must settle in our minds and hearts the fact that God created us to become holy. Once we arrive at that place, then we come to the second step in the pursuit of holiness.

Second, let some things die.

That sounds rather cruel, doesn't it? In a way, I guess it is. The things we let die however are not the worthwhile and lovely, but the things in our lives which should be removed. The resulting gain far exceeds the pain. What do we allow to die in our lives?

Colossians 3:5



*Put to death the sinful, earthly things lurking within you.*

*Have nothing to do with sexual immorality, impurity, lust, and evil desires.*

The things which were a part of our old way of living should die. Such things comprise what the Bible calls the “old man” (Romans 6:6-23). This is your pre-Christian life, your life Before Christ. Those things should be put to death.

I’m reminded of a cartoon in a Christian magazine a few years back. Pictured were two couples at a bible study or a small group. One woman said, “Well, I haven't actually died to sin, but I did feel kind of faint once.”

We smile, but we also understand. We can be convicted (convinced) of our need to be holy. We can even be convinced that the old ways of thinking and living should change. But, we also recognize that seeing it happen is far more difficult.

One way of thinking about it is the changing of garments. We are to “put off” the habits and thoughts of the old life. In so doing, we consciously and openly admit, “This is who I was. This way of life belonged to who I used to be but choose through the power of the Cross to be no longer.” In so doing, we consciously determine this is who I was, not who I am or will be (Ephesians 4:22).

With God’s help and guidance, some habits need to be shelved. Immodest clothing needs to be put away. Language and lifestyle changes need to be radically altered. Why? To get God’s favor? Certainly not. We live holy lives to reflect what He has done for us and is doing in us. We live to please the One who purchased us with His own blood, so we might glory in Him (Acts 20:28).

Third, let some things live.

Cultivate godliness and the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23).

Embrace mercy. Don’t look down on others. Don’t magnify the faults of others and minimize your own. When you see God-brought change in your life, don’t feel it gives you the license to boast or to judge others. Recognize that it’s God working in you, not you yourself.

I heard of a pastor who keeps a magnifying glass and a hand-mirror on his desk. When people come into his office to complain about other people, he holds up the magnifying glass and says, “You’re looking through a magnifying glass at others’ faults.” Then, he holds up the mirror and asks, “Why don’t you look first at your own faults?”

*They who are conscious of their own sins  
have no eyes for the sins of their neighbors.*

—Abbot Moses (10th century)

Walk in the Spirit. Permit Jesus to change your life.

Fourth, keep it beautiful.

We are to worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness. Anytime holiness becomes a drudgery or something ugly, it ceases to be holiness. Should pursuing holiness ever cause you to feel better than your neighbor, it ceases to be beautiful. Anytime it prompts you to put someone else down or to judge someone, it ceases to be beautiful. Should your desire for holiness ever cause you to forget that without Jesus your life would be meaningless, then it ceases to be beautiful.

That's what Jesus meant by our righteousness exceeding that of the Pharisees. They tarnished God's crown with their self-righteousness. Keep holiness beautiful.

Fifth and finally, look to Jesus.

He is our example. We should be Christlike in all we think and do. Ask Him what He would have you do.

**Close:**

God seeks us to be holy, not happy. But can I tell you a secret? Holy people are the most joyful, contented people you will ever meet. We are permitting Jesus to live His life through us and He makes us worthy of His investment in us.

I started with a quarterback who broke his leg playing football and displayed a poor attitude. Let me end with a young lady who broke her neck diving into Chesapeake Bay and caught a glimpse of Heaven. When she was fourteen years of age, Joni Eareckson embraced Jesus as her Savior. Yet, she was surprised and disappointed to discover that she lived no differently.

One evening Joni came home from a sordid Friday night date and cried, "God, I'm staining your reputation by saying I'm a Christian. Doing one thing on Friday night and another on Sunday morning. I'm a hypocrite. Change my life... Do something to bring glory from me."

Three months later, she had her diving accident and became a quadriplegic. She immediately blamed God and said, “You’ll never be trusted with another of my prayers.” But after much anguish and anger, she prayed a prayer that changed her life. “Oh God, if I can’t die, then show me how to live.” Joni’s writings have gone on to help people in the darkest paths of life. God has used her.

“Show me how to live.”

God will always answer that prayer. He will always show you how to live. Even better He will live through you. Oh, God, give me MORE!

### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

1. Holiness is a vital subject. How has reading and hearing about this helped you?
2. Does it help you to think of God’s holiness as His crown? In what way does it help you?
3. God is holy, and God is love. Do you think these are at odds with each other and why?
4. Several of the profound impacts of holiness are mentioned in this chapter. In which of these do you find the greatest impact in your own life and why?
5. “Let some things die.” What areas of your life would you like to see fall away completely?



# CHANGE

---

## THE HIGHER ORDER

*And the Lord—who is the Spirit—*

*makes us more and more like Him*

*as we are changed into His glorious image.*

*(2 Corinthians 3:18)*

In my first year of college, evangelical scholar Francis Schaeffer wrote a book called, *How Should We Then Live?* He described how major cultural shifts had taken place and these would prompt Christians to determine if we belong to this world or to another world.

The French philosopher, Blaise Pascal, would say the latter: to another world. Pascal claimed there are three orders of greatness: a physical order comprised of riches, beauty and strength; a mental one made of genius, science and art. Above these two existed a third type of greatness that he called “The order of Holiness.”

We are called to this “Higher Order.”

This elevation does not come from our natural gifts, talents or abilities. Nor does it come through willpower and discipline. Rather, it is the Spirit living within us that takes flight and leads us higher than we can imagine. In this journey, we are changed to become more like Jesus.

Anyone can make this trip. No matter your background, upbringing, socioeconomic status, education level, language or ethnicity. God can move you into this higher order. You can be separated from this present and expected life and changed to become like Jesus.

The word “holy” in one form or another appears over 500 times in the Bible. As we saw previously, God is holy. He gives us His Holy Spirit to make us holy and to call us into this higher order. We are called to become like Jesus. We are called to be holy (1 Corinthians 1:2).

The power to do this does not come from you, but from Christ in You. Our role is to cooperate with Him where we can be changed from glory to glory.

In the last chapter we focused more on the holiness of God. In this chapter we will focus more on the change that comes to us as we permit God to work in us.

How does God bring about this change in us? I liken it to the story in Genesis of the man named Enoch. He walked with God, the Bible says. Each day he walked with God, he was separated more and more from who he once had been. Each day he walked with God, he became more and more like Him. Until there came a day Enoch never went back home. He was promoted into a higher order (Genesis 5:24).

Isn't that what God does through us? Each day, He separates us from our “yesterdays” and who we once were and draws us into our “tomorrows” and who we will become. And the longer we are with Him, the more we become like Him.

The Apostle John gave insightful counsel:

1 John 2:15-17

*15 Do not love the world or the things in the world.*

*If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.*

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

*17 And the world is passing away, and the lust of it;*

*but he who does the will of God abides forever.*

Two “loves” are contrasted here: the love of the world and the love of the Father. These two loves go back to the two trees in the Garden of Eden. Eat of the one that looks good, feels right, and appeals to you and you will perish. Eat of the one that God approves, and you will abide forever. We either choose God’s way or our own way. We either love the world or love God.

Had Adam and Eve never eaten from the wrong tree they would have remained in Paradise. The Higher Order then is obtained in through loving obedience to our Heavenly Father and not following after our own ways. Like Enoch, we have to choose to be closer to Him and farther from our world.

2 Corinthians 6:17-18

*17 Come out from among them*

*And be separate, says the Lord.*

*Do not touch what is unclean,*

*And I will receive you.*

*18 I will be a Father to you,*

*And you shall be My sons and daughters,*

*Says the Lord Almighty.*

Saying “Goodbye” to the world and its false friendships is saying “Hello” to God and His lasting love.

### **God Separates Us to Change Us**

One of the first ways we see God in the Bible is the One who divides things. The same God who is Provider is also Divider. The God who blesses unity also draws clear distinctions in the world He created.

#### In Creation, God Divides (Genesis 1:1-31)

- 1st Day (vv. 1-5)      God divided light from darkness.
- 2nd Day (vv. 6-8)      God separated the atmosphere from the earth’s waters.
- 3rd Day (vv. 9-13)      God separated the dry land from the water.
- 4th Day (vv. 14-19)      God separated work of the sun and the moon.

- 5th Day (vv. 20-23) God separated the environments of aquatic life and terrestrial.
- 6th Day (vv. 24-31) God separated male from female.

At the outset of the Bible, the Creation story, we see God start His divisive work by separating light from darkness. He concludes by separating the sexes, male and female.

The separation of the sexes did not originate with man, but with God. He created the differences between man and woman. He ordained a division between the two so that males and females are complementary partners, counter-balances between one and the other. To seek to confuse the genders is to defy His creative intent and to put self in the place of God.

In Salvation, God separates

1 Thessalonians 5:5

*You are all sons of light and sons of the day.*

*We are not of the night nor of darkness.*

God calls us from the world's darkness into His light. Our identity, lifestyle, and calling are found as children of the light. He separated us from the darkness and brought us into His marvelous light.

I'm reminded when God separated the children of Israel in Goshen from the people in Egypt. When the plague of darkness came against Egypt, we read there was light in Goshen (Exodus 10:23). God clearly illuminated the difference the people who loved the world and those who loved Him.

Blessings obviously come upon those who are devoted to God.

### **Ten Blessings Of A Separated Life**

1. Unreaped Harvests (Job 4:8).

Job said that if we sow to wickedness, we will reap the same. If we don't sow wickedness, we won't reap it.

2. Freedom to Live as He Pleases (Psalm 119:45-46).

Holiness is not bondage. Holiness is not an irrational fear of God or a guilt complex. Holiness is identifying with the character and ways of God. Thus, a separated individual is one who is free to live as God pleases. Playing to an audience of One is a freedom the world cannot give.



3. God's Present Favor (Hosea 10:12).

Sowing in righteousness brings great rewards. Hosea said if we sow (invest) in righteousness, we will reap great mercy.

4. A Future Hope (Joshua 3:5, 1 Chronicles 15:12).

We are aware that no man can see the Lord without holiness. This is not only true in the future realm of the redeemed, but in this present world as well.

Joshua told the people to sanctify themselves in anticipation of ensuing miracles on the following day. Miracles have a way of finding people who have been seeking God's face.

When God prepared to bring the ark back to His people, He told them to sanctify themselves so that God may bring up the ark of the Lord. Holiness invites the miraculous presence of the Almighty.

5. A Crucified Life (Romans 8:13-15).

If we live after the flesh, we die. But if we through the Spirit put to death the deeds of the body, we live. A crucified life unlocks the door of the abundant life.

6. Christlikeness (Galatians 4:19).

Paul prayed that Christ be formed in us. People should see Jesus in us, in our attitudes, our speech, and our behavior. And yes, they should see Jesus in our appearance. Jesus should be noticeably seen and experienced by others through our lives.

7. Enhanced Testimony (Philippians 2:15).

Paul said we affect our generation as "lights" in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation. By preserving the difference between darkness and light and by being lights to our world, we enhance our testimony. People are drawn to that light. Obscure the difference and we hinder our testimony.

8. Growing Churches (Matthew 13:23).

This seems counterintuitive. It would seem that abandoning the lifestyle of holiness would attract people, not vice versa. What we have seen though through experience is that we can live such a separated and joyous life that this becomes a magnet to people who are struggling with various issues.

Many people, of course, are not truly desirous of change. They will find other, less intensive (and less godly) options to pacifying their consciences. Yet, there are many, many people who truly want to see God change their lives. To these, the separated life is attractive.

In the Lord's parable of the sower, seed was sown indiscriminately upon four different types of soil: stony ground, wayside, thorns, and good soil. It was not the seed sown amongst thorns (worldliness) that produced 30-, 60- and 100-fold. It was the seed sown on good ground (Matthew 13:1-23).

We too sow everywhere. But, we know that true and lasting change comes when people who are genuinely sincere about change open their hearts to God. In such soil, growth will happen.

9. Increased Fellowship (Ephesians 5:8, 1 John 1:7).

If we walk in the light, we have great fellowship one with another. No competing or hidden agendas colliding and dividing. We can walk together because we are in agreement (Amos 3:3).

Jesus watched the multitudes walk away when He presented the need for greater devotion. The Twelve Apostles also saw it happen and looked at Him incredulously. They must have been thinking, "They're leaving! Go chase them and bring them back!"

Jesus didn't run after those who had counted the cost and decided they weren't willing to pay the price. Nor did He run them down. He did not dislike these people, but neither did He choose to continue fellowshiping with them. He chose to stay close to those who were fully committed to the change that could only come through faith and obedience to Him. From that group would come those who would go on to change the world.

10. Protection (Ephesians 6:14).

Righteousness acts as the breastplate to the believer. In the same sense, separation from the world to God protects us from much harm. Remove righteousness and all that is precious and vital to life itself becomes vulnerable.

I've watched some who believe they can lay aside the protection of separation and still be okay. They profess that they will never turn their back on the basics of the Gospel, the Oneness of God, and the spiritual disciplines and devotions of the righteous. Yet, they forget: it's called a breastplate

because we have an enemy who is out for our destruction. To lay aside a piece of armor on this spiritual battlefield is at best foolhardy and at worst fatal. Hold to separation.

God is not only a unifier; He's a divider. He divides in creation and in salvation. But He also divides in relationships. When we separate from the world, we are choosing to walk a different path, what Jesus called the narrow way (Matthew 7:14). By implication, the broad path is one that follows the plain and sea level. But, the narrow way is one that leads to the heights. Seek that higher path. In so doing, you will see more of God and become more like Him.

### **Separation From The World: What It Is and Isn't**

So, what is separation from the world? Let's consider the negative first.

#### What Separation Is Not:

*Separation is not judgmental superiority.* Some of the greatest confrontations in Christ's ministry were with the people who felt more holy and more spiritual than others. Separation is not joining an exclusive self-righteous group who is ready to drop the hammer on any deviation from their expectations. Like the Pharisees Jesus encountered, such people may look the part, but their speech is proud and critical, and their hearts are far from God. Such people deceive themselves into thinking they are holy.

*Separation from the world is not giving up making a living in this world.* Paul was a tentmaker, Cornelius a soldier, Luke a physician and so forth. Godly people know how to work. Paul said those who don't work shouldn't eat (2 Thessalonians 3:10). A Christian can and should work, but he cannot lay down his relationship with God to do work that would compromise His walk with God.

*Separation from the world is not being ignorant about what's happening in the world.* Some would say that the child of God has no business reading anything but the Bible and being anywhere but Church. It's okay to know the headlines. It's okay to exercise your voting rights. Jesus instructed us to render to Caesar that which belonged to Caesar. The important thing is to not be consumed by this world.

*Separation from the world is not refusing all association with those who aren't saved.* The Lord went to a marriage feast. He went to a dinner party and sat at the table in the home of a Pharisee. There are some associations that are wrong to engage in with an unbeliever: marriage, partnership in a

business endeavor, and so forth. But, separation from the world does not mean isolation from the world.

Hopefully in our church we see people at all levels of spiritual growth. Some are brand new to this faith (Welcome!) and others have been here for years. If you only have association with people who are mature in their faith, then how can you be the salt and light of the world (Matthew 5:13-16)?

Church is the welcoming place where everyone is at one level of change or another. Here the wheat grows with the tares. God sorts it out in the final harvest.

*Separation from the world is not making a spectacle of yourself by your appearance.* Scripture says that the Pharisees made their tassels long and their phylacteries wide so as to be seen of men (Matthew 23:5). Sanctification isn't being sanctimonious. Trying to show our "unworldliness" by acting super-holy in our dress and appearance doesn't please God.

*Separation from the world isn't legalism, it's the freedom to choose to follow Jesus.* We operate from biblical precepts and principles. For example, there are seven principles to test any issue you and I face:

1. The Mastery Test: Will it control me? (1 Corinthians 6:12)
2. The Benefit Test: Will this benefit me? (1 Corinthians 5:12)
3. The Temple Test: Will it hurt me? (1 Corinthians 6:19-20)
4. The Stumbling Block Test: Will it hurt others? (1 Corinthians 8:13)
5. The Soul-Winning Test: Will it damage my witness? (1 Corinthians 9:19)
6. The Glory Test: Will it bring glory to God? (1 Corinthians 10:31)
7. The Association Test: Will it associate or align me with evil? (1 Thessalonians 5:22)

These are Bible principles that guide the change in our lives. Approach any issue and pass it through this test and the teachings of Scripture, and God will reveal the right answer when you seek Him in sincerity and faith. Separation is obviously not legalism; it's the living out of our faith as God would have us to live.

Okay, we've seen what it's not, now let's see what separation is.

What Separation Is:

In the New Testament, we find a church in the Greek city of Thessalonica that believed Jesus was coming back at any moment. Paul complimented them for this belief, but told them to focus as well on living in the present:

*1 Thessalonians 5:23*

*Now may the God of peace make you holy in every way,  
and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless  
until our Lord Jesus Christ comes again.*

Paul said that we should be made holy in every way, so that must mean in our emotions, thoughts, attitudes, lifestyles, dress, and bodies. He also indicates that the change is more than superficial, but involves our body, soul and spirit. So, separation involves a “full court press.” It doesn’t involve a part of us, but all of us.

Let’s look at a few elements of separation:

- *To be separated from the world, a person must constantly refuse to be guided by the world’s definition of right and wrong.*

The rule of the majority might be democracy, but it is not spirituality. It is the nature of people to go along with the crowd, to stay in step with what others are doing, to be like the world.

The child of God cannot be content with that. He or she will ask, “What does God’s Word say about that?” When nominal believers (believers in name only) choose to justify lifestyles that are associated more with darkness than living in the light, we do not berate them or preach to them, but neither do we follow them. If the majority opinion is it’s okay to party, drink, curse, gamble, lie and so forth, we will look to what God has to say about it. We will follow His path.

One of the greatest friends of the world is the argument that “everyone is doing it.” The child of God rests his life on the opinion of God, not that of man.

- *To be separated from the world, a person must be careful how he spends his leisure time.*

This seems so small. But, the world and its system are pervasive. Like the tide, the world rises over every bit of undisputed territory. If we give the world a little time, it will command our whole time.

I read a book called *Amusing Ourselves to Death* by Neil Postman. It's not a book that I recommend to the faint of heart. It's a sobering look at what has happened to America. The word amuse finds its roots in two words meaning "without thought." Our thoughtless amusements can easily dominate our lives.

We don't glorify in being busy. Yet, there is truth in the old adage that an idle mind is the devil's workshop. So, any thoughtless activity that takes precedence over God, family, key relationships, church, spiritual devotions and so forth is a sin. Sin will lead you in the direction you came from, not the direction God wants you to go.

- *To be separated from the world, a person must constantly choose to not be swallowed up by the cares of this life.*

While in a strange land far from home and family, Daniel made time for communion with God. Even though he was a busy, important man, he found time each day to call on God. We too must not allow the mundane cares of this life to swallow up our constant reaching up to heaven.

A godly person will resist the world by making those tiny decisions to keep God first in every way and every day of his life.

- *To be separated from the world, a person must refrain from being involved with those activities and behaviors associated with a sinful lifestyle.*

This is a difficult subject, but one that each of us should address in an honest manner with ourselves. The world is a place of darkness in which the god of this world (Satan) rules supreme. We should refrain from participating with anything that brings us into the kingdom of darkness.

We are not above temptation. In our quest to help others, we must be careful that we do not fall prey to the same vices and chains that grip others.

- *To be separated from the world, a person must be modest.*

I'm thankful that modesty seems to be making a comeback in the world of fashion. Yet, the world is not normally known for its modesty.

Paul was adamant that men should pray everywhere, lifting up holy hands free from wrath and doubt (1 Timothy 2:8). To Paul it seems that a separated life for men was at least partly found in not “going along to get along,” but in proclaiming his faith while holding his temper.

For women, Paul followed with the description of a godly woman:

1 Timothy 2:9

In like manner also, that women adorn themselves in modest apparel,

with shamefacedness and sobriety;

not with braided hair, or gold, or pearls or costly array

Several words here that are worth slowing down and looking at:

- “Modest” (*kosmios*, Greek): This means a woman’s appearance should be decent, well-arranged and in harmonious parity with who she is as a godly woman.
- “Apparel” (*katastole*, Greek): This word means a garment flowing down, a covering, a wrapping, a long dress. The same God who clothed Adam and Eve in the garden still desires us to be modestly clothed.
- “Shamefacedness” (*aidos*, Greek): This word means a sense of honor and respect for others, downcast eyes, or reverence.

Of course, our changed life is not merely one of dress and appearance, but we do see elements of modesty in all facets of the changed life. Men should “live out” their faith before all. Women should not seek to draw attention to themselves with their dress through brevity, transparency, expense or tightness, but to reveal the change in their hearts through a changed appearance.

- *To be separated from the world, a person must be true to their God-given gender.*

A few years back, this was a given. But, not any longer. The same God who separated the sexes intends for us to glorify Him through our gender. What does this mean?

At least partly, it means identifying with the gender chosen by God. Men should be men; women should be women. Each should wear gender appropriate clothing (Deuteronomy 22:5). It’s good for a woman to wear a dress, not so good for a man to do the same.

A godly person's hair reflects his or her gender. Women will allow their hair to grow; men will not (1 Corinthians 11:14-15).

- *To be separated from the world, a person must be careful in his friendships and relationships with worldly people.*

Paul said that unless we leave this world, we can't help but have some association with people of this world (1 Corinthians 5:10). We should treat all people with courtesy and kindness.

Yet, acquaintance is one thing, intimate friendships are another. Paul teaches believers that they should not be "unequally yoked" (2 Corinthians 6:14). A Christian shouldn't date or marry a non-Christian. As I have said to tens of thousands of teens through the years, "You can't choose who you will fall in love with, so you carefully choose who you date."

A person is known and influenced by the company he keeps. Solomon said that if we walk with the wise, we will grow wise but if we are a companion of fools we will suffer harm (Proverbs 13:20).

- *To be separated from the world, we must worship in the beauty of holiness.*

The Temple of God had outer courts and inner courts. The closer you came to God's Presence in the Temple, the more separated you had to become. Moses said that the sweet incense was within the veil (Leviticus 16:12). To step into the sweet presence of God, one had to worship in a holy, separated manner.

The exterior of the Moses' tabernacle was covered with badger or porpoise skins. The exterior then was functional, but not beautiful. However, if you stepped within the tabernacle, you will see the gold and precious things.

That was the meaning of what Simon Peter said, our holiness is not solely of outward adorning, but of the hidden man of the heart which God finds to be most valuable (1 Peter 3:3-4). As the Temple of God, we reflect who He is and what He had done in our lives.

This involved chapter holds to the simple premise: as we seek to please God, we will be separated from the world and others will see the change in our lives. Is it possible without separation? Not really. People are looking for the difference Christ can bring in a person's life.



Let me close with this analogy. The moon is part of the world; but not part of the world. It orbits around the earth but is separated from the earth by many miles. It's that separation that permits the moon to see the sun when the earth cannot.

The glory or light of the moon differs from that of the sun. The moon has no internal radiance of its own; it only reflects the light of the sun.

True holiness permits a child of God to catch the light of another world and reflect it into the darkness. You are indeed the light of the world (Matthew 5:13-16). Shine into the darkness. Let them see the Christlike change in your life.

#### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. God separates us from our old ways of living to change us. In what ways have you seen such changes in your life?
2. The "Stumbling Block" test says that something should not cause us to hinder someone else's walk with God. Explain this idea in the context of brotherly love.
3. Highly effective people control their leisure time. In what ways could you improve on this?
4. "Separation is not judgmental superiority." What does this statement mean to you?
5. Unreaped harvests form one of the benefits of living a changed life. In what way has living a changed, overcoming life led you to avoid many negative consequences?



# SACRIFICE

---

## CROSS-BEARING

*It is MORE blessed to give than to receive*

*(Acts 20:35)*

We are told that the best things in life are free. There's a lot of truth in this. Laughter, peace, and joy don't usually present themselves with a price tag. Neither do air, sunlight and water. We experience these gracious gifts and accept them with little thought and without so much as a "Thank you!"

Yes, the best things in life are free. It's also true, paradoxically, that nothing truly worth having is free. Everything comes with a price, either to us or someone or something else. Freedom itself is never free. Someone paid a price for it and freedom is worth whatever price that had to be paid.

We see this in the blessings and heritage handed to us. When we worship and assemble freely, we remember that someone paid the price for this. When we enjoy the truth discovered and passed along by believers of yesteryear, we realize they forged and paved a trail for us that we could experience spiritual freedom.

The first church found in the Book of Acts gave so much to pass along the truth we know today. In a sense, this 1<sup>st</sup> Century church is the pattern and guide for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century church. Today's First

Church is a direct recipient of the sacrifice of those individuals. It should be our posture then to have what they had, believe what they believed, and live how they lived. We want all of these things in equal or greater measure. We want what they had and MORE.

Those believers in the Book of Acts possessed so much, but they also gave much. The word “all” is used more in the Book of Acts than in any other book in the New Testament. It’s as if God is telling us the secret of the very first church. They gave all and turned their world upside down. We too must be willing to give all to see God work through us.

Sacrifice is at the heart of passionate service. Those early believers had that in abundance. The Apostle Paul, quoted a lot in these chapters, was living proof of the sacrificial lifestyle so willingly offered in those days. Paul was the Apostle to the Gentiles. As moved by the Spirit, Paul wrote a huge portion of the New Testament. He touched many lives and his sacrificial spirit inspired the devotion of many more.

We know precious little about his life. What we do know we have to piece together from various books of the Bible. Had it not been for his second letter to the church in Corinth, we would know even less. From that personal letter where Paul opened his heart, we glean much of what we know about him.

If Paul followed the typical path in those days, he would have been entering his prime in Judaism at the age of 30. It’s doubtless that he was the up-and-coming star of this monotheistic faith. He was of the first kingly tribe of Benjamin and his name reflects the inaugural monarch of Israel from that tribe: Saul. He was taught by none other than the revered rabbi, Gamaliel. He also had a Roman citizenship. So, by man’s standards, he had it made.

Heaven had a different view. On the Damascus Road, the Lord interrupted Paul’s well-planned life. From that day when Paul recognized Jesus to be Lord of all, once-opened doors were now shut and locked to him. Old friends turned their back on him. Even the church distrusted him, and why not? He had been instrumental in jailing, punishing, and even executing followers of Jesus Christ.

For a dozen or so years, Paul was on the back burner of the first church. One day, Barnabas—the Son of Encouragement—took an interest in him. We are all indebted to Barnabas for encouraging the future Apostle to the Gentiles, our apostle.

Paul's life from that point forward became a living death. He was a hated, hunted man. He was hated by Jews and Gentiles, believers and unbelievers. Wherever he went, his life was in danger. While the threat of death in most areas of the world has largely been lifted from the 21<sup>st</sup> Century church, there is still a recognition that walking the narrow way can lead to loss, and at times, significant loss. Like Paul, each of us must approach our growth in God with an "at-any-cost" mindset. For sacrifice is no stranger to God's people.

### **The Bible Is Filled With Sacrifice**

It's been true from the start of human history.

- Abel sacrificed (Genesis 4:4).
- Noah sacrificed (Genesis 8:20).
- Abraham sacrificed (Genesis 9, 12, 13, 22).

David, the man after God's own heart, once said that he could never offer to God that which cost him nothing (2 Samuel 24:24). The sacrifice he then offered on a threshing floor not only ended a costly judgment but became the probable site for the building of Solomon's Temple.

Following on the heels of David was the sacrificial spirit of his son, Solomon. At the outset of his reign, King Solomon offered a thousand sacrifices to God (2 Chronicles 1:6-7). At the dedication of the temple he built for God, Solomon and God's people offered numerous sacrifices before the Lord.

2 Chronicles 7:4-5

*<sup>4</sup> Then the king and all the people offered sacrifices before the Lord.*

*<sup>5</sup> King Solomon offered a sacrifice of twenty-two thousand bulls and one hundred and twenty thousand sheep. So the king and all the people dedicated the house of God.*

Don't get the wrong idea here. God is not asking each of us to start collecting animals to be offered to Him. Animal sacrifices are no more. These faded away with the once-and-for-all sacrifice of the Spotless Lamb, Jesus Christ, at Calvary (Hebrews 10:1-18). Today, we offer "spiritual sacrifices" to the Lord (1 Peter 2:5).

What are our "spiritual sacrifices"?

- We offer the giving of thanks, the “fruit of our lips” (Hebrews 13:15). We take sincere, heartfelt words to the Lord rather than a dove, a pigeon, or a lamb (Hosea 14:2).
- We walk the second mile. We go beyond the customary into the excessive (Matthew 5:38-42).
- We forego the permissible to lay hold on the essential. This reminds me of the words from Vance Havner’s *Playing Marbles With Diamonds*:

*In a day when tragedy has become comedy, we play fast and loose with eternal issues.*

*The Pearl of great price is not cheap!*

*I have read that years ago in that part of Africa where diamonds in the rough were plentiful, a traveler chanced upon boys playing. Closer investigation revealed that they were playing marbles with diamonds. God forgive us today if we handle God’s treasures as though they were trifles and the coinage of the eternal as though it were play money. Now is no time to play marbles with diamonds!”*

–Vance Havner

We don’t play marbles with diamonds. We identify those things that are truly essential and cling to them (1 Timothy 6:12).

- Another spiritual sacrifice is our choice to make Jesus Lord and to follow His way and will (Matthew 6:24).
- We take up our Cross. We deny ourselves and follow after the original Cross-Bearer (Luke 9:57-62).
- We learn to say again and again, “Not my will; but Thine be done” (Luke 22:42).

Giving sacrificially of our time, talent and treasure unites us with the giving heart of the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus is the willing sacrificial Lamb who gave Himself for the sins of the whole world (John 1:29). He purchased the Church with the shedding of His own blood (Acts 20:28). Since Jesus is the Head of the Church, then sacrifice is the life and spirit of the Church.

The average spectator to Christianity does not care for the call to sacrifice. It’s not too strong to say that casual believers despise this. For the spirit of sacrifice and cross-bearing runs contrary to the flesh. And much of today’s religion centers upon catering to the flesh: our personal wants and felt needs.

As Dallas Willard, an author known for his works on spiritual disciplines, is fond of saying:

*“The Lord is my Shepherd”*

*is written on many more tombstones than lives.*

—Dallas Willard

In the crowds surrounding today’s churches, there are more would-be and wannabe followers of Jesus than true disciples; more fair-weather soldiers than frontline troops.

A recent article in *Real Life Magazine* could serve as an apt metaphor for this phenomenon. The market for workout clothing continues to skyrocket, growing five percent each year. This market approaches \$100 billion dollars of annual sales. Yet, the article also notes that sales of yoga clothes increased ten times as fast as actual participation in yoga classes. For every ten people wearing workout clothes, only one is working out (*Real Life Magazine*, August 22, 2016).

For many it’s the same in their attempt to live for God. They like the look, but not the work. They like to talk the talk; they just don’t like to walk the walk.

It’s hard to come to a different conclusion when we understand that the average American Christian spends only nine minutes a day in religious and spiritual activities (Ted Olsen, *Christianity Today Magazine*, August 2010). And we wonder why we cannot find the victorious, overcoming life; why we fall prey to the slightest temptation and distraction. If that’s true of individual believers, then the collection of believers known as the church is not faring well either:

#### AMERICAN CHURCH STATISTICS

- Of the 250,000 Protestant churches in America, 200,000 are either stagnant (with no growth) or declining. That’s 80% of the churches in America.
  - 4,000 churches close their doors every single year.
- There is less than half of the number of churches today than there were only 100 years ago.
  - 3,500 people leave the church every single day.

—Compilation, James MacDonald, *Walk in the Word*

Giving, sacrifice, and stewardship are largely foreign words to many nominal believers. Weekends are for pleasure, not for worship. Time to play, no time to pray.

That's not how it was in the first church. That's not how it is supposed to be today. We should expect MORE.

God's people should not be strangers to sacrifice. Paul spoke the truth when he said, "I die daily." In his second letter to the believers in Corinth, Paul opens the treasure chest of his memories and ministry. For a moment, he reveals the partial price he paid to bring Pentecost to each locale:

*I've worked much harder, been jailed more often,  
beaten up more times than I can count,  
and at death's door time after time.*

*I've been flogged five times with the Jews' thirty-nine lashes,  
beaten by Roman rods three times, pummeled with rocks once.*

*I've been shipwrecked three times,  
and immersed in the open sea for a night and a day.*

*In hard traveling year in and year out, I've had to ford rivers,  
fend off robbers, struggle with friends, struggle with foes.*

*I've been at risk in the city, at risk in the country,  
endangered by desert sun and sea storm,  
and betrayed by those I thought were my brothers.*

*I've known drudgery and hard labor,  
many a long and lonely night without sleep,  
many a missed meal, blasted by the cold, naked to the weather.*

*And that's not the half of it,  
when you throw in the daily pressures and anxieties of all the churches.*

*(2 Corinthians 11:23-29)*

The word cost is found in Pentecost. What they had back then, we must have now.

**Sacrifices Then And Now Are Based On Love**



Think about that promise in Acts 1:8: “You shall receive power after the Holy Ghost has come upon you.” We like to quote that portion. The second phrase seems uplifting as well: “You shall be witnesses...” The word “witness” comes from the Greek word *martus* which can also be translated as “martyr.” The lifestyle promised here is powerful and sacrificial.

The Spirit-filled life is one of bold sacrifice. Paul said he was willing to spend and be spent for the Gospel’s sake. This “spending” is an emptying of one’s self to fulfill what God has called us to do and become.

The “spirit of sacrifice” is seen in the history of the original Apostles. We are not sure of all the details surrounding their deaths, but each seemed to die a martyr’s death. From a mixture of history and church tradition, we surmise:

- PETER and PAUL were both martyred in Rome about A.D. 66, during the persecution under Emperor Nero. Tradition has Paul beheaded. Peter was crucified, upside down at his request, since he did not feel worthy to die in the same manner as his Lord.
- ANDREW went to the "land of the man-eaters" in what is now thought to be Russia and the surrounding former Soviet states. Christians there claim him as the first to bring the Gospel to their land. He also preached in Asia Minor, modern-day Turkey, and in Greece, where he is said to have been crucified.
- "Doubting" THOMAS was possibly most active in the area east of Syria. Tradition has him preaching as far east as India, where the ancient Marthoma Christians revere him as their founder. They claim that he died there when pierced through with the spears of four soldiers.
- PHILIP may have had a powerful ministry in North Africa and then in Asia Minor, where he converted the wife of a Roman proconsul. In retaliation the proconsul had Philip arrested and cruelly put to death.
- MATTHEW the tax collector and writer of a Gospel, ministered in Persia and Ethiopia. It is thought he was stabbed to death in Ethiopia.

- BARTHOLOMEW had widespread missionary travels attributed to him by tradition: to India with Thomas, back to Armenia, and also to Ethiopia and Southern Arabia. He was skinned alive and crucified.
- JAMES THE LESS ministered in Syria. The Jewish historian Josephus reported that he was stoned and then clubbed to death.
- SIMON THE ZEALOT, so the story goes, ministered in Persia and was killed after refusing to sacrifice to the sun god.
- MATTHIAS was the apostle chosen to replace Judas. Tradition sends him to Syria with Andrew and to death by burning.
- JOHN is the only one of the original apostles thought to have died a natural death from old age. Even then, his life was no rose garden. During Domitian's reign from A.D. 81-96, John was exiled to the island of Patmos. An early Latin tradition has him escaping unhurt after being cast into boiling oil at Rome.

--(Largely summarized from “Whatever Happened to the Twelve Apostles?” Ken Curtis, Ph.D. [www.christianity.com](http://www.christianity.com).)

The trail of sacrifice did not end with the passing of the original apostles. Time and again we see great sacrifice welling up in the hearts and lives of believers when the times demanded it. Believers worshipped and gave their lives through the reigns of Nero, Domitian, Trajan, Hadrian, Marcus Aurelius and others.

All of these may best be summarized by Polycarp, bishop of the church in Smyrna. He was probably the last living disciple of the Apostle John. Polycarp was told to either renounce the Lord Jesus or perish by burning at the stake. His answer revealed the character of those leaders:

*“86 years have I have served him, and he has done me no wrong.*

*How can I blaspheme my King and my Savior?”*

*(Polycarp)*

And now we come close to the source of their sacrifice. What motivated these people? Compulsion? Anger? Perseverance?

No, their sacrifice was motivated by the same force that prompted Jesus to die at Calvary: Love. Their sacrifice was given as an offering of love. Freely they received; freely they gave (Matthew 10:8).

Whatever we give pales in comparison to what Jesus gave to us and for us. Jesus, the Founder and Foundation of the Church, is the Lamb of God who gave His life for the sins of the whole world. What a Savior we have!

The results of His sacrifice? A grave was opened; death was conquered; and the Church was born.

The results of His followers' sacrifice? A world turned upside down, the Gospel preached to the known world, and countless lives spared an eternity without God.

### **Sacrifice Brings Great Power**

We have adversaries to such giving: the world, the flesh and the devil conspire to stop us. Satan's strategy is not to stop you from being a nominal believer—praying or going to church occasionally—but he does wish to stop you from bearing a cross and living and giving sacrificially.

How can we say that? Because this is what Satan did with Jesus Christ. He tempted Jesus to bypass Calvary and accept world domination at Satan's hand. Yet, Jesus resisted the temptation, paid the price at Calvary, and took dominion over death and hell (Matthew 4).

Satan did the same with Ananias and Sapphira. This married couple was prompted by a spirit of sacrifice to sell a piece of property and give the proceeds to the apostles to meet a genuine need. Yet, at the last minute they held back half of the proceeds while pretending to have given all (Acts 5:1-11).

How that contrasts with the widow who gave two mites—worth about a half-cent—in an offering to the Lord. Jesus trumpeted her sacrifice because she had given everything she possessed (Luke 21:1-4).

Within sacrifice, there is great power. Power to open the windows of Heaven. Power to turn the face of God. Power to turn a cold heart of stone into a compassionate soul. Power to change lives and set people free.

Sacrifice causes you to bear fruit (John 12:24). It gives you authority and dominion (2 Timothy 2:12). Sacrifice accesses the blessings of God (Luke 6:38).

Do you remember what happened when Solomon offered 1,000 sacrifices? God came to Solomon in a dream and made promises to him. Or when the same Solomon led His people to offer 22,000 oxen and 120,000 sheep to the Lord? Heaven came down and filled the House.

Sacrifice has great power. It can invite Heaven to Earth. It can usher in the presence of God.

Systematic sacrifice is called stewardship. Stewardship is the practice of managing God's resources. God owns the title to everything: Earth and everything in it belong to the Lord (Psalm 24:1). We own nothing. All that we have is His. Anything we hold we do so as His stewards. He's the owner, we are just the manager.

What does a good steward do? God requires our all. It all belongs to Him. Yet, He only asks us to return the first 10% of our increase to Him and His cause. Why? If God has the first, then He has the last. This 10% is called tithes or tithing which simply means a tenth. When we are paid or blessed financially, we put aside a tithe for the church. We also set aside amounts for general offerings and missions.

What we have learned is when we put God first in giving, He more than makes up the difference. Besides, cheerful giving is contagious (2 Corinthians 9:7). As Jesus said, it's MORE blessed to give than to receive (Acts 20:35). With sacrifice, comes great joy, power and blessings.

Successful people in their careers understand this. Consider what Hollywood actors have given to achieve success:

- To portray a dancer in *Black Swan*, Natalie Portman trained with a New York City Ballet dancer for eight hours a day, six days a week for a year before the film ever started.
- To portray a cerebral palsy character in *My Left Foot*, Daniel Day-Lewis interacted with disabled patients for months before filming. During the filming he remained in his wheel chair and was spoon-fed by the crew.
- Shia LeBeouf trained as a soldier and chaplain's assistant for months prior to filming *Fury*.
- Jamie Foxx lost 30 pounds in a week and wore prosthetic eyelids that rendered him unseeing during the film about Ray Charles.

You get the picture? Actors and actresses are willing to give up what they must to achieve success in their sphere.

Professional football players are willing to go to most any length for NFL glory and fame. *Esquire Magazine* reported that during the 2011 NFL season, the roughly 2,000 active players suffered at least 4,500 injuries. That's an injury rate of 225 percent. Why did they do it? They believe in the giving of themselves fully, they will be rewarded.

The question is for each of us believers. If actors and athletes will sacrifice all to achieve fame and fortune, will we have the same or greater dedication towards the Lord and His service? After all, we do not run for a momentary prize, but one that will last forever (1 Corinthians 9:25).

### **Closing Thought:**

Someone one said, "There are two great moments in a person's life: the moment you were born and the moment you realize why you were born."

We were born once to be born twice. We are born so that we may die to our sin and selfishness and be born again to a life of worshipful sacrifice. Like a grain of wheat that falls into the ground and dies so that it may be multiplied many times over (John 12:24).

Jesus said:

Luke 9:23

*If anyone would come after me,*

*let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.*

This is the call to the sacrificial life. Bear a cross. Invest yourself into the cause of Christ and watch your life be changed. Jesus looks today for the next generation of sacrificial followers.

A missions agency in South Asia asks a series of questions to prospective candidates for baptism in countries where persecution is strong:

- Are you willing to leave home and lose the blessing of your father?
- Are you willing to lose your job?
- Are you willing to go to the village and those who persecute you, forgive them, and share the love of Christ with them?
- Are you willing to be beaten rather than deny your faith?
- Are you willing to go to prison?

- Are you willing to die for Jesus?

(--"South Asian nation struggles to shape itself", Mission Network News, 1-17-12)

That's the spirit of sacrifice that runs through the people of First Church. We believe...

*"There are no crown-wearers in Heaven who were not cross-bearers on Earth."*

*--Charles H. Spurgeon*

Elisha Hoffman penned many memorable songs we once sang from hymnals: "I Must Tell Jesus," "Are You Washed in the Blood?", "No Other Friend Like Jesus" to name a few. One of his songs written in 1900 may be relevant here:

*You have longed for sweet peace,  
And for faith to increase,  
And have earnestly, fervently prayed;  
But you cannot have rest,  
Or be perfectly blest,  
Until all on the altar is laid.*

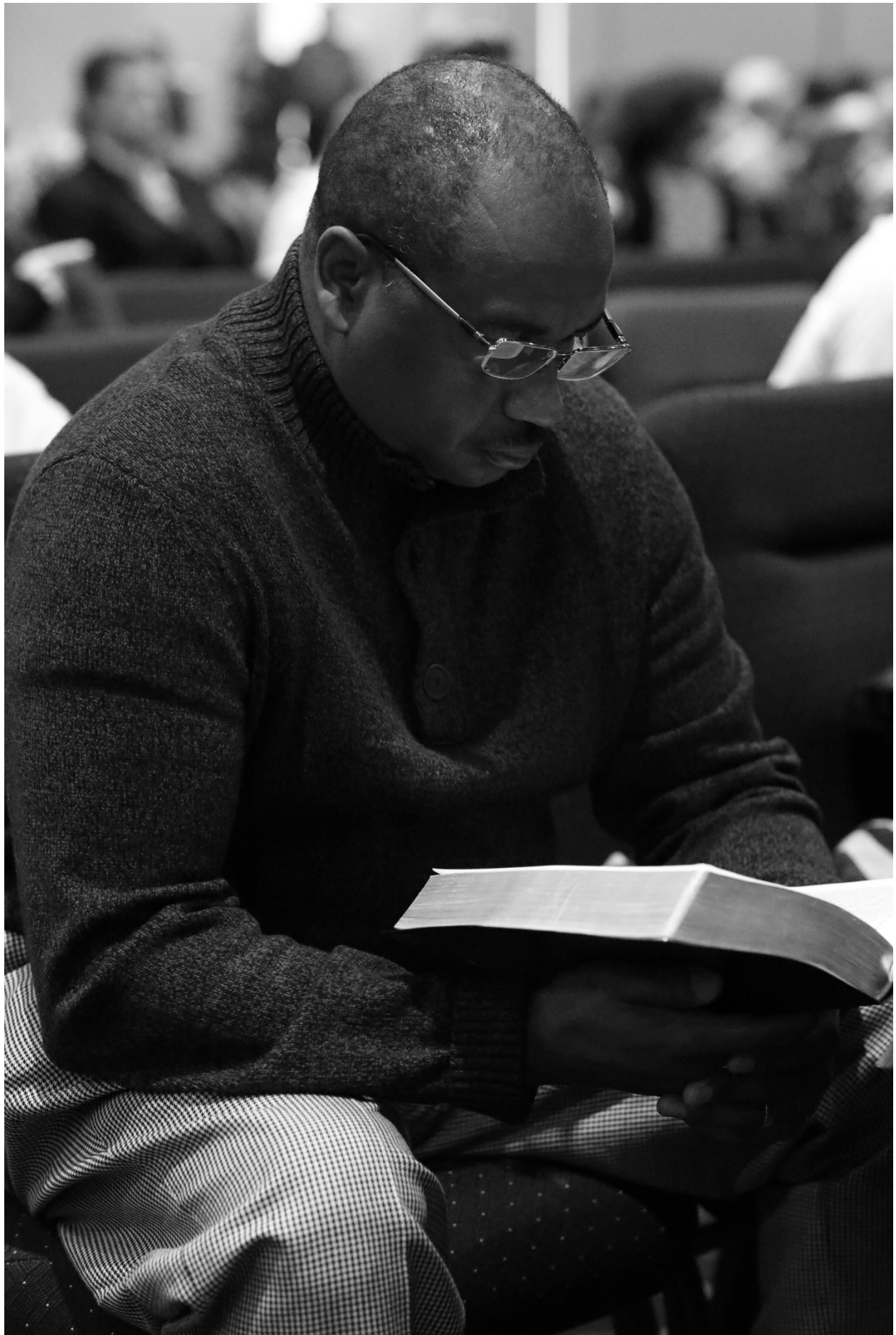
*Is your all on the altar of sacrifice laid?  
Your heart does the Spirit control?  
You can only be blest,  
And have peace and sweet rest,  
As you yield Him your body and soul.*

(*"Is Your All on the Altar?"*, Elisha A. Hoffman, 1900)

If you want to know MORE of God, then get close to who God is and what He does. God loves, and God sacrifices.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. The word “all” is used more in the Book of Acts than any other book of the Bible. What does this mean to you and how should it affect your growth in God?
2. Men and women in the Bible gave sacrificially. How do their examples motivate you?
3. Churches, ministries and missions are funded through the faithful and generous giving of supporters. How does this study motivate you to be more mindful in giving?
4. When you read what is thought to have happened to the apostles and how their lives ended, how does that make you view your own service for God?
5. People sacrifice a great deal to succeed in many spheres of life, in what ways does an overcoming child of God need to sacrifice and why?







# THE WORD

---

## PEOPLE OF THE BOOK

*And the people of Berea were MORE  
open-minded than those in Thessalonica,  
and they listened eagerly to Paul's message.*

*They searched the Scriptures day after day to see if Paul and Silas were teaching the truth.*

*(Acts 17:11)*

The Book. The Bible. Scripture. The Word of God.

Call it what you will, God's Word is a limitless treasure. Read it and you will be informed; study it and you will grow intrigued; apply it and you will be transformed.

This book we call the Bible is a compilation of 66 separate books: 39 in the Old Testament and 27 in the New Testament. Each book is divided into chapters which in turn are divided further into verses. The chapter and verse numbers are not in the original manuscripts. These are a later addition for the reader's benefit. When referencing a particular verse, we say the book name first, then the chapter, followed by the verse. For example, "Romans 8:28."

Although we know the chapter and verse numbers came later, there is something interesting about some of the sixteenth verses of the third chapters of various books. These “3:16” verses touch upon some of the greatest subjects and themes of the entire Bible. For example:

- John 3:16 “For God so loved the world...” THE LOVE OF GOD
- 1 Timothy 3:16 “Without controversy great is the mystery of godliness...” THE ONENESS OF GOD

There are also two “3:16” verses that address the subject of the Word of God itself:

- 2 Timothy 3:16 “All scripture is given by inspiration of God...” ALL SCRIPTURE COMES FROM GOD
- Colossians 3:16: “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly...” NOT JUST ON PAPER, BUT IN YOUR HEART.

The Bible is God’s lasting gift to mortal man. It can rightly be called the world’s most popular book, neglected and dangerous book. No book-burning in some oppressed culture or regime is complete without tossing the Bible into the flames—as if the fire will quench its incendiary voice.

*"There's nothing more radical, nothing more revolutionary,  
nothing more subversive against injustice and oppression than the Bible.*

*If you want to keep people subjugated, the last thing you place in their hands is a Bible."*

—Desmond Tutu

God’s Word is true, and truth sets people free (John 8:32).

Through the years, there has been much criticism of the Bible’s reliability. People ask if it should be trusted. Consider that this is not only the most popular book in the United States, it is also the most studied book.

More than any other ancient work, the Bible has ample ancient manuscripts to support that the words we read are faithful to what holy men of old penned under the inspiration of the Spirit. There are thousands of ancient Greek manuscripts for the New Testament, totaling over 2.6 million pages. There are more than 66,000 ancient manuscripts for the Old and New Testaments.

Add to this the writing of the early church fathers and those just after the time of Christ. From their writings alone, there are enough scriptures quoted (some 32,000) to nearly recreate the entire New Testament. (Josh McDowell, “Historical Reliability of the New Testament”, January 2018).

I feel like the British preacher C.H. Spurgeon when asked if he would defend the Bible. He said, “I would as soon defend the Bible as I would a lion.” In other words, the Bible needs no defense. It was here before we were born and will remain long after we die.

Critics, skeptics, and heretics can rail against it all they like but the Bible is the anvil that has worn out many a detractor’s hammer. Heaven and Earth will one day pass away, God’s Word will abide forever (Luke 21:33). You can trust God and His Word.

### **The Book Has Power**

The Book is not just any book, it is the Word of an All-Powerful, All-Knowing, All-Loving God. Men were involved in its creation and presentation to us, but they were certain type of men. Simon Peter said:

2 Peter 2:1

*Prophecy never came by the will of man,*

*but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit.*

The individuals involved in bringing us the Bible were “holy men of God.” They were not exercising their will to write this, but they were moved or carried along by the Spirit. The Spirit guided the mind and hand of some 40 men to write the 66 books of the New Testament.

In one of those 3:16 verses, Paul said:

2 Timothy 3:16

*All Scripture is given by inspiration of God,*

*and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction,*

*for instruction in righteousness,*

“Inspiration of God” means God-breathed. When you hold the Bible, remember that the same God who spoke this world into existence and breathed into Adam’s nostrils such that he lived, also

moved on holy men of old to give you this Book. This book is God-sent to you to guide you and change your life. This book is powerful.

Powerful in Creation. The writer of Hebrews said:

Hebrews 11:3

*By faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God,  
so that the things which are seen were not made of things which are visible.*

Nine times in the first chapter of Genesis do we read, “And God said...” Each time God spoke, something was formed, created and made. God’s Word creates worlds. The same Word not only creates but sustains creation.

When you claim the promises of God’s Word, powerful things happen (Romans 10:8). Through God’s Word we lay hold on the promises of God. Through His Word, our faith is strengthened to claim those promises. Through His Word, our lives and present circumstances can be changed.

The writer of Hebrews tells us at the outset that the Word of God is not merely paper and ink. But, in our day, we understand and see God through Jesus Christ. As John said, Jesus is the Word made flesh (John 1:14). The Written Word leads us to Jesus Christ, the Living Word.

Try to wrap your mind around a mind-blowing sentence in the opening chapter of Hebrews (Amplified Version):

Hebrews 1:3

*The Son is the radiance and only expression  
of the glory of [our awesome] God [reflecting God’s Shekinah glory,  
the Light-being, the brilliant light of the divine],  
and the exact representation and perfect imprint of His [Father’s] essence,  
and upholding and maintaining and propelling all things  
[the entire physical and spiritual universe] by His powerful word  
[carrying the universe along to its predetermined goal].*

Too many people think they have the Bible figured out. They know a verse or two, have half-dozen opinions, and perhaps even a Bible course here or there. But, I challenge you to go back and read that sentence and be anything but awed. Our knowledge of the depth of God's Word is like holding a bottlecap of water and saying we have the ocean in our hands.

The word of God creates, sustains, upholds, transforms anything and everything you can see. It's inexhaustible in its power. When He speaks, worlds are created. When God speaks, what's falling apart will be held together. When God speaks, your life will never be the same.

Powerful in Conquest: Think of the metaphors the Bible uses to describe itself:

- Hammer (Jeremiah 23:29).
- Consuming Fire (Jeremiah 23:29).
- Sword (Ephesians 6:17).
- Rock/Foundation (Matthew 7:24).

God's Word can withstand whatever opposition that comes against it. When Jesus was baptized, He went in the power of the Spirit into the wilderness for the express purpose of being tempted by and conquering Satan. He did so with spiritual weapons that would be at His followers' disposal: fasting, prayer and the Word of God. After forty days of fasting when Jesus was at His weakest physically, Satan came to Jesus and tempted Him three times. Each time, Jesus responded with a citation from Scripture: "It is written..." (Matthew 4:4,7,10).

The Bible is a weapon in your hand, sharper than any two edged-sword. It's not to be used against flesh and blood. It's not to be cherry-picked to find verses that justify your preconceived notion or used to antagonize people you don't like. The Word is used to effectively alter your entire life. God's Word has the power to:

- Convict us of sin (Acts 2:37).
- Regenerate us (1 Peter 1:23).
- Give us saving faith (Romans 10:17).
- Give us prevailing faith (Mark 11:24).
- Cleanse us (Ephesians 5:25-26).

- Edify us (Acts 20:32).
- Equip us for service (2 Timothy 3:16-17).
- Make us fruitful believers (Psalm 1:1-3).
- Strengthen us (Isaiah 40:29-31).
- Give us wisdom (2 Timothy 3:16-17).
- Provide assurance of eternal Life (John 3:36).
- Bring peace to our heart (Philippians 4:6-9).
- Bring joy to our lives (John 15:11).
- Give us patience, comfort and hope (Romans 15:4).
- Protect us from error and sin (Matthew 4:4,7,10).

The Word of God is a powerful weapon in your hands.

### **The Book Reveals**

More than a weapon, the Word of God has the power to reveal the important things in life to us.

### We See God in the Book.

A primary means of seeing God is through His Word. The same Spirit that spoke these words into the hearts and minds of ancient writers will use the same to speak words to us today. The Word of God is a lens through which we can see God.

His character is seen in the Book. We see Him in terms of His steadfastness and faithfulness. We see His willingness to reveal facets of His character and nature through the many different names and titles given to Him.

Nearly 3,800 times do we read “God said” or “Thus saith the Lord.” From the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks (Luke 6:45). What God says reveals who He is. What we know about God largely comes through His Word.

Look at some of the times God speaks for Himself:

- In Exodus 3, God says, “I am who I am.” Literally, “I am the God who makes things happen.”

- In Isaiah 45, “I am the Lord, there is no other... apart from me there is no God.”
- In Isaiah 55, “My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways.”
- In John 8, Jesus equates Himself with the Great I Am. The One who makes things happen.

As we listen to God speak to us through His Word, we see who He is. God reveals Himself as:

- One
- Self-Existing
- Not restricted by time
- Unbound by place and space
- Unlimited in power
- Unlimited in knowledge
- Transcendent: above and beyond it all.
- Immanent: in touch and involved with us all.

In Scripture, we see God. The lens of Scripture is not just like a telescope bringing Him nearer to us; it’s also like a microscope revealing things that are near. Through the Word, we see God, but we also see ourselves.

#### We See Ourselves in the Book.

A few years ago, a 75-year-old woman named Marion Shurtleff happened upon a used bookstore near her home in San Clemente, California. She was on a quest. She needed something in her life. While in the store, she saw a used Bible and purchased it.

Returning home, she discovered a couple of folded, yellow notebook pages tucked in the Bible’s pages. She opened them and saw a child’s handwriting. As she looked at the handwriting, she thought it looked familiar. She looked at the bottom of the page and saw her own childish signature. These pages were an essay she had written 65 years prior when she was ten years old.

She was 2,000 miles away from her childhood home. She was 65 years away. But, when she opened the Bible, she didn’t just find His story, she found her own story (Bill Johnson, Orange County Register, May 16, 2013).

Each and every time we look into God's Word with an open heart and mind, we see ourselves. Another metaphor for the Bible is a mirror:

James 1:21-25

*21 Lay aside all filthiness and overflow of wickedness,  
and receive with meekness the implanted word,  
which is able to save your souls.*

*22 But be doers of the word,  
and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.*

*23 For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer,  
he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror;*

*24 for he observes himself, goes away,  
and immediately forgets what kind of man he was.*

*25 But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it,  
and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work,  
this one will be blessed in what he does.*

Mirrors let us see ourselves, so too does God's Word. The latter reflects not the outward appearance, but who we are within. Not how we look to others, but how we look to God. The One who tries the reins of our hearts, sees our attitudes, thoughts, intents and motives. He knows us and reveals us to ourselves through His Word.

Yet, the metaphor of a mirror doesn't aptly describe God's Word. A mirror only reveals, God's Word takes it a step further: it restores.

Between the altar of sacrifice and the Holy Place in Moses' Tabernacle stood a brazen laver filled with water. When it came time to make this laver, the women of Israel brought their mirrors made of highly polished metal. These were melted down and the laver was cast from mirrors (Exodus 38:8).



This laver was essential to worship in the Old Covenant. From the surface of its water, priests could see their reflection before they entered the Holy Place to minister before God. Through its water, they could also cleanse themselves. Today, we have the Word of God and the washing that comes from it to prepare us for God's presence (Ephesians 5:26).

The mirror metaphor is incomplete when it comes to God's Word, because the Bible does so much more than a mirror. God's Word not only reveals, it also cleanses and changes. Paul said that as we look into the face of the Living Word, we take on His likeness and we are transformed into His image (2 Corinthians 3:18).

So, the next time your heart is touched when you read God's Word or hear it preached. You know the Word is doing its work. Something in your life is being revealed, cleansed or changed so that you can be just like Jesus.

### **The Book Prompts A Response.**

When God speaks to us through His Word, there are several areas in our lives that demand a response. Our response to God's Word should be:

- Allow it alter and order my steps (Psalm 119:105).
- Let it fall upon good ground in your heart (Mark 4:20).
- Desire it to be established in your life (Psalm 119:38).
- Keep the Word (John 14:23; Psalm 119:60).
- Let God's Word abide in you (John 5:38).
- Meditate on it (Psalm 119:48).
- Continue in His Word (John 8:31).
- Choose companions who also fear the Word (Psalm 119:63).
- Believe it (Psalm 119:66).
- Value it more than gold and silver (Psalm 119:72).
- Hope in the Word (Psalm 119:74)
- Desire for it to change your heart (Psalm 119:80).

- Long for God’s Word (Psalm 119:131).
- Delight in it (Psalm 119:35).
- Speak the Word (Romans 10:8)

**Close:**

If we are to speak His Word, it must mean that we’ve hidden His Word in our hearts. We need a daily reading plan. First Church uses the YouVersion “Through the Bible in a Year” plan. Get in a regular habit of reading the Word.

Why? You never know when the Bible will speak directly to you.

There are two Greek words translated “word” in the New Testament. One is *logos*, the word or written word. The other is *rhema*, the written word come alive in the hearer’s heart and mind.

Jesus differentiated between the two:

Matthew 4:4

*It is written, ‘Man shall not live by bread alone,  
but by every word [rhema] that proceeds from the mouth of God.’*

In another place, Jesus said:

John 6:63

*The words [rhema] that I speak unto you,  
they are spirit, and they are life*

When we read God’s Word, He speaks to us. A phrase, a Bible story, a turn of events will be set on fire in our hearts. God knows what you need. As you read the *logos*, the written Word, He will speak a *rhema*, a personal word into your heart.

Yes, there is no Book like our Book. That’s why we are “People of the Book.”

## **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

1. What reading plan for the Bible do you find best?
2. Of the metaphors used by the Bible for God's Word (hammer, fire, rock, foundation, etc.), which one do you think to be most applicable in your life and how?
3. How important is it to know the Bible not only to refute false beliefs, but to have the necessary information to withstand temptation and the enemy?
4. What is your favorite book of the Bible and why?
5. If God's Word is a mirror that reveals and changes, describe how important it is to be a student of the Word.

# PRAYER

---

## THE SECRET PLACE

Luke 22:44

*Being in agony, He prayed MORE earnestly.*

Chris and DeeAnn Abke felt overwhelmed. A financial challenge loomed, and they did not have the resources to meet it. One evening, they put their kids to bed and sat in the living room distressed by all that was happening. As they pondered their situation, they heard an audible voice saying, “If you need help, call 9-1-1.”

They looked at each other, shrugged, but again they heard the voice, “If you need help, call 9-1-1.”

The couple momentarily forgot their distress, got up and followed the sound of the voice that seemed to come from the garage. They opened the door to the garage and flipped on the light. They saw nothing except a few of their son’s toys scattered on the floor.

Chris picked up a toy ambulance and when he did, the same voice came from the car saying, “If you need help, call 9-1-1.”

As the voice spoke, Chris later said, “I heard God speaking to me.” He raced back into the house and opened the Bible. He scanned the table of contents and found the one book that had at least 91 chapters: the book of Psalms. He opened to that chapter and read the first verse:

Psalm 91:1

*He who dwells in the secret place of the Most High*

*Shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty.*

The secret place of prayer and communion with God has been a refuge for many believers down through the ages. When times are tough, when confusion comes like a fog, and adversity rises like a flood, people have found through prayer the secret place of tranquility and peace.

- Jesus called it a “closet of prayer,” a place to meet with Him (Matthew 6:6).
- Moses called it a “tent of meeting,” or as one translation says, a “trusting tent” (Exodus 33:7). The Hebrew word for meeting is *ya’ad* which is also linked to betrothal. The place God meets with man is one of intimacy.
- David called it the “refuge” (Psalm 61:4).

Whatever you choose to call it, the secret place is where we meet with God. An important question: Do you have a secret place?

### **The Place of Prayer**

The “place” of prayer is less important than the “act” of prayer. God is everywhere, and we can pray anywhere. Yet, having a consistent place to pray also encourages prayer itself.

God called Samuel late one night while the young boy and prophet-in-the-making slept in the temple. God spoke three times before the young man said the words God wanted to hear, “Speak Lord. Your servant hears” (1 Samuel 3:10).

Samuel himself was the result of his mother finding the secret place. God met Hannah, Samuel’s mother-to-be, as she knelt as close to God’s altar as she was permitted. She offered a heartfelt prayer and the answer came in the form of a newborn son: Samuel (1 Samuel 1:10).

God met a discouraged woman named Hagar in the midst of a wilderness (Genesis 16). Through the prayers of her son Ishmael, deliverance came.

Temple or wilderness, any place can become your secret place. Call on His Name and He will make that place special with His Presence.

The secret place leads us to a divine encounter. Following the description of the secret place, the psalmist said, “In Him will I trust” (Psalm 91:2). From that single expression of human will emerges six expressions of divine will. Six times God says, “I will:”

Psalm 91:14-16

*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.*

When you choose to trust in God and seek His face, divine promises start flowing your direction. Find your secret place.

### **The Act of Prayer**

I said a moment ago that the “place” of prayer is less important than the “act” of prayer. Paul said we should pray continuously (1 Thessalonians 5:17), not just when we arrive at a certain longitude or latitude. In other words, if the “place” is not accessible, we do not neglect the “act” of prayer.

God commands us to pray. In the Sermon on the Mount, when Jesus spoke of acts of sacrificial service:

- “When you give...” (Matthew 6:2-3).
- “When you pray...” (Matthew 6:5-7).
- “When you fast...” (Matthew 6:16-17).

Notice Jesus said, “When” not “If.” The Christian life is one of giving, praying and fasting. Jesus would later give us the option to pray or to faint (Luke 18:1). Paul gave us the option of either praying or worrying (Philippians 4:6-7). Prayer is a vital part of our life in Christ (Luke 2:36-38). As such, we should pray continuously (1 Thessalonians 5:17).

Jesus prayed. Stop and think about that. In a previous chapter we described Jesus as fully God and fully man; the God made man; God in flesh. Yet, Jesus prayed. Not once, but many times. If Jesus prayed, how can we be exempt from prayer?

The early church prayed again and again (Acts 1, 3, 4, 6, 13, etc.) The first church was born in a prayer meeting. If the first church prayed, shouldn't we?

Need some more reasons to pray? How about these?

- Prayer unlocks the Heavens.
- Major decisions are better made in prayer.
- Strongholds are shaken through prayer.
- Temptation is conquered by prayer.
- Others are blessed when we pray.
- If we ask according to His will, we will receive (1 John 5:14-15, James 4:3).

Persistence in prayer is necessary. We ask, seek, knock... and keep on asking, seeking and knocking (Matthew 7:7-8). Even if the answer does not come swiftly, we do not abandon the secret place. We continue to enter the doorway of His presence with our petitions.

Maybe an analogy would be good here. Three drivers in three lanes are driving parallel with each other in the same direction. Up ahead, a traffic light can be seen at an intersection. The light is green.

One driver lifts his foot from the gas pedal thinking, "It's green but could be getting ready to turn yellow."

The second driver puts his foot on the brake thinking, "It is green, but I now it is turning red."

The third driver continues at the same rate of speed thinking, "I have a green light. I'll keep going."

The three drivers are DOUBT, UNBELIEF and FAITH. Doubt whispers that change is coming and it won't be for the good. Unbelief shouts that there's no hope. Faith sees the promise and goes through.

When we pray, we cannot doubt.

James 1:6

*But when you ask, you must believe.*

*You must not doubt.*

*That's because a person who doubts is like a wave of the sea.*

*The wind blows and tosses them around.*

If prayerlessness is the father of all sin, then faithlessness is sin's grandfather. It's faith that prompts us to believe that God is a rewarder of them who diligently seek Him (Hebrews 11:6). The same faith brings us boldly into the throne room of grace (Hebrews 4:16).

Prayer is less recitation and more perspiration. Not that prayer is a work of the flesh, but if we study Scripture we will find that people who prayed did so with all of their heart, soul mind and strength. They poured themselves out in prayer with blood, sweat and tears.

During the Second World War, a British soldier was stopped for entering the military post after hours. He was hauled before his commanding officer and charged with treason. What other reason would he have had for being outside of the post than to consort with the enemy? The man pleaded that this was not the case. He claimed to have only slipped from the post to pray.

"If that's the case," the officer said, "let me hear you pray."

The soldier fell to his knees knowing that his fate was to be shot at sunrise for the crime he was accused of committing. In such a time, he had no rehearsed prayer. He poured out his heart to God. In moments, he forgot about those standing by listening and he found the secret place he had visited so many times before.

When he finished praying, there was a hushed silence until the officer said, "You may go. I believe you. Had you not been praying then; you could not have prayed as you have now" ("Teach Us To Pray," Doug Batchelor).

Prayer should be heartfelt and passionate. Listen to James 5:16 in three different renderings: Amplified, Message, and New Living Translation.

James 5:16



*The heartfelt and persistent prayer of a righteous man (believer) can accomplish much [when put into action and made effective by God—it is dynamic and can have tremendous power].*

James 5:16

*The prayer of a person living right with God  
is something powerful to be reckoned with.*

James 5:16

*The earnest prayer of a righteous person has great power  
and produces wonderful results.*

God hears and responds to the passionate prayers of people who seek to have a relationship with Him.

### **The Spirit of Prayer: Desperation**

*God does not answer prayer.*

*God answers desperate prayer.*

—Leonard Ravenhill

At first blush, that sounds offensive. To say that God doesn't answer prayer flies in the face of everything we know about God. But, it makes sense when we understand that prayer is not passive, but active; not superficial, but heartfelt.

Jesus said:

Matthew 11:12

*From the days of John the Baptist until now  
the kingdom of heaven suffers violence,  
and the violent take it by force.*

In another place and time, He said:

Luke 16:16

*The law and the prophets were until John.*

*Since that time the kingdom of God has been preached,  
and everyone is pressing into it.*

Prayer is not the mild folding of the hands and the haughty voice intoning memorized words to God. Prayer is a desperate pushing and pressing our way into God's Kingdom. Prayer is praying "more earnestly" (Luke 22:44). Prayer is forcefully insisting upon a hearing before God and a suitable answer.

Wouldn't you have loved to hear Jesus pray? The disciples heard Him, and it so impressed them that they said, "Lord, teach us to pray" (Luke 11:1). Jesus responded to their request by leading them in the Lord's Prayer or the Believer's Prayer:

Luke 11:2-4

*2 Our Father in heaven,*

*Hallowed be Your name.*

*Your kingdom come.*

*Your will be done*

*On earth as it is in heaven.*

*3 Give us day by day our daily bread.*

*4 And forgive us our sins,*

*For we also forgive everyone who is indebted to us.*

*And do not lead us into temptation,*

*But deliver us from the evil one.*

The words are slightly different than the prayer found in the Gospel of Matthew, but in both we see the basic approach to prayer: praise, petition, forgiveness, and in the version in Matthew, adoration. Many people find this to be a good model to aid them in praying.

Yet, in this, Jesus gave the disciples the "form" of prayer. He went on to give them the "fuel" of effective prayer.

Jesus described a man who had unexpected company. The man was caught ill-prepared and had no bread to feed his guest. It was late so there was no market opened for him to purchase bread. He resorted to a neighbor's house and knocked on the door until the neighbor awakened. When the neighbor at first refused, he persisted in his request until the neighbor relented and gave him bread.

This persistence born of desperation is the "fuel of prayer." This attitude that says, "I will not give up until I see this prayer answered" is what leads to answered prayer. True prayer is going into the secret place and saying, "I'm staying until something changes."

- When your life is falling apart...
- When your world has collapsed...
- When all have walked out...
- When your strength has gone...
- When you get desperate before God...
- That's when the answer comes.

It's impossible to skip over the rawness of David's emotions when he cried out to God:

Psalm 13:1-2

*1 How long, O Lord? Will You forget me forever?*

*How long will You hide Your face from me?*

*2 How long shall I take counsel in my soul,*

*Having sorrow in my heart daily?*

*How long will my enemy be exalted over me?*

Whatever you may think prayer is, think again. Prayer is not piety or formality. Prayer is not even pretty. Prayer is sheer desperation.

In another place, David prayed:

Psalm 31:9-10

*9 Have mercy on me, O Lord, for I am in trouble;  
My eye wastes away with grief,  
Yes, my soul and my body!  
10 For my life is spent with grief,  
And my years with sighing;  
My strength fails because of my iniquity,  
And my bones waste away.*

Moses prayed in such a desperate manner telling God that if didn't go with His people, then life wasn't worth living (Exodus 33:15-16).

Such prayer was seen in the Canaanite woman who came to Jesus. She ignored the protests and pressed her way to the Lord. Her persistence and desperation prompted Jesus to say, "Great is your faith" (Matthew 8:10).

So, it comes back to faith. The basis of persistent, desperate prayer is that we fully believe that God exists, He cares, and He will reward our prayers with an answer. It's such faith that draws us into the secret place. We know Jesus will meet us there, give us a hearing and either change us or change the situation.

When we pray in such a manner, self-reliance gives way to God-reliance. The more confidence we have in ourselves, the less we will pray. The less confidence we have in ourselves, the more we will draw nigh to Him and He will draw nigh to us (James 4:8).

Simon Peter learned many things on the night Christ's betrayal. One of the lessons came from His following Jesus after the Lord was arrested. He followed Jesus at a distance and he ended up denying Him (Matthew 26:58). The closer we stay to God, the less likely we are to deny Him. Draw near to Him. Be persistent in the secret place.

### **Is God Calling You to the Secret Place?**

There's a story about Judah's King Hezekiah that's found in the Bible in three different places. I guess God really wants us to learn something from this incident since it's repeated again and again. Hezekiah knew how to pray. Once he was very sick and it appeared he would die, but he turned his face to a wall and prayed. On his sickbed, face to the wall, the king found a secret place and God extended his life.

That ability to cry out to God would be seen in the incident repeated three times in Scripture. Powerful enemy armies had surrounded Jerusalem (2 Kings 18:13-19:37, 2 Chronicles 32, Isaiah 36-39). To add insult to injury, the enemy sent a letter to King Hezekiah. The letter predicted his destruction and described what would happen to him and to his people if they did not immediately surrender.

Hezekiah did something so unusual. He tore his clothes and put on sackcloth, the emblem of mourning. He took the letter with him into the secret place of prayer. He laid the letter before God and said in effect, “This is what they are threatening. What will you do God?”

Heaven acted. An angel came down and fought the battle slaying 185,000 of the enemy. (Isaiah 37:36). The battle was not Hezekiah’s at all, the battle belonged completely to the Lord. It’s as if God was just waiting for Hezekiah to come see Him in the secret place.

Maybe the difficulty you’re experiencing; the great trial that’s going on; the hurt and the pain; all of this is nothing but an invitation. The Lord is saying, “Come to the secret place. Come to me.”

Could this be the problem? You’re in a constant state of motion and you’ve lost touch with the secret place. You’re missing out on your “alone time” with God. Maybe you can hear the soft calling of our Lord asking, “Where are you?”

God is no respecter of persons, but He is a respecter of passion. He promises us that we will find Him if we search for Him with all of our heart (Jeremiah 29:12-14). God dwells in the secret place. It may require some searching, but He bids you to find Him.

Martin Luther once said, “When I can’t pray, I sing.” There’s an old song we once said that may close this best:

*Shut in with God in a secret place  
There in the spirit, beholding His face  
Gaining new power to run in this race  
Oh, I love to be shut in with God*

*--Unknown*

## **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

1. Where and when do you pray the best?
2. When prayer comes difficult, how do you persevere in prayer?
3. Ravenhill observed that God does not answer prayer, He answers desperate prayer. How have you found Ravenhill's observation to be true in your own life?
4. Jesus did not speak of the possibility of giving, praying, and fasting, but of its probability. He said, "When" not "If." How devoted should we be to these spiritual disciplines and how concerned should we be if we do not see them in our lives?
5. Of the people you know, who inspires you to pray more than anyone else?

# FAITH

---

## EMBRACE THE UNBELIEVABLE

Luke 17:5

*Then the apostles said to the Lord,*

*"Give us MORE faith."*

Incredible.

Inconceivable.

Improbable.

Implausible.

Unimaginable.

Unbelievable.

All of these adjectives are kissing cousins with the word impossible. It's human nature to believe "in" the impossible more than "for" the impossible. In a sense then, we are all born in the State of Missouri, the "Show Me" state. Like doubting Thomas of old, unless we see it for ourselves, then

we will not believe. Yet, that's exactly what God asks of us: to believe "for" the impossible, to embrace the unbelievable.

In this chapter, we will turn aside from our inborn skepticism and reach for the impossible. For nothing is impossible with God (Luke 1:37). All things are possible to them who believe (Mark 9:23). The answer to this and most problems we face is MORE faith!

Faith is the ability to accept things as true and real long before you see them. Faith is the fundamental principle for approaching God. As we saw in the previous chapter on prayer, faith is a motivating force for coming to God with our petitions:

Hebrews 11:6

*Without faith it is impossible to please Him,  
for he who comes to God must believe that He is,  
and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.*

To please God, we must have faith. Our growth in God then is partly based on our willingness to take God at His Word and to believe in the Unseen God although our physical senses have not seen or touched Him. Not only are we asked to believe in the unseen, we are also asked to be confident in God's predisposition to reward those who have faith in Him.

The Christian walk is one of faith. We can't see Him, but we know that "He is!" We can't comprehend Him in all of His ways, yet we are asked to trust in His benevolence. We can't track Him, but we can trust Him.

A question for you...

### **Do You Believe in Miracles?**

Oh, I know we use the word miracle a lot in products and merchandise:

- We use it to describe food: "Miracle Whip."
- We use it to describe plant fertilizer: "Miracle Gro."
- We use it in describing weight loss pills: "Miracle Weight Loss."
- We use it to describe products that are supposed to bring drastic improvements: "Miracle Teeth Whitener," "Miracle Hair Conditioner," "Miracle Skincare," and so forth.



But none of these describe what is really meant by the word miracle.

#### MIRACLE: Definition

A miracle is an unusual or wonderful event  
believed to be caused by the power of God

--Merriam Webster

If a miracle is caused by the power of God, then to believe in miracles is to admit our faith in God. God alone is behind the unusual or wonderful event that transpires in our lives.

Do we serve a God who works miracles? Yes, we do. God is not disinterested in you. He loves you. He is not the "absentee landlord" who leaves you fending for yourself. Scripture describes Him as the compassionate, loving God who does wonders on our behalf. Jesus tells us to not fear, it's God's pleasure to give us the Kingdom (Luke 12:32). He is a miracle-working God.

Americans believe in miracles and believe in the God who performs such wonders.

- 84% of Americans believe in divine miracles.
- 79% believe in the reality of miracles described in the Bible.
- 77% believe that when all hope is gone, God can heal sick people.
- 67% have prayed for a miracle.
- 63% know someone who has experienced a miracle.
- 48% of Americans say that "God did a miracle for me."

*"Newsweek Poll: Most Americans Believe in Miracles," Newsweek (5-1-00)*

The aim in this chapter is to increase our faith. We need MORE faith to embrace the unbelievable. We must defy what others say is impossible. They simply do not know the God who makes the impossible possible.

From the outset, let's admit that this idea of miracles in our day flies in the face of rational thinking people. One group of religious people call themselves "cessationists." They believe God is, but God no longer works miracles. God did it back then, but He no longer does it today. They believe what Jesus did in the Gospels and the first church did in the Book of Acts is not available for our day.

These individuals are reminiscent of a certain critic of a young girl who was leaving church one Sunday morning. Beneath her arm, she carried a picture she had colored of Jonah and the whale. A man saw it and thought to rib her a little.

He asked, “Do you really believe that Jonah was swallowed by a whale?”

She simply answered, “Yes.”

He asked, “Why do you believe it?”

She replied, “The Bible says so.”

The man persisted, “Can you prove the Bible is true?”

She responded, “When I get to heaven, I’ll ask Jonah.”

He asked, “But what if Jonah isn’t there?”

Then, she answered, “Well, you ask him.”

Okay, smile...

Our belief for the unbelievable does not rest with the majority or even minority opinion, it rests on the bedrock of who God is and all He has promised. When life gets difficult, our faith can rise to meet the challenge. In times of extreme stress, faith can grow to see mountains moved and oceans opened.

A Gallup study revealed that the vast majority of people who’ve experienced deep pain followed by quick recovery put their faith in a wonder-working God at the top of their personal priority list. (“Religious Faith Tied to Profound Experiences,” Emerging Trends, September 2001.)

When you’ve been to hell and back.

When you’ve received the terrible diagnosis and prognosis.

When you’ve faced down the demons of your past.

When you’ve experienced desertion and desolation.

When rejection and needs seem to be your only companions.

And God shows up. And God shows that He’s Great and He’s Good. And our Good, Great God remedies the situation. During times of war, there is no atheist in a foxhole. When you’ve

experienced great personal struggle and the only hope you have is in God, skepticism melts away like a snowflake in July and a desperate faith grows in your heart.

The Apostle Paul closed his prayer for one group of believers with these words:

Ephesians 3:20-21

*20 Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think,*

*according to the power that works in us,*

*21 to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations,*

*forever and ever. Amen.*

God is able to give more faith. He's able to increase our faith to such a degree that it will shatter any illusions we may have of His limitations (Luke 17:5-10).

### **Miracles Come at Different Times And In Different Ways**

Since miracles are found only in God, He is the object of our faith. Jesus said, "Have faith in God" (Mark 11:22). Although miracles have a single source, they come to us in a myriad of ways: a meal barrel, a raven, a lunch of five loaves and two fishes, and so forth.

God works wonders, but He does them in His own time and way. There are times when God is waiting on us. This was true when God delivered Israel from Egyptian captivity. His delay was for two reasons: to give the Amorites, the people who inhabited the Promised Land, the chance to do right; and to permit Israel to grow weary of their bondage and cry out to Him (Genesis 15:16, Exodus 2:23). When these purposes were fulfilled, God delivered Israel in a timely, dramatic, miraculous manner.

There are other times when we are waiting on God. At those times, He does not move quickly. This was the case when Lazarus, the Lord's close friend, died. His sisters Mary and Martha wanted a miracle yesterday, but they waited on Jesus for four days. God does not follow our time frames. He moves in ways only He understands:

Isaiah 55:8-9

*8 "My thoughts are not your thoughts,*

*Nor are your ways My ways," says the Lord.*

9 “For as the heavens are higher than the earth,  
So are My ways higher than your ways,  
And My thoughts than your thoughts.”

During such times, it’s important to keep our faith in God, not in a formula or method. Our hope rests on the benevolent faithfulness of our God.

God works in a variety of ways: deliverances, salvations, healings, miracles of provision, changed circumstances, and so forth. God is able and willing to show Himself strong on our behalf (2 Chronicles 16:9).

In the Bible and in life, there are two types of miracles: instantaneous and incremental. God can do wonders in a moment: worlds are formed, seas are parted, and bodies are healed. God can also work miracles over time. When Jesus told the ten lepers to go show themselves to the priest, we read that as they walked they were healed. Each step brought them closer to a restored health (Luke 17:14).

We could speak about any sort of miracle God can do, but let’s focus on healing for a moment.

### **The Miracle of Healing**

When you open the New Testament, you are confronted with one healing after another. Jesus healed a lot of people.

*There are 3,779 verses in the four gospels.*

*727 of them relate to healing & deliverances.*

*One-fifth of the Gospels then is devoted to Jesus healing people.*

*--Gary Wiens, THE HEALING MINISTRY OF JESUS*

Jesus healed all sorts of diseases: blindness, chronic hemorrhaging, deafness and dumbness, dropsy, paralysis, raising of the dead and so forth. Compassion was usually behind it all. Jesus was moved by people’s needs.

He healed in a variety of different ways. Sometimes Jesus healed people first, then forgave their sins. Sometimes He forgave sins first and then healed. Sometimes Jesus touched people to Heal

them; other times He just spoke and healed them from afar. He healed people at a variety of places: funerals, graveyards, temple, pools, hillsides, and gardens.

Although He practiced no set formula, faith was the common element in healings. We read of people believing for their healing or others believing on their behalf. The heart of the miraculous is faith in a faithful, compassionate God.

Why did Jesus heal so many people? The simple answer is because He could and because He's good. The more complex answer is He healed to draw people to Himself, to prove He could forgive sin, to prove He was God (i.e., Jehovah Rapha: God our Healer), to destroy the works of the devil, to show His compassion, and for people to understand that the Messiah had indeed come.

God's work in a person's life can begin with a physical miracle, then progress from there to the spiritual. When Simon Peter and John healed the lame man outside the Gate Beautiful, 5,000 people came to know the Lord through this miracle of healing (Acts 3-4). A physical miracle moved into the spiritual one.

Our healing and restoration were included in what Jesus accomplished at Calvary. The stripes on His back are for our healing (Isaiah 53:5, 1 Peter 2:24). Our pain—be it physical, emotional, relational, spiritual—was remedied in a miraculous manner at the Cross.

That this was in the plan of God from eternity past makes this even more miraculous. Sickness was not in God's original plan, but God foresaw it. So, He prepared for man's sin and sickness. He was the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world (Revelation 13:8). What we would eventually need, God provided at the beginning.

One of the signs that follow a true believer is that they lay hands on the sick and the sick recover (Mark 16:17-18). Each of us should not only believe for our healing, but that God can use us to pray the prayer of faith to see the sick healed (James 5:14-16).

### **Open Your Eyes To Miracles**

How do you do such a thing? Begin looking at life differently. Each and every day and many times during the day, God works miracles in your life. When you begin seeing His handiwork in everything you do and say — you start believing Him for more miracles.

Look at your difficulties differently. Each problem you face is an opportunity to believe God more. Only through problems do you catch a glimpse of Him as the Problem-Solver. Only when you experience storms do you find Him to be the Peace-Speaker. Only when you're up against a wall do you find Him to be the Door and the Way-Maker. Where there is no struggle, there is no opportunity for a miracle.

Greater faith comes through the Word of God and the preached Word of God. "Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God" (Romans 10:17).

Frances Ridley Havergal was a British songwriter who possessed a ferocious temper. She could explode at a moment's notice. Afterwards, she felt ashamed at herself and would go to the Lord and ask Him to forgive her... yet again.

This cycle repeated itself again and again. An outburst of temper followed by humiliation and going to God asking for help. Until a certain day arrived when she found herself yet again asking God to forgive her for her temper. Then God reminded her of a passage found in the Bible.

Exodus 14:13-14

*13 Do not be afraid. Stand still, and see the salvation of the LORD,  
which He will accomplish for you today. For the Egyptians whom you see today,  
you shall see again no more forever.*

*14 The LORD will fight for you, and you shall hold your peace.*

Moses spoke this when Israel's back was to the Red Sea and Egypt's army had them trapped. The portion of the passage that spoke to Francis was, "The enemy you see today, you shall see again no more forever."

And at that moment she embraced the unbelievable. She believed that the temper that had been her enemy for a lifetime would never be seen again. A miracle was brought to her life and true enough, the temper never returned.

What God did for her, He can do something similar for you. God is no respecter of persons. That means, He doesn't show favorites. God responds to your faith in Him.

I like what the late Chicago pastor named A. W. Tozer once said:

*Anything God has ever done, He can do now.*

*Anything God has ever done anywhere, He can do here.*

*Anything God has ever done for anyone, He can do for you.*

--AW TOZER

God is actively involved in our dilemma. He sees what we're going through. He is willing and able to come to our defense.

I was in a conversation recently with a friend of mine who has made many trips to Ethiopia and has seen God do such wondrous things there. He told me about an event that was beyond imagination. I should have believed him, but I resorted to Google to verify what he said—as you probably will after you hear this story.

In the year 2000, during a time of great drought and famine in the nation of Ethiopia, the faith of believers was tested not only by their dire circumstances but also by a fresh wave of persecution. In one village in South Ethiopia especially hurt by the drought and famine, believers began to pray. Eight million souls in that area were in jeopardy of losing their lives from the elements. Their backs were to the wall and they turned their face to God.

After they prayed, three things happened: first, a rainstorm came to their drought-stricken land and it began to rain. That solved a long-term need for crops in the future. Not only was the long-term need addressed, but, secondly, the immediate need was met as well.

For as the villagers stood welcoming the rain to their fields, fish by the hundreds and thousands began to fall from the sky. Their immediate need for food and sustenance was met.

And finally, great revival broke out amongst those people, because God had not remained silent in their dilemma, but had responded to their needs. (*Amharic*, weekly newspaper, for Wednesday, May 31, 2000).

God is actively at work in your dilemma. If He moved for those believers in Ethiopia, He can move for you. Embrace the unbelievable in your own life.

### **Closing Thought:**

When Israel faced Egypt in the wilderness, God waited for His people to call on His Name. When they did, God parted the Red Sea to show His people:

- The forces against you may have the artillery. But you have God.
- They may have the strategy, schemes and plans. But you have God.
- They may have the numbers on their side. But you have God.
- They may have the powers that be – the courts, the court of human opinion, the collective will of movers and shakers. But you have God.

Not long after Paul said cited that classic, assuring promise, “All things work together for good”, he said this:

Romans 8:31

*What then shall we say to these things?*

*If God is for us, who can be against us?*

If God is for us... Your answer is God, the One who does miracles. Believe in Him.

He’s the One who can say, “That circumstance you face, you will never see anymore forever.” He works miracles. He will work one for you.

Embrace the unbelievable.



## **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

1. What do you believe is the greatest miracle you have ever seen?
2. Why is it easier to believe for someone else's miracle than your own?
3. Scripture calls for the elders to anoint with oil and lay hands on the sick. But, Scripture also says that believers shall lay hands on the sick and they shall recover. Have you ever prayed for someone to be healed? What help would you need to have the confidence to pray for the sick and believe for their healing?
4. Why is it easier for children to have faith in God than for adults?
5. Tozer said that anything God has ever done, He can do for you. What one thing would you like to see change in your life? How can you develop the faith to see it happen?



# UNITY

---

## CELEBRATE UNITY

Hebrews 10:25

*“... Encouraging one another—  
and all the MORE as you see the Day approaching”*

It’s called the polar star or Polaris, the prominent star in the Ursa Minor (Little Bear) constellation. More commonly, it’s known to be the brightest and last star in the Little Dipper.

Most know it as the North Star. It’s a fixed star relative to Earth, meaning that its position largely remains intact in the swirling masses of the night heavens. For its constancy, it was the friend of ancient mariners and runaway slaves. As its name implies, to find an approximate location for due north, one only need find the North Star and follow it.

A curious thing about the North Star though. It’s not a single star, but two stars—what astronomers call a binary star. A binary star is actually two stars revolving around each other so closely that from a distance they appear to be a single star.

Unity is like the North Star. Like the North Star, unity is majestic and magnetic. People are drawn to it.

That was the conclusion of an early revivalist in America named Barton Stone. Stone came to prominence in the frontier during America's Second Great Awakening that began in 1801.

For all of America's religious beginnings, this nation had slipped into gross carnality. On the New England seaboard, however, something began to happen: the temperance movement, the missionary societies, and revivals in "burned-over" areas. Such emphasis on God and morality are called "awakenings" in America's history.

Another place affected by such an awakening was America's western frontier in Western Kentucky, a place famed frontiersman Daniel Boone called Cane Ridge. A young man named Barton Stone had arrived there a few years prior. What he saw appalled him.

*Apathy in religious societies appeared everywhere to an alarming degree.*

*Not only the power of religion had disappeared,  
but also the very form of it was waning fast away.*

—Barton Stone

Born to a Presbyterian family in Maryland, Stone had recently undergone a transformation in his beliefs. He began to look back to the Book of Acts and see the power found in the first church. He became part of the group of "restorationists" who determined to reclaim the church as first seen in the Acts of the Apostles.

A meeting house was erected in Cane Ridge that still stands. That small structure, however, belies the significance of the movement because most of what happened in the Appalachians did not happen indoors. The crowds were too big, so outside meetings were held. The American "Camp Meeting" was born.

It is estimated that from 20,000 to 30,000 people came to the Cane Ridge meeting. Their worship was demonstrative, not passive: loud singing, dancing, clapping, fainting, and hand-waving. Their messages revolved around repentance and yielding one's entire being—body, soul and spirit—to God. They saw healing and wonders. They saw demonstrations of the Spirit.

People were drawn to these meetings. Several church and revival organizations trace their modern roots back to this and similar meetings. On the heels of the Cane Ridge meeting and perhaps partly because of the religious fervor generated, the Holiness Movement emerged and would become a

dominant force in America. And from such meetings, years later, the modern Pentecostal movement emerged.

What caused this rippling effect from this meeting? Barton Stone believed there was one thing that gave rise to the influence of the Cane Ridge Revival. It was his frequent prayer, “Let Christian unity be our polar star.”

### **The Church Is Built On Unity**

When the first church in the Book of Acts began, we notice that it was marked by unity.

Acts 2:1

*When the Day of Pentecost had fully come,  
they were all with one accord in one place.*

Unity was present before the miracle of the Spirit’s outpouring at Pentecost. This passage goes onto say that the room itself where 120 people waited in obedience to Christ’s command was filled with wind, fire and noise as God’s Spirit flowed through the place. Each had a personal encounter with God and all experienced the same baptism of the Holy Spirit. The first church was unified before, during, and after this mighty move of the Spirit.

Consider some of the metaphors used for the church in Scripture.

- It’s a *body* that requires a connectedness amongst its members (1 Corinthians 12:27).
- It’s a *building* that requires the foundation to be in touch with its walls and roof (1 Peter 2:4-5).
- It’s a *family* that requires respect and the bonds of brotherhood (Galatians 6:10).

In Jesus’ great high priestly prayer in John 17, He prayed for His church to be unified. Unity is His prayer for us and God’s gift to us. We should likewise pray that God make us “one and heart and one soul” (Acts 4:32).

In the classic work *The Pursuit of God*, A. W. Tozer wrote:

*Has it ever occurred to you that one hundred pianos all tuned to the same fork are automatically tuned to each other? They are of one accord by being tuned, not to each other, but to another standard to which each one must individually bow. So, one hundred worshipers together, each one looking away to Christ, are in heart nearer to each other than they could possibly be, were they to become 'unity' conscious and turn their eyes away from God to strive for closer fellowship.*

—A.W. Tozer

Jesus is the Head of the Church. Thus, as we look to Him, the True North of our lives and soul, we are united with Him and with each other.

Do you remember the Bible lesson involving the plain of Shinar? People shell-shocked by the great flood determined to build a tower that would reach the heavens. The Bible says they were of the same mind and Heaven declared that nothing on earth could stop them in such a unified state (Genesis 11:1-9). The lesson we draw from this is nothing on earth can stop a group of believers who remain unified.

### **Around Whom Or What Do We Unify?**

We unify around JESUS, the fixed star of our existence. Everything flows from Him and back to Him.

He's the Mainspring, the Well, the Fountain.

He's the Foundation, the Rock, the Cornerstone.

He's the Source, the Author, the Beginning.

First Church identifies its unifying hubs in a document we call the "Who, What and Why:" who we are, what we believe and why we exist.

### Who We Are

First Church is the continuation of the first church found in the Book of Acts.

### What We Believe

First Church is a Bible-based church. That means we seek to believe and practice what is explicitly taught in the Bible. Based on such, we believe the following:

- About the Bible

The Bible is the inspired Word of God. It is true in all that it teaches. As the flawless Word of God, it is our only authority for what we believe and how we live. In its original form, the Bible is inspired, infallible and inerrant (Proverbs 30:5, Romans 16:25-26, 2 Timothy 3:15-17, 2 Peter 1:20-21).

- About God

There is only one God. The One God has revealed Himself to us as our Father, in His Son Jesus Christ, and by the Holy Spirit. Jesus Christ is the Son of God, that is, the One God manifested in and through an authentic human life. To see Jesus is to see God. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Jesus that now lives in today's believers (Deuteronomy 6:4, John 14:9, Ephesians 4:4-6, Colossians 2:9, 1 Timothy 3:16).

- About Sin and Salvation

Everyone has sinned and needs salvation. Salvation comes by grace through faith based on the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ and His triumph over death and the grave (Romans 3:23-25; 6:23; Ephesians 2:8-9).

- About the Gospel and Conversion

The gospel is the good news that Jesus died for our sins, was buried, and rose again. We express our belief in the gospel through our obedience to the gospel. We obey the gospel and apply it to our lives by repenting of our sins (death to sin), being baptized in water in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of our sins (burial), and by receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit (resurrection). This threefold experience is the consistent pattern of conversion in the first church (Mark 1:15; Acts 2:4, 37-39, 8:9-17, 10:1-48; 15:7, 19:1-7; Romans 6:3-4; 1 Corinthians 15:1-4; 2 Thessalonians 1:8; 1 Peter 4:17).

- About Christian Living

As Christians we are to love God and to love others. We are to worship God joyfully and seek to live a life that is pleasing to Him both inwardly and outwardly—in our thoughts, words, appearance and

actions. We are empowered to live a life pleasing to God through the Holy Spirit (Mark 12:28-31, Romans 8:13-14, 2 Corinthians 7:1, Galatians 5:19-26, Hebrews 12:14).

- About Spiritual Gifts

Holy Spirit baptism is part of salvation, but additional supernatural gifts of the Spirit are also available to all Spirit-filled believers. These gifts operate in harmony with Scripture and should not be used to create division (Romans 12:4-8; 1 Corinthians 12:1-31, 14:1-40; Hebrews 2:4; 1 Peter 4:10).

- About the Church

The church is the Body of Christ, the house of God through the Spirit, that encompasses the body of believers in the world today. Each born again person should seek to be a vital member of the church by loving God, growing in faith, serving others, and going into his community to make a difference (John 17:11, 20-23; Ephesians 1:22, 2:19-22; Hebrews 12:23).

- About Spiritual Encounters

We believe that there are many spiritual encounters a person may have with God, but the primary ones are through Conversion (including water and Spirit baptism), the Lord's Supper, the act and spirit of Footwashing, and Laying on of Hands. These sacred actions are not mere symbols but acts of true worship in which the Holy Spirit is active (John 13:1-14; Acts 2:38-39, 3:19-26; 1 Corinthians 11:17-34; Hebrews 6:1-2).

- About Spiritual Disciplines

We believe in six primary spiritual disciplines: prayer, fasting, giving, reading and studying of the Bible, worship, and service (Psalm 119:11; Matthew 6:1-18, 26:30; Luke 9:29; John 13:12,14; 1 Thessalonians 5:17, Hebrews 10:25).

- About Healing of the Sick

Jesus healed the sick and instructed His followers to do the same. Healing is part of the Lord's work on the Cross and one of the gifts of the Spirit (Psalm 103:2-3; Isaiah 53:5; Matthew 8:16-17; Mark 16:17-18; Acts 8:6-7; Romans 12:29; 1 Corinthians 12:9, 29; James 5:14-16).

- About Marriage



We believe marriage is defined in the Bible as a covenant, a sacred bond between one man and one woman, instituted by and publicly entered into before God. Marriage is a model of God's love for the Church (Matthew 19:4-6, Ephesians 5:22-33).

- About the Future

Jesus Christ will return to catch away His church. In the end will be the final resurrection and the final judgment. The righteous will inherit eternal life in Heaven, the eternal dwelling place for all who believe and obey the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The unrighteous will receive eternal punishment in the Lake of Fire, the place reserved for those who have disobeyed the Gospel of Jesus Christ (1 Thessalonians 4:15-17; 2 Thessalonians 1:7-8; Revelation 1:7, 20:11-15).

### Why We Exist

Others (Matthew 4:19, 5:16, 9:38, 24:14, 28:19-20).

This is not an exhaustive list of what we believe and practice, nor does it fully define all we believe about each item. Yet, we've agreed to lay aside our personal desires, egos and ambitions for OTHERS. God loved them an awful lot to lay down His life for them. Shouldn't we be willing to lay down our personal opinions to reach the people for whom He died?

Can people attend this church without believing everything in this document? Yes, they may. Yet, it's important for each person to understand this is what First Church believes and practices and to deliberately pull for something different is to invite discord, something displeasing to God (Proverbs 6:16-19).

### **Threats Of Disunity Are Always Present**

Each "open door" or spiritual opportunity brings adversity (1 Corinthians 16:9). As we see God move in our lives, we can then expect opposition to come against our lives, our marriages, our families, our communities, and in other areas. All the more reason to seek unity during such times.

The Greek city of Corinth experienced a great move of God. Riding side-saddle with that revival was strife. People started disagreeing with one another, vying for attention and prominence. Some claimed to follow Paul, others Apollos, still others Cephas (1 Corinthians 1:10-12). Some also sought

to push their personal emphasis of prayer, worship, study of the Word, or sacrificial service on everyone else (1 Corinthians 13:1-3).

Paul did not disparage their personal preferences but called them back to the center of it all: the love of God shown in the Lord Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 1:23; 13:13). For every threat of disunity, love for God and one another is usually the antidote.

One cannot be around a group of people without realizing quickly that there are parties, factions, cliques, and various interest groups. It's no accident that the word "politics" finds its root in the word "citizens." Where there are people, there will then be politics.

We should be very careful to watch out for those who intentionally try to divide and separate people in the Church. Since we are members of the Body of Christ, we must endeavor to be unified in the Spirit and in faith (Ephesians 4:13-15).

We should also do our part to work together in unity. Scripture is quite clear that God is attracted to unity (Psalm 133:1-3). Jesus said if two of us can come into agreement on one thing, then God will hear and respond (Matthew 18:19). Further, Jesus said:

Matthew 18:20

*For where two or three are gathered together in my name,  
there am I in the midst of them.*

Our unity invites the presence of Heaven. This desire and quest for unity will illuminate our path.

### **Allow Unity's Light To Guide Us**

How can we follow after the unity of the Spirit? What should we do to permit this?

Three actions are worthwhile in this pursuit.

#### Love one another.

The phrase "one another" is used 59 times in the New Testament. God is insistent that we learn to function in relationship and fellowship one with another.

One of the hallmarks of the New Testament church was their "fellowship" (Greek, *koinonia*). In this life, we can have friends, even close friends, but we cannot have the fellowship God designed without holding the same faith. Our shared faith builds bonds that are unlike anything else.

We know in Scripture that Jesus chose Twelve original apostles. Of these dozen men, we see a couple of pairs of brothers: James and John; and Peter and Andrew. Some also say that Matthew and James were brothers, the sons of Alphaeus. Others say Jude and Simon were brothers. Whether it's one-third or two-thirds or somewhere in between of the disciples who were brothers, the principle still holds true: brotherhood attracts the favor of God and He seeks it.

The Apostle Peter commanded people to “Love the brotherhood” (1 Peter 2:17). That's how we should feel about one another. We are not just in a community of friends or associates, but of brothers and sisters. We stand with one another. We fight for one another. We believe in one another.

One recent study said only one in ten people find a sense of community in church. In a nation of strangers where people feel intense degrees of loneliness, church should be the place where people find community (“Americans Divided on the Importance of Church,” Barna, May 2014).

For the loneliest people on the planet, Americans need a church that loves one another.

#### Refuse to hear or speak evil.

The second way we let unity guide us is to refuse to speak or hear evil. Gossip divides friendships, destroys respect, and makes one's life and spirit toxic (Proverbs 16:28).

To not hear destructive things isn't easy. It's all around us in social media, relationships, and so forth. Once you become convinced that you need to stop gossiping and refuse to remain in the company of those who are gossiping, you will be surprised by peoples' initial reactions. They'll belittle you and possibly accuse you of being a “holier-than-thou” person. Know this: it's far easier to avoid speaking evil if you've avoided hearing evil.

Our speech is tied to our thought life. If we refuse to think impure, negative thoughts then we can more easily avoid saying something we shouldn't. Paul taught us to permit only thoughts that are true, lovely and of good report to dominate our minds (Philippians 4:8).

#### Follow leaders.

The third way we follow the light of unity is to trust and follow those in leadership (Hebrews 13:17). In our independent age, this is hard for us. We glory in independence and skepticism, which is not altogether bad. Yet, for many this quest for self-reliance leads to stubbornness and skepticism leads

to cynicism.

Becoming a disciple of Jesus, however is to learn to follow after Him. To follow Him, we must follow the leaders He has set in charge of the flock. As Paul said, “Follow me as I follow Christ” (1 Corinthians 11:1).

To follow requires a spirit of humility. We humble ourselves. We submit ourselves one to another and from that spirit arises great unity.

### **The Twelfth Man**

We are in Texas. And a football analogy may be proper here.

In the 1921 football season at Texas A & M University, a sophomore named E. King Gill had been on the football team but chose to focus more on basketball and quit the football team in the middle of the season.

The Aggies were in a post-season game when all of its starting running backs were sidelined by injuries. The team was down to eleven players, the minimum number required to take the field. If one more was injured, the team would forfeit the game. Coach Dana Bible looked into the stands, spied Gill and waved him down to the field.

“I may not have enough players to finish the game,” the coach told the former player. “Could you stand in for one?”

Gill raced beneath the bleachers and changed into a running back’s uniform and returned to stand on the sidelines as the twelfth man. He never played in the game. He was the only player who didn’t play, but he stood ready as the team went on to score a major upset.

This started a phenomenon known as the “12th Man” in A&M lore. There are seats in the A&M stadium, but fans rooting for the guys in maroon and white jerseys don’t sit down. They are together. They stand as the 12<sup>th</sup> Man.

This is the attitude we need in the church today. We need a purposeful recognition that together we stand, divided we fall. We are unified in our pursuit of the Lord.

## **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

1. What is your favorite scripture verse on the subject of unity?
2. What do you think prompted the unity in the Upper Room amongst those original believers and gave birth to the great move of God and the birth of the church?
3. Which of the metaphors mentioned for the church (i.e., body, building, family) do you relate to the most and why?
4. In the “Who, What and Why” document, we enumerate some fundamental beliefs of this assembly. How do stating such beliefs help develop unity?
5. “One another” is mentioned 59 times in the New Testament. Why do you think God’s Word so emphasizes the importance of corporate rather than simply individual faith?

# SERVICE

---

## HANDS IN THE HARVEST

Acts 5:14

*Yet MORE and MORE people believed and were brought to the Lord—crowds of both men and women*

Comedian Ken Davis tells the story of a believer waiting on a sign from God. He said that a Christian gets on an empty city bus, walks to the rear of it and sits down.

“Lord,” he prays, “if you want me to speak to someone about you, please give me a sign.”

At the next stop a passenger boards the bus and comes all the way back to where he is sitting. He sits down next to the Christian and asks, “Do you know anything about Jesus?”

The Christian excuses himself for a moment, bows his head, and once again prays, “Lord, if you really want me to talk to this perfect stranger about you, I need just one more sign. Please turn the bus driver into an armadillo.”

Yes, that’s pretty much the way it sometimes is. We shy away from shining our light, sharing the Gospel and making a difference.

Someone once said, “The two most important days in your life are the day you are born and the day you find out why.” You and I were born again to be transformed as “fisher of men” (Matthew 4:19).

Why do you think so many of Christ’s Apostles were drawn from the fishing industry? We know of four who were fisherman (Peter, Andrew, James and John) and we find another three fishing later in the Gospels (John 21). It seems Jesus wants each of us to know that we must have more of an emphasis on others than on ourselves.

We may derive great satisfaction from our careers in law, medicine, sales, manufacturing or education. But, that’s not why we were born. We may be adept in public-speaking, athletics, quilting, or aerobics. But, that’s not why we were born. We were born to reach and disciple souls for the Kingdom. We were born to be fishers of men.

Jesus said that when we are filled with His Spirit we will be witnesses to the ends of the earth (Matthew 24:14, Acts 1:8). You and I live to witness, win souls, disciple people, and to change our world. We are to spread the good news of life-changing power of the Lord and to reach a lost world.

### **The Need For Evangelism**

The need for evangelism—spreading the Gospel and discipling souls—is great. Of the seven billion-plus people on this Earth, only 40% have heard the Name of Jesus or His Gospel. The remainder have never heard His Name and realistically don’t have much of a chance to hear it. Of the 11,646 distinct people groups on this planet, some 6,734 of these have none or few people who claim to be Christians. No churches, no Bibles, no missionaries have reached them. (Ronnie Floyd, *Our Last Great Hope*, pp. 62-64).

The need, as I said, is great. Major cities are growing ever larger and ever darker. In the past century, humanity has migrated into the city.

- In 1900, only 14 percent of the world population lived in Urban areas. Now, 74 percent of the world’s population lives in urban areas (Population Reference Bureau, “2011 World Population Data Sheet.”)

- In 1900, 40 percent of the U.S. population lived in the City. Today, 81 percent lives in the City (US CENSUS, 1900 and 2010, rural/urban shift). Increasingly populations are moving into the city.

That's what we saw in the last century. What about this 21st Century?

*“What will be remembered about the twenty-first century . . . is the great, and final, shift of human populations out of rural, agricultural life and into cities. We will end this century as a wholly urban species.”*

*--Doug Saunders, Arrival City, 2010*

And what cities they are! By 2050, look at the cities in this world with more than 20 million in population:

1. Mumbai (42 million)
2. Delhi (36 million)
3. Dhaka (35 million)
4. Kinshasa (35 million)
5. Kolkata (33 million)
6. Lagos (33 million)
7. Tokyo (33 million)
8. Karachi (32 million)
9. New York (25 million)
10. Mexico City (24 million)
11. Cairo (24 million)
12. Manila (24 million)
13. Sao Paulo (23 million)
14. Shanghai (21 million)



When we see such growth in the cities, we are at first tempted to think, “How can so many people be reached with the Gospel?” Yet, reach them we must.

God’s greatest works have begun in a city. When Paul was struck down by the Risen Lord on the Damascus Road, he asked the Lord what he should do. Jesus said, “Go to the city...” (Acts 22:10). It just seems that God has a special place in His heart for the City.

The First Church was born in the City of Jerusalem. In fact, the entire early history of the First Church can be expressed in terms of cities: from Jerusalem, to Antioch, to Ephesus, to Rome and elsewhere.

God’s greatest works can be seen amongst those people reached in the City.

*In the book of Acts, we go from city center to city center....*

*It is easy to see that the mission strategy of the early church  
was to evangelize the city.*

*It is no exaggeration to say that in Acts  
the church is almost exclusively associated with the city.*

*--City, Dictionary of Biblical Imagery, p. 153*

When Jesus promised that His followers would be filled with His Spirit, He commanded them to witness first to the City of Jerusalem and then move ever outward. God wants us to evangelize all people.

Outside of the sheer staggering numbers who have never heard the Gospel in the world and in our cities, there are at least seven Biblical reasons to evangelize and disciple:

1. God loves the world (John 3:16).
2. God wants to see the world saved. (John 3:17).
3. Jesus commanded and commissioned us to reach the world (Matthew 28:19).
4. Winning souls is wise. (Proverbs 11:30).
5. Souls are eternal (Daniel 11:23)

6. Reaching and teaching people pleases Heaven (Luke 15:10)
7. Soul winners and disciple-makers are rewarded (1 Thessalonians 2:19-20).

We were called to be fishers of men. The same Jesus who called His disciples back then is still calling. He's calling people to go win and disciple souls.

### **God Still Calls People To Evangelize & Disciple**

Jesus still calls. This is a fundamental truth in Scripture and in God's World. That the Unchanging Lord is still actively seeking people to reach others in His stead, to be His hands and His feet.

*“The call of God is like the call of the sea—no one hears it except the person who has the nature of the sea in him. What God calls us to cannot be definitely stated, because His call is simply to be His friend to accomplish His own purposes.”*

—Oswald Chambers

God calls us first to Himself. When Jesus originally chose His Twelve Disciples, He called them first to be with Him, draw close to Him, and learn of Him (Mark 3:14). He cannot send people to different places unless He has first called them and drawn them to Himself. He sends people to disciple others only when they themselves are disciplined.

Once we are with Him and grow to be like Him, we should soon be consumed with what He cares about and whom He loves. Our Lord is the Good Shepherd who always is looking for that one lost sheep. He cares about the down-and-out and the up-and-coming. He cares about those whose lives are being destroyed by sin and about those who are too comfortable in their way of living.

That passion and compassion rubs off on those close to Jesus. And soon, we hear Him say, “Who will go to these people?”

God calls people differently. For some, like the Prophet Isaiah and the Apostle Paul, it is a dramatic call. In a previous century, Charles Finney was practicing law and one of his clients was a church in a legal battle. He decided to read the Bible to prepare himself for trial. While reading that powerful Book, God got ahold of his heart. He dropped out of the legal profession and started reaching for lost souls.

For others, it's the slow dawning of realization that God is calling. This is perhaps the most common way God calls people today. Just as each day slowly dawns, God's call comes gradually to people. They sense a desire in their heart to be used of God. They find their place in an area of service. They find that they are gifted to do things. Then they fall in love with it and the people Jesus died to save.

For still others, significant people in their lives confirm what they're feeling. Barnabas and Paul were set apart by the Holy Ghost and the Church of Antioch for a great work.

Some find an "Open Door." They see something that makes them think, "I can do that." Perhaps they're on a missions trip at home or abroad. Maybe they're doing a Serve Day at a local food bank or inner-city mission. In a moment, it dawns on them, "This is what God is calling me to do."

For all, the call came long ago. Jeremiah said he was set apart before he was born (Jeremiah 1:5). What about Hannah's miracle, Samuel? She pledged to give him to God before he was even conceived.

How the call comes to us may differ, but the premise remains the same: God still calls people to reach others with His Good News.

### **Ways to Reach Others**

How do I start reaching others? Let's walk through some practical steps:

First, make certain your motives are pure. You are not trying to get a gold star on your chart. You're trying to help a person find freedom in the Lord Jesus Christ and eternal life.

Second, pray for people who don't know Jesus. Make a list of their names and carry this list around with you. Speak to the Lord about them often. Intentionally cultivate relationships with those same individuals where you may have a moment to speak with them about the Lord.

Third, ask God to put someone on your list on your heart. God knows who is ready to be approached and who will respond.

Fourth, look for God at work. People are more prone to hear about Jesus when they are struggling with something and looking for a solution. Be a friend to the hurting and wait for God to open the door for you to speak with them.

Fifth, be prepared with your testimony. We should always be ready to tell people what God has done in our own life. That alone is usually enough to convince someone they need more of God.

Sixth, invite people to church or a small group. It has been said that 57% of the people we know would come to church if we only invited them. Invite them to a weekend service that is tailored for newcomers. Invite them to go out and eat with some church friends. Invite them to join you in a small group or Bible study.

Seventh, be patient. Leave the results in God's hands. It may take a while to bear fruit, but it will.

Eighth, when God draws that person, commit to seeing them through to spiritual maturity. Your work is not over the moment they are born again; your work has just begun. God will use you to disciple that person.

God is calling you to reach and disciple more and more souls. In the process, you will become more and more like Him.

### **Final Thought**

A Cambridge-educated son of a British pastor answered a call to Nigeria. God gave him favor and soon people came by the droves to hear of Jesus. The work grew so large, that his younger brother, a physician, also came to Nigeria.

Barely had his brother left England for Nigeria than the missionary fell sick and died. Shortly after his brother arrived, he too grew very ill and died.

The Mission Society wrote to their father who was also a pastor. In the letter they told him that both sons had died in Nigeria. While reading the letter, he and his wife collapsed in tears and grief. Then they did something astounding.

They sold their land. They sold all of their belongings. They took the proceeds from the sale and went to the Missions Society and said, "As much as we grieve the death of our two sons, we will only be consoled if the purpose for which they died continues." They handed them the money with the assurance the work would go on (As told by Benjamin Kwashi, Christian leader in Nigeria).

If you and I ever get a passion for lost souls, there's no telling what can happen. God is seeking 11<sup>th</sup> hour laborers to enter into the harvest. There is more harvest to be brought into God's keeping.

Watch out! Evangelism is contagious... and eternal.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. If the two most important days in your life are the day you are born and the day you find out why, then how important is it to seek God for answers to the major questions in our lives?
2. What are some ways to be a light and make a difference to the people around you?
3. How does increased urbanization of people in our day motivate you to be involved in evangelizing and discipling? In what ways is it different to reach people in urban areas than in rural areas?
4. Jesus sent His disciples out two-by-two. How does having someone with you to reach and teach people help give you strength for ministering to others?
5. Can you envision yourself being used of God to lead a small group? What kind?

# ANTICIPATION

---

## THE WEDDING APPROACHES

Luke 10:35

*Take care of him; and whatever MORE you spend,  
when I come again, I will repay you.*

The first church in the Book of Acts had a greeting for each other. Rather than saying, “Hello” or “Goodbye,” they said, “Maranatha,” meaning “Our Lord come.”

Believers in the New Testament anticipated the Lord’s soon return. This expectancy kept them through extreme times of persecution and trials. Hope, they discovered, was good medicine.

Bill & Gloria Gaither penned a song early in their writing career. One that expresses this same hope:

*I can hear the chariots rumble  
I can see the marching throng  
And the flurry of God's trumpets  
spell the end of sin and wrong  
Regal robes are now unfolding  
Heaven's grandstands all in place*

*Heaven's choir is now assembled*

*Start to sing Amazing Grace*

*The King is coming*

*The King is coming*

*I just heard the trumpet sounding*

*And now his face i see*

*The King is coming*

*The King is coming*

*Praise God He's coming for me*

That's our hope: The King of Kings will soon return.

Jesus came first as a Baby in the manger to redeem us; He will come again as the King to take us home. We call His first entrance into the world the Advent or Coming; we call the latter entrance the Second Advent or Second Coming. The contrast couldn't be greater.

*The immense step from the Babe at Bethlehem to the living, reigning triumphant Lord Jesus, returning to earth for his own people--that is the glorious truth proclaimed throughout Scripture. As the bells ring out the joys of Christmas, may we also be alert for the final trumpet that will announce His Return, when we shall always be with him.*

*--Alan Redpath in The Life of Victory. Christianity Today, Vol. 39, no. 14.*

One of the many titles given to Jesus Christ is the Son of David, meaning that Jesus was of the lineage of David and heir to his throne. Solomon was the immediate son of David who inherited the throne from his father.

One explanation for the Song of Solomon in the Old Testament is that Solomon grew weary of the palace intrigue and would frequently don the robes of a shepherd and travel through his ancestral fields disguised as a commoner. On one such excursion, he apparently met a young shepherd girl and fell in love. She thought her true love was a common shepherd, but later he returned as a king who took her back to the palace.

This is a picture of the two comings of the Lord Jesus Christ. First, Jesus came as one of us to win us and lift us from our sin. Second, Jesus will return in His glory to receive us to the eternal place He's prepared for us. Or, to borrow John's analogy in Revelation, first Jesus came as a suffering Lamb; He will return as a victorious Lion.

Hebrews 9:28

*Christ was offered once for all time as a sacrifice*

*to take away the sins of many people.*

*He will come again, not to deal with our sins,*

*but to bring salvation to all who are eagerly waiting for him.*

He will come again. When He does, He will be received and accepted by those who are found watching, waiting and anticipating His return. He will come again for those who "love His appearing" (2 Timothy 4:8).

### **The King's Return Is Promised**

When J.R.R. Tolkien penned his epic work, *Lord of the Rings*, the Christian scholar envisioned the work to be published in six books. The publisher had different ideas and collapsed them to a trilogy with the last being called *The Return of the King*.

Had the story been merely about hobbits, elves, or orcs it would have never resonated beyond Middle Earth. Overarching the entire broken realm of Gondor is a promise that a destroyed kingdom will be restored when the king returns. That hope propelled the protagonists of the story and won its lasting fame.

Our belief in the Lord's return is more than fiction or fantasy; it is the lifeblood of a child of God. Jesus will soon return.

*An overwhelming 25 percent of the Bible is given to predictive prophecy.*

*In the Old Testament, there are over 1,800 references to the second coming of Christ.*

*And of the 260 chapters in the New Testament, there are more than 300 references to Jesus's return.*

*That is one out of every 30 verses. And 23 of the 27 books of the New Testament feature the return of Jesus as a prominent theme.*



*For every prophecy in the Bible about the first coming of Jesus, there are eight about the second coming of Jesus. It is the primary theme of Scripture.*

*--Dr. Robert Jeffress, "What Difference Does Prophecy Make," 2017*

His Return will not happen so inconspicuously as His prior entrance into Bethlehem.

Revelation 19:11-12

*11 I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse.*

*And He who sat on him was called Faithful and True,*

*and in righteousness He judges and makes war.*

*12 His eyes were like a flame of fire,*

*and on His head were many crowns.*

The First Coming was for everyone: to whosoever will.

The Second Coming will be for those who indeed were willing.

Most Pentecostals believe there are two parts to the Second Coming. The first is called the Rapture or the catching away of the saints; the second is called the Revelation when Jesus physically returns to this Earth. At His Return, those who anticipate His coming will meet Him in the air.

Does that sound strange? There are several people in the Bible to which something similar happened:

- In the fifth chapter of Genesis, God took a man named Enoch in similar fashion. We learn later in the New Testament that this means Enoch did not die but was taken by God into Heaven (Hebrews 11).
- Or what about Elijah? He did not die. He was taken by a whirlwind and a chariot of fire into the Heavens (2 Kings 6).
- Even Isaiah was caught up into the throne room of Heaven and saw the magnificence of worship there (Isaiah 6).
- Paul mentions that he was "caught up" or raptured into a third heaven (2 Corinthians 12:1-4).

So, don't think it strange that Scripture teaches we will be caught up when the Lord returns:

1 Thessalonians 4:16-18

*16 For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout,  
with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God.*

*And the dead in Christ will rise first.*

*17 Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together  
with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.*

*And thus we shall always be with the Lord.*

*18 Therefore comfort one another with these words.*

When will it happen? Soon.

### **His Return Will Be Soon**

While on earth, Jesus prepared His followers for this event. On one occasion, He was transfigured before Peter, James and John where they could see the glory to soon be revealed (Matthew 17:1-13). On another occasion, when Jesus stood before His judges He spoke of a day when they would lift their eyes and see Him coming in clouds of glory (Mark 14:62). And on still another occasion, Jesus took His disciples to the Mount of Olives and unfolded the plan for the days ahead (Matthew 24).

Just prior to Calvary, Jesus told His disciples that He would be making a trip to Heaven where they would not see Him. There, He would prepare them a place and when all was ready, He would return to take them away (John 14).

After His resurrection, Jesus ascended from the Mount of Olives heavenward before the amazed eyes of His followers, a perfect illustration of what will happen to us someday. Two angels spoke to the disciples saying:

*Acts 1:11*

*Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven?*

*This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven,  
will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven.*

Throughout the Book of Acts, the apostles declared that the One raised from the dead would someday return to this earth. The book of Romans is divided into three sections: doctrinal, prophetic, and exhortation. Each section ends with the declaration that Jesus is coming again. In the opening chapter of 1 Corinthians, we are told to anticipate the coming of the Lord (1 Corinthians 1:7-8). In the closing chapter of the same book, we are told of our radiant hope:

1 Corinthians 15:51-52

*51 Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed—  
52 in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed.*

- In Ephesians, Paul sees believers as ascended into the heavens (Ephesians 2:6-7).
- Paul told the church in Thessalonica to be ready for the rapture (1 Thessalonians 1:9-10).
- To Timothy, Paul spoke of the hope we have of Christ's coming (1 Timothy 6:17-21, 2 Timothy 4:8).
- To Titus, Paul said we are to anticipate our blessed hope (Titus 2:13).
- Christ's Return is found in Hebrews (Hebrews 1: 6, 9:23-28).
- In James, we hear that the Coming of the Lord is at hand or soon (James 5:7-8).
- Peter speaks of the Coming of the Lord (1 Peter 1; 2 Peter 3).
- Jude speaks of the Lord coming with ten thousands of his saints (Jude 1:14).
- And, of course, Revelation may as well be called the Book of the Second Coming. At its close, we hear our Risen Lord proclaiming three times, "Behold, I come quickly" (Revelation 22:12-21).

It's no stretch to say that many major New Testament doctrines are entwined with the Lord's Return. For example, the degree of our separation from the world is in direct proportion to our anticipation of His soon Return.

If you can hear, then hear the footsteps of the Lord as He approaches. The King is coming.

Hebrews 10:37

*For yet a little while, and he that shall come will come...*

## **We Anticipate His Return**

Jesus will come again to receive us unto Himself. We are called “the Bride” in the New Testament and His Second Coming is compared to a wedding (Revelation 19:7, 8; 21:2, 9; 22:17). It’s not typical for brides to dread their wedding day, rather they anticipate it with joy. So too do we look forward to His return.

The first church lived in a state of expectancy. They lived as if Jesus would come back each and every day. Some may fault that anticipation, but this “maranatha mindset” kept the church during many difficult times.

That same anticipative mindset should grip us today. Soon, we will see Jesus. We will see the place He’s prepared for us. We will see loved ones and friends who have gone before us. Why shouldn’t we anticipate that?

We also have the promise of great rewards. At the Judgment Seat of Christ, Jesus will reward His faithful followers (2 Corinthians 5:9-11). Five specific crowns are mentioned in the New Testament that Jesus will distribute:

The Crown of Discipline (1 Corinthians 9:25-27). The person who exercises godly disciplines will receive this crown.

The Crown of Rejoicing (1 Thessalonians 2:19-20). People who win and disciple souls to the Lord will be rewarded with this crown. Imagine the joy of seeing people in Heaven that you have won and disciplined.

The Martyr’s Crown (James 1:12). The person who gives his life for the cause of Christ will receive this crown. Jesus promised that the person who suffers much will be rewarded much (Matthew 5:12).

The Shepherd’s Crown (1 Peter 5:2-4). People involved in pastoring and shepherding others will receive this crown.

The Last Days Crown or Crown of Righteousness (2 Timothy 4:5-8). If you endure through the Last Days on this earth, you will receive this crown. If you stand true when temptation and persecution are strong, a crown awaits.

So many crowns! And who knows how many more the Lord has prepared for those who remain faithful to Him?

Remember that no labor, no service, no prayer, no act of kindness is in vain (1 Corinthians 15:58). What is done in the present life will reap present and future rewards.

In Heaven, we see certain people worshipping the Lord and casting their crowns at His feet (Revelation 4:10). Part of the joy of receiving such crowns will be to be able to return them to the only One who is truly worthy.

As we have discussed in a previous chapter, one of the most beautiful parables is that of the Good Samaritan. When he picked up the man who was robbed, beaten and left for dead, the Samaritan took him to an inn on the Jericho Road. He paid the innkeeper two silver coins and commanded him to care for the wounded man:

Luke 10:35

*Take care of him; and whatever MORE you spend,  
when I come again, I will repay you.*

When Jesus comes again, whatever you have spent, He will repay you. Anticipate that.

Thomas J. Watson, the founder of IBM, once said, “The ability to ask the right question is more than half the battle of finding the answer.”

Ask yourself the right question. The right question is not, “What career do I want?” It’s not “What school do I want to go to?” It’s not even, “Who should I marry?”

The right question is this: “Am I Ready?” For Scripture speaks of making your call and election sure, making certain your garments are white as snow. No wrinkle. No blemish. (2 Peter 1:10, Ephesians 5:26-27).

For the wedding approaches.

Revelation 19:7

*Let us be glad and rejoice and give Him glory,*

*for the marriage of the Lamb has come,  
and His wife has made herself ready.*

We can't save ourselves, but we can focus on the One who is able to save and cleanse us.

Noah's ark was a century in the building. Countless people were warned of the coming judgment, but only eight people responded. Only eight people were ready.

Ask yourself again that question: "Am I ready?"

After church, where she had been taught about the Second Coming, a little girl was quizzing her mother.

"Mommy, do you believe Jesus will come back?"

"Yes," the mother replied.

"Could Jesus come this week?"

"Yes," the mother replied.

"Today?" The girl asked insistently.

"Yes," The mom replied patiently.

"Could He come in the next hour," she asked.

"Yes," sighed the mom.

"In a few minutes," the girl asked?

"Yes, dear."

The little girl grew quiet for a moment and then asked, "Mommy, would you comb my hair?"

The MORE we gain in God here, the MORE awaits us over there. Lay up your treasures in another world.

The Lord is at hand. The Lord is coming soon.

Be ready. Maranatha.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. “Maranatha” means, “Our Lord come.” It was the greeting amongst believers in the first church. Do you feel it is just as important today as it was then to recognize the soon coming of the Lord?
2. Hope is a powerful force. How do you see hope at work in your life?
3. How does the knowledge that Jesus will soon return affect your priorities, your future, and your decisions?
4. One of the most difficult aspects of the subject of future events is timing. People want to know exactly when such-and-such will take place. How is it possible to live with an expectancy of the Lord’s Return without getting lost in debates about the exact timing of such an event?
5. We have come to the close of this chapter and of the MORE series. In what way has this series helped you to become the person God desires for you to be?

# SUMMARY

---

And there you have it... MORE!

I hope you've been blessed by this study and I hope too that it has inspired you to grow more and discover more in God. The heights and depths of God are truly beyond our comprehension and level of experience.

If you have benefited from this, please consider starting a small group to share it. God will use these words to come to life in someone else's heart. And through prayerful discussion and fellowship, the words and lessons will have an even greater impact upon you. You will grow more as you give more of yourself to others.

We never reach a plateau. We should always avoid the status quo. Go deeper and go higher! Let God use you more and more.

May God be with you now and always!



