

3:16

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Foreword

Conscientious Bible study is an admirable quest. Attention to good hermeneutics and careful parsing of words and phrases can lead to amazing discoveries in God's Word. On occasion though, serendipity takes control and fascinating truths can appear unannounced and unexpectedly. Such was the impetus for 3:16.

As I prepared my lessons over several weeks for my Middle School Sunday school class, coincidence seemed to bring several "3:16" verses across my path. I fully understand that the original manuscripts did not contain the chapter and verse designations that we commonly observe today. And that they were placed, as seemed best at the time, by the early translators as a method of making the passages more accessible to the average reader.

My curiosity led me to begin looking at each book of the Bible, contemplating each 3:16 that I found. I was astounded at the depth and breadth of theology I found there, hiding in plain sight. So, the Bible student in me began looking at each passage in depth. That simple study has resulted in what I am presenting to you now.

I make no assertions that these verses are of any greater importance than others found in the Bible, nor is it of any

greater significance that these are all 3:16 verses. Numerology is of no consideration here. This is quite simply a curiosity, a unique, thoughtful look at the truth of the Word of God, as seen in each sixteenth verse of each third chapter.

Genesis 3:16

To the woman He said, “I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing, and with pain you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and He will rule over you.”

Adam and Eve were created sinless and perfect. That condition allowed them the unique opportunity to experience an untainted daily walk with their Creator. It was absolutely perfect—until they allowed sin into their lives. Everything changed for them at that moment, and for God as well. God’s desire has always been to have a sustained relationship with His children (James 4:8). Sin broke that fellowship, and God’s plan for restoration and redemption was immediately set in motion. That solution has been purchased on the cross (Galatians 3:13) and will come to full fruition at the end of time when He makes all things new (Revelation 21:5).

It makes us uncomfortable to consider how much God hates sin (Psalm 11:5). Hate is a strong word in our vocabulary. God hates sin. He cannot abide in its presence. His holiness demands the absolute exclusion of even the slightest hint of iniquity. By God’s rules, the deserved penalty for imperfection in our lives is death (Romans 6:23). We saw His hatred burst forth in the third chapter of Genesis when God displayed His righteous wrath. The resulting curse upon man was massive and

devastating. It is beyond our abilities to circumvent or abrogate the rules that God imposed when Adam and Eve sinned. We simply cannot undo what God has commanded.

The curse of sin effected the entirety of Creation. “The whole of creation groans” (Romans 8:22) and is eagerly awaiting redemption. Until then, God’s proclamations stand.

We live in a technologically advanced culture that is uncovering daily, new insights into the astounding intricacies of our world, and things beyond. God’s attention to detail cannot be denied. But just how much can we attribute to God? The answer to that question rests solidly upon the true majesty of the Creator. God was not bound by any pre-existing framework or limits. He created the universe and all that is in it, and He created the place to put that universe, as well as all of the laws that would govern its existence.

Note that on the very first day God said, “Let there be light” (Genesis 1:3). That simple statement is vastly more complex than we can imagine, because in it is embedded the beginning of all of the laws of physics, and even time itself. Light is a function of intensely technical physical properties, working in perfect, predictable, and observable unison. It is no wonder that God finished that day with the grand announcement that it was good.

The following days, plants were created, along with the laws of nature that govern their growth and propagation. And

then animals, with all of the laws that sustain their ability to live and reproduce, were commanded to fill the earth.

As our scientific discovery continues, we are becoming more and more aware of the complexity and intricacy of the laws that give our universe order. Without those laws, our lives would be chaotic. Imagine if gravity were unpredictable and varied from day to day—or from hour to hour. What if the coefficient of friction changed unexpectedly minute by minute? Life would be impossible were it not for the perfect, observable order dictated and put in place by God at creation.

God's establishment of order does not stop with physics, botany or zoology. In His final effort, His crowning achievement, God created man and woman. "*Male and female He created them*" (Genesis 1:27). God created gender. He called it good and perfect. And as Jesus walked this earth, He reiterated that God had indeed created two distinct genders, each with uniqueness and the ability to compliment the other (Matthew 19:4). Gender is not a social construct. It is not a status or condition we choose for ourselves. It is an essential component of life that God designates specifically for each of us. In perfect love, He architected and structured the beautiful gift of gender. And to ensure that we understand His plan, He has marked each of us with an unquestionable biological signature. It was part of the perfect plan of God, established to make our world perfect in every way. It is no surprise that Satan would set his sights on the dissolution of the concept and definition of gender by blurring the lines between male and female.

We see the laws of physics and nature and understand that they cannot be successfully overridden or ignored. But our society attempts to misconstrue God's laws governing humanity and redefine them in a way that suits those who have a rebellious heart. They may believe for a moment that they have successfully introduced a concept like gender fluidity, but reality comes crashing in around them in a very short while. Allow me to give one example that is not talked about much among those who promote gender transitioning. Of those who undergo the medical process to redefine their genetic gender by surgically adding, subtracting, or reassigning body parts, 35%-45% will attempt suicide during their lifetime. That fact alone should cause alarm.

As sin entered the world, so did the curse of God upon that sin. The effect of which we cannot ignore or absolve ourselves of. The laws that came to be at Creation stand firm, and so do the laws associated with the curse. The command found in Genesis 3:16 has been an undeniable fact of life since that fateful day. Bearing a child would no longer be a flawless, consummate physical act. From that moment on, the miracle of birth would be beset often with complications and pain and sorrow. Every woman who has ever given birth will echo that the entire process may have been a wonderful experience overall, but they will readily admit to the many moments of discomfort and difficulty they experienced along the way. One must also recognize that not all pregnancies end well. Miscarriages, birth defects, even the sadness associated with the inability to

conceive, are all results of God's disdain for sin. The commands of God stand firm.

What of the other half of the reprimand of God to Eve? Our society struggles to redefine the God-ordained delicate balance between the roles of a husband and a wife. God told the woman that from that day forward "her desire will be for her husband" (Genesis 3:16). And by implication, that same rule extends to, and still exists, today. We must be careful to keep our politically correct culture from skewing our understanding of Scripture. The Satanic influence upon society's deconstructing of gender roles and the unique function God has outlined for each is evident in our daily news.

But what did God mean?

It is always best to use multiple passages of Scripture when looking deeply into a given subject. Taking the whole of the Word, we find that God did not create an archaic male dominated hierarchy, as some would define it. Rather, even as He reprimanded Adam and Eve for their grievous error, He worded His commands in such a way as to amplify the concept that perfect love must still prevail in a marital relationship. He gave man a sincere responsibility to protect and reverence his wife—to hold her in the highest possible esteem, to give his life for her if necessary (Ephesians 5:25). The woman, in response to such a display of chivalry and valor, would reverence her husband in return, and respect him highly for his genuine love.

Responsibility for making a marital relationship work falls with much greater weight upon the man. God will hold him accountable for his success or failure to love the tender, delicate woman looking to him for respect (I Peter 3:7). God has created a woman with an innate desire to respond to a man. That is not meant to be demeaning, or that a woman is expected to squelch her personality in any way. There are two genders, male and female and they are not the same, but are indeed, vastly different! Also, one is in no way superior to the other. In God's perfect plan, they fit together like intricate pieces of a jigsaw puzzle to form one unit—a marriage.

The picture that comes to my mind is that of a trusting, content woman melting into the arms of a strong, loving husband in whom she has absolute confidence to protect her from every possible harm. A fairytale, storybook fantasy? No, a page straight out of God's plan for relationships between husband and wife.

Even the introduction of sin into a perfectly created world cannot stop God's perfect plan. We live in a broken world, and eagerly await a permanent fix. Until then, we would do well to follow the rules, the laws of God. They cannot successfully be undone, no matter how hard we may try to convince ourselves that we can achieve that goal. The physical laws of God serve to make our world make perfect sense. The laws of God addressing our relationships provide us with the foundation needed for a successful marriage as well. May we be willing to embrace the laws of God—all of them.

Exodus 3:16

Go, and gather the elders of Israel together, and say unto them, “The LORD God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob, appeared unto me, saying, ‘I have surely visited you, and seen that which is done to you in Egypt.’”

Hollywood learned years ago that the general public loves a story where the bad guy gets his just desserts in the end. That may be why the story of Moses leading the people of Israel out of Egypt has such favor among adults as well as children of all ages. We love to see the evil Egyptians brought to their knees.

Exodus 3:16 addresses something that took place just ahead of that miraculous redemption and deliverance. Israel had been sorely mistreated by Egypt and had begun to cry out to God for relief. They had not been faithfully serving their God for many years, and it was only after circumstances became appalling that they finally remembered and called on God for salvation (Exodus 3:9).

And God heard their cry.

We find mention here of a “visit”. Other passages confirm the concept that God’s concern for Israel was a very

personal one (Zechariah 2:8-10). He did not just listen to reports of Egypt's behavior. He did not send spies on reconnaissance missions. I believe the Scripture says that God Himself came and walked through the midst of the hardship and adversity and identified with His children and their personal pain and suffering.

We serve a God of immense abilities. He is infinite. We catch glimpses of bits and pieces of His character and are tasked with piecing together the giant jigsaw puzzle to gain an understanding of who He is. Empathy is an integral part of His character. It is interesting to note that all tears are not ultimately wiped away forever until Revelation 21:4, after the final judgement of God when all punishment has been meted out. Then, and only then, can the tears of a loving God be wiped away.

A most interesting portrayal is found in Isaiah 59:17! Few are familiar with this verse, yet it describes the essence and character of God more succinctly than any other passage in the Bible. We find there four character traits that picture Him to us in an extraordinary way. An infinite God defined by four words.

He put on righteousness as a breastplate. Righteousness. God is absolutely, totally and completely perfect in every way. End of discussion. He cannot abide with sin. He loathes it. He will not allow anything less than His standard to prevail. Everything God does is righteous and good. Everything.

And the helmet of salvation on His head. Salvation. From before the creation of the world, God knew we would have a

problem with sin. So He made plans for the redemption of man, salvation. It is the central theme of the Bible from beginning to end. Christ is the sacrifice, the Son of God. And if the references to the breastplate and helmet sound familiar, it is worthy of note that Paul, in writing to the Ephesian church, wasn't the first to use an analogy of armor. A careful study of Isaiah 59 will reveal all the other items Paul mentioned as well.

He put on garments of vengeance. Vengeance. God is a vengeful God. He is Judge, Jury, and Executioner. That description is discomfoting to us. And yet, through the pages of the Bible we see over and over again God judging sin—harshly. It may even frighten us a bit. That is not all bad—the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

The fourth character trait may surprise most. Few think of God in this light, which is truly unfortunate.

And wrapped Himself in zeal as in a cloak. Zeal. The “forgotten” character trait of God, zeal, is defined as “intense enthusiasm, to be deeply passionate about.” Everything God does, He accomplishes with eagerness and excitement. He is sincerely fervent about all He has ever done. That is an amazing idea. Just think what that can mean. Not only was He intensely passionate and enthusiastic about the big moments, like creation. But He is also as ardently interested when dealing with individual people on a day to day, moment by moment basis.

That same zeal compels Him to be involved in the lives of his children, even the straying ones. It is a beautiful,

touching picture to see God walking among the Israelites, seeing their personal struggles first-hand and being moved by their emotional trauma, and reacting with His justice. The remainder of Exodus details the greatest story of deliverance the world had ever seen.

Jesus, as He walked this earth, reminded His disciples that He was the exact representation of God the Father (John 14:9, Hebrews 1:3). His actions and behaviors and the Father's are identical. Recall with me if you will, the story of Lazarus (John 11:38-44). Mary, Martha, and Lazarus were close friends of Jesus during His ministry, and yet, when Lazarus became deathly ill and died, Jesus was not there to intervene. He did finally make the short trip to their village three days "late" and, upon His arrival, He was overwhelmed with the emotion of the situation and broke down in tears (John 11:35). One could not ask for a more poignant, visual definition of empathy. It is one of the most touching displays of God's love found in the Bible.

I believe the Exodus passage leaves us with a hint of the emotional stirring that God experienced during His obviously clandestine visit to Egypt. His response was to come to the aid of His children in a spectacular way. We can claim to have that same kind of concern directed toward us as His children. It is a great comfort to know that God is intensely interested in even the smallest details in our lives and is ready to protect us and deliver us, eventually, at all costs.

When it came time to leave Egypt, Israel walked out with all of the plunder and wealth of the nation. They left in full

view as the Egyptians were burying their dead (Numbers 33:3-4). The Bible makes a specific mention that they walked out after 430 years of captivity—to the very day (Exodus 12:41)! No one but God was counting those days and years. He had not forgotten His chosen ones. Nor will He ever forget.

Leviticus 3:16

...and the priest shall burn them upon the alter, it is the food of the offering made by fire for a sweet savor: all of the fat is the LORD'S.

It is all too easy to skim through passages such as this one when reading through the Old Testament laws. They often seem so far removed from us in the church age. We no longer are required to offer animal sacrifices because the ultimate sacrifice has been made for us. The perfect Lamb of God on that cross over 2,000 years ago satisfied the wrath of God towards the sin in our lives (Hebrews 10:10). Jesus said that He came to fulfil the Law (Matthew 5:17), and that He did wondrously.

The verses surrounding this passage deal with a sacrifice commonly known as The Fellowship, or Peace Offering. It was unique among the five sacrificial offerings described in detail in the Law. And its differences from the other four are worthy of note. Four sacrifices dealt with sin in various ways and were mandatory, to be brought at specific times and dates. The Fellowship Offering was an optional undertaking. As its name hints, it was primarily about relationship with God, but as individuals carefully observed this sacrifice, it led to an increase in the quality and depth of relationship with family and friends as well.

Sin offerings were essentially burnt on the alter in their entirety. Hair, hooves and all! In our day, we are so distanced from the physical aspects of the sacrificial system that we often forget how all five senses were involved in the process of worshipping God and atoning for sin. The remission of sin with the presentation of blood was truly a religious aspect to understand, but do not forget that there was a physical component to the experience as well, that could affect the worshipper profoundly.

Sight: a worshipper in that day would have seen the parade of living animals being reverently led to the altar. It was a spectacle to be seen every day as some sacrifices were a daily occurrence. It was a very visual reminder that sin is an ever-present concern in our daily lives. God demands that He is due a settlement. Sin garners the wage of death (Romans 6:23). The creatures presented to God were substitutionary. And they died. Its not a subject that we are comfortable with, but God requires blood to be shed for sin to be forgiven and paid up in full (Hebrews 9:22).

Sound: animals tend to make noises of various kinds. The cacophony of intermingled barnyard animal sounds would have been quite noticeable. Sound is invisible, but it is a tremendously powerful force. The last bleat of a sheep offered upon an altar, as its blood spilled upon the ground would give way to the silence of death. Our emotions and thoughts can be profoundly affected by the audible part of the world around us.

Touch: a worshipper was to place their hand on the forehead of the sin sacrifice, thus identifying their sin with the animal. Touch is a tremendously personal experience. Tactile sensations affect our thoughts and emotions in ways that the other four senses cannot.

Smell: without being too crass or vulgar, understand that barnyard animals each have their own unique pungent body odor and will also relieve their bowels and kidneys when under stress. And don't forget the "aroma" of an entire animal being burnt completely on a fire. That is not a backyard BBQ fragrance at all! The sacrifice for sin was never meant to be a sterile, clean, and amiable practice. It was to reflect the reality that sin is disgusting and hated by God. And the ultimate, substitutionary death of Christ would be gruesome and extremely unpleasant to witness.

Taste: only the priest and his family were allowed to eat of certain parts of the sin offerings brought by the Israelites. I am also reminded of Psalm 34:8, *Taste and see that the LORD is good, blessed are those who take refuge in Him.*

The Fellowship offering was entirely optional. It was held out to the people of Israel as an appropriate way of saying, "Thank you" to their God. And the process of this offering was in stark contrast to the sin offerings. This one was, in fact, a celebration.

First an animal was chosen. It could be of any of the clean herd animals stipulated in the law. It was brought before God (to the priest.) The worshipper would then lay his hand on the forehead of the animal to identify himself with

it before God, it's throat would be cut and the blood poured out as a sacrifice. But at this point, things changed remarkably. The animal would then be slit open and the fat scraped out of the belly of the animal, as well as a few key internal organs. This glob of fat and organ parts would then be gathered up and taken to the sacrificial fire and burned up completely. Are you aware of the fragrant smell of burning fat? Think of one of two things—bacon frying or an outdoor barbeque. A wonderful, fragrant aroma would have filled the area. Then all of the meat from the animal was to be cooked and eaten within two days. I don't know of anyone who can sit down and eat a beef in two days without waste. The only alternative would be to invite friends and family to dine together to eat the entire animal in the time allowed.

We serve a gracious and generous God. Many times, though, we overlook that fact. We see the things that we have been able to buy and accumulate and tell ourselves that, “Our hands produced these things.” Nothing could be further from the truth. It is God who has given us the ability to produce wealth (Deuteronomy 8:18).

Regularly giving thanks is a tremendous act. Thankfulness keeps our hearts in right relationship to God, the supplier of all things. It also reminds us of the things that we have. It is far too easy to overlook many of the small things that God supplies us regularly.

Saying “Thank you” to God was to be a family meal affair, sharing the blessings together. It's not surprising that our own Thanksgiving tradition mimics the one that the people

of Israel enjoyed thousands of years before our own Pilgrims and Indians. A corporate worship experience of giving thanks to a God who supplies generously.

Numbers 3:16

And Moses numbered them according to the word of the LORD, as he was commanded.

God has an accounting system quite unlike any other. It is exact, to be sure, but it is tied closely to His sovereignty and righteousness. When the Israelites cried out to God in their misery and bondage in Egypt, He heard their cry and came to their rescue (Exodus 3:9). Moses was sent to represent God in Pharaoh's court. The resulting punishment measured out upon the nation of Egypt was so significant that they never recouped from the tremendous blow they were dealt by God.

We recall the plagues and note that the last one was incredibly severe. According to the account in Exodus 11-12, God commanded that the first born of every living thing in Egypt would die on a specified night. The only deliverance from this terrifying spectacle was to kill a lamb and wipe its blood on the lintel and doorposts of your house. The angel of death would then "pass over" the occupants of that house (Exodus 12:23).

That fearful night, at precisely midnight (Exodus 12:29), there was not a household among all of the Egyptians that

did not have someone who died (Exodus 12:30). In the middle of the night, Pharaoh realized his only hope was to let the people of God go. The multitudes of Israel were granted permission to leave and the Egyptians watched them go that following morning as they were burying their dead (Numbers 33:3-4).

If only the Exodus text is considered, one would think that Israel was completely exonerated and isolated from the calamity because they knew God and had a relationship with Him. The beginning of the book of Numbers presents an interesting facet of the character of God and His sovereignty. In the passage in chapter three, we find God counting the family of Levi. The stated reason was to consecrate them to God and set them apart from the rest of the community in place of all of Israel's firstborn (Numbers 8:16).

Israel was not innocent of wrongdoing in Egypt. In fact, many were probably as godless as anyone in the country. God's mercy spared them from His wrath, but there was still a price to be considered in place of punishment. The Egyptians lost all of their firstborn to God's chastisement. Israel was required to give the Levites to God in place of their firstborn (Numbers 3:12-13,41).

But don't consider for even a moment though that being a Levite and fulfilling an obligation to serve God your entire life was a hardship or had a negative connotation. God confirmed to them that their opportunity of service was a gift from Him, something to be cherished and honored. Their times of allotted service was from age 25-50. Then

they faced a mandatory retirement from full time service to God (Numbers 8:24-26). It was an honorable task to serve the Lord. And we should still see it that way today in our own lives. Nothing is more satisfying than an involvement in God's perfect plan (Colossians 3:23-24).

We are all guilty of sin (Romans 3:23). We all deserve punishment (Psalm 103:10). But God intervened (Ephesians 2:8-9), not because we deserved or had earned a special treatment, but because of His love (John 3:16).

Substitutionary payment for sin is a theme that runs continuously through the Bible from cover to cover. It began with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. One of the results of their loss of innocence was the realization that they were naked and they desired to cover themselves in their shame (Genesis 3:7). God gave them animal skins to cover their bodies (Genesis 3:20). The simple implication of that act is that those animals died facilitating the process. Animal sacrifices stipulated in the Mosaic Law were also substitutionary and temporary, atoning for sin until the final, perfect sacrifice would be made (Hebrews 10:3). It is notable that God supplied the garments for Adam and Eve, hand made by Himself. He also supplied the ultimate, final sacrifice, Jesus. And do not forget that we as believers are now clothed in the righteousness of Christ (Romans 4:22-24).

The simple fact remains that Israel was guilty of many of the same sins as Egypt, and deserved punishment. God's mercy and grace provided for an alternative for His chosen people.

Numbering the Levites, accounting the death in Egypt, balancing out the equation—the harmony of wrath, justice, judgment, love, grace, and mercy leaves us with unresolved tension at times. We find it difficult to consider that God is Judge, Jury and Executioner, and are far more comfortable with our understanding of a God of love and grace and mercy. Our concept and understanding of God must incorporate all that He is, whether we find it convenient or not. Israel was spared from the grief of thousands of deaths not because they were righteous or deserved anything from God. God, in His sovereignty, chose to extend His hand of mercy and grace to an underserving people at the very first Passover. And He still extends mercy and grace towards us in our time.

Deuteronomy 3:16

And unto the Reubenites and unto the Gadites I gave from Gilead even unto the river Arnon half the valley, and the border even unto the river Jabbok, which is the border of the children of Ammon;

After a memorable, miraculous deliverance from Egypt, followed by a difficult struggle of forty years of following God through a vast desert, the people of Israel were finally ready to enter the Promised Land. God took great care in His Word to spell out in detail the tribal inheritance of each family group of Israel. He hand-picked the inheritance that each family would receive. The land across the Jordan River was to remain with the families and not sold permanently or given away. God made it clear that the land was His and that He was simply giving it to the Israelites to care for and administer for a time (Leviticus 25:23). This was the Promised Land that they had dreamed about for so long. It was now nearly time to go in and make claim to their inheritance.

In just a very short while, the nation would be ready to cross the Jordan River and begin the arduous task of removing the current inhabitants and taking the land. We find the Reubenites, Gadites and half of the tribe of Manasseh requesting to be allowed to stay on the east side of the

Jordan River. The property under consideration in this passage was the land that had been controlled by Og the King of Bashan, whom they had defeated not long ago. They wanted their inheritance to be there instead of the west side of the Jordan with all of the other tribes of Israel. God granted their request on one condition—that they take up arms and follow their brothers into the Promised Land and help them subdue their individual portions. And that they did.

Three years later, conquering and possessing the Promised Land had been a long, arduous task. With many mistakes along the way, the Israelites were no longer as dedicated to the cause as they once were. Joshua aged, and the intensity and commitment of the people waned. They decided to call a halt to the conquest for a while, and the sad truth is that they never concluded what they started. God had clearly delineated for them the exact geographical boundaries for each of the twelve tribes to inhabit. He had promised them unequivocal success if they would but obey Him. All they had to do was walk in and claim the land—flowing with milk and honey, with houses they didn't have to build, trees they didn't have to plant, and crops already in the ground—absolutely free (Joshua 24:13). They grew tired and complacent, not willing to trust God entirely.

The tribes of Reuben, Gad, and the half tribe of Manasseh, had requested that they be allowed to reside on the East side of the Jordan River. God permitted it, but do not think for a minute that it is what God would have preferred. He simply allowed them to live there, knowing full well that problems would lie ahead of them if they refused His

perfect inheritance in the Promised Land. The two and one half tribes had committed themselves to cross over the Jordan with the rest of the nation and assist the other tribes as they conquered the land. Much time passed. Having kept their word, tired and worn, they wanted to go home. Joshua warned them explicitly to keep the commands of God, and never forget Him.

With permission to leave granted to them by Joshua, they headed east toward their inheritance. Upon reaching the Jordan River, they decided to build a very large, imposing altar to God. All of Israel heard of it and misinterpreted their actions. Thinking that the two and one half tribes had turned their backs on God, they prepared to go to war with their own brothers. Tempers flared until it was learned that the tribes that they had assumed to be rebellious weren't wayward after all. The explanation given for their questionable behavior was this—they had fear and concern that someday, they would no longer be considered part of Israel because they lived on the East side of the Jordan. The dramatic altar was to be a witness to future generations that there was indeed a link between the two groups of people. The clarification calmed emotions, and everyone went their separate ways.

Gad, Reuben, and Manasseh called their altar “Ed”, which means “a witness”. On the surface, the building of this monument seems like an appropriate gesture. A more in-depth look at the altar named Ed exposes a few complications. First, the nation of Israel was to have one and only one altar, and God had mandated that it be located

in front of the Tabernacle in Israel. Sacrifices were to be offered only there (Leviticus 17:1-9).

We do not have the option to disobey God without consequences (Number 32:23). Trying to camouflage our sin or couch it in the guise of being something religious, is a wasted effort. Ed was a bloodless altar and represents the theology that ignores the blood sacrifice of Jesus. The church today is a divided entity. There are those that hold to the fundamental truths of the Word, and others who define the Word down so far as to try to make it say what “their itching ears want to hear” (2 Timothy 4:3).

Taking a stand against sin is not popular in our culture today. It is not easy to brace ourselves against the wave of political correctness that is sweeping our nation and the world as a whole. Too many people are content to choose to ignore the absolute truths found in God’s Word. They find it far more comfortable to “fit in” by twisting and turning their religious beliefs to square with the current trends of the day.

The actions of these errant Israelites were indicative of their true hearts. Many hundreds of years later, Jesus crossed the Sea of Galilee and visited the Gadarenes (Matthew 8:28-34). That visit was memorable. They were pig farmers, a ceremonially unclean animal under the Law. They had a problem with demonic possession, and upon seeing Jesus work miracles, they told Him, in no uncertain terms, to leave their land.

Liberalism is working its way into the church today, attacking many of the fundamental doctrines that we have accepted and adhered to for generations. Let us be cautious of religious or pious acts that may look impressive on the surface, but distract us far from the commands set forth in the Bible. What God called sin 5,000 years ago, is still sin in our generation today. We would do well to acknowledge that fact and live accordingly.

Joshua 3:16

And they commanded the people, saying, When you see the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God, and the priests the Levites bearing it, then you shall remove from your place, and go after it.

Nearly five centuries earlier, God had made a solemn promise to Abraham that his descendants would inhabit the Promised Land (Genesis 17:8). That day had now arrived, and the entire nation was expectantly awaiting the command from God to step into, and cross, the Jordan River and begin a brand-new life on the west side of the river. Moses was dead and Joshua had taken his place, leading the people of Israel.

The river was running at flood stage as it would normally do at that time of the year, and was a formidable encumbrance to overcome. A mighty river is no obstacle for a God capable of humbling the entire nation of Egypt. God gave the command to Joshua to have the people follow the Ark of the Covenant into, and through, the river.

Many times, a conscientious student of the Bible will find types and shadows of New Testament theology hiding in plain sight in the Old Testament stories. While the crossing of the Jordan River is a memorable moment in the panorama of the history of Israel, there is an underlying

truth buried in this narrative that should not be overlooked. Follow me as we look at the picture God has painted for us concerning the truth and beauty of our salvation in the person of Jesus Christ.

The Ark of the Covenant is a wonderful type, or picture of the person of Jesus Christ.

1. It was a simple wooden box covered in solid gold. Jesus came to this earth in a frail human body such as we have, but He also stood to be recognized as God. 100% God, 100% man—in one being.

2. The Ark contained the original tablets of stone upon which God Himself had engraved the ten commandments and given to Moses on Mt. Sinai. Jesus came to fulfil the Law (Matthew 5:17), not do away with it. Much of the Old Testament Law foreshadowed the coming of the Messiah and the work of redemption that He would perform. Hebrews Chapter 10 details very well that the old system of sacrifices temporarily atoned for sin until the final, perfect atonement could be made by Christ Himself, once for all.

3. The Ark also contained Aaron's staff that had budded and produced fruit overnight in response to some of the leaders of Israel questioning Aaron's authority given by God (Number 17:1-11). It proved that Aaron was God's choice for the office of Priest. Jesus is our High Priest (Hebrews 4:14).

4. Finally, it contained a pot of manna, perfectly and permanently preserved by God for all of time. Manna is the bread that came down from Heaven each morning for the Israelites to gather for food each day. An individual could never gather too much or too little. It had to be

gathered every day, as it could not be kept over for the following day. The word “manna” is a transliteration from the ancient Hebrew into our English language. It literally is a question, “What is it?” As Jesus walked this earth during His brief ministry among us, many wondered and marveled at His miracles and teachings. They often asked the question, “Who is this man called Jesus?” Jesus is the Bread of Life (John 6:30-35), and we need Him in our lives daily to live well.

As the priests carried the Ark, they were to lead the people down into the flood waters of the river. The river here is a picture of death. Jesus has led the way for us, experiencing death and conquering it once and for all so that we need not fear it (II Corinthians 5:15). When the feet of the priests carrying the Ark touched the water, it stopped flowing from upstream and it quite literally piled up and was held back until all the people had crossed over.

Just as at the Red Sea, the entire nation crossed on a dry riverbed. As they looked to their right during the crossing, at a great distance away, they could see the water piled high against the sky. And it is no coincidence that Scripture mentions that the water heaped up near a town called Adam. The work of redemption that Jesus began and finished at the cross was for all of mankind. Everyone from the very first man—Adam, even to today, Jesus, the Messiah came to save all who would believe in Him.

In First Corinthians 15:45, Paul used a curious title for Jesus. He called Him “The Last Adam.” There are a number of parallels between the first Adam and the Last

Adam. One fits especially well in this picture of a river crossing and its relation to the idea of death. The first Adam was put into a deep sleep, his side opened up and a beautiful bride created from the results of the surgery (Genesis 2:21;22). The Last Adam, was also pierced in His side (John 19:34), placed into the “sleep” of death (Romans 5:8), and the result has been the foundation of the church, the “Bride” of Christ (Ephesians 5:25-27).

Jesus has led the way through the darkness and shadow of death. He has overcome it and taken its sting away, so that we need no longer fear death (1 Corinthians 15:55-57). We can now recognize it as a wonderful moment that transitions us into the presence of God. In death, He paid the ultimate, complete price for our sins, and in His resurrection and ascension into Heaven, He showed us that we too will one day go to be with Him forever in a promised paradise.

Judges 3:16

Now Ehud made himself a dagger (it was double-edged and a cubit in length) and fastened it under his clothes on his right thigh.

From our perspective, the time of the judges of Israel was brutal. Disobedience by the people led to punishment, which eventually gave way to their cry to God for deliverance. He then brought them a deliverer, who freed them from their misery for a short while. As time progressed, they fell once again into sin and the cycle would begin over again.

Israel seemed doomed to ride that roller coaster forever.

One of those obscure leaders who brought Israel up from disaster for a short while was Ehud. His pedigree is anything but remarkable—he was from the smallest tribe of Israel, Benjamin. With no mention of his education or financial standing, we are left with little information except for two things. He was a metal smith at least capable of producing his own hand made dagger, and he was left-handed. Those credentials would buy little notoriety anywhere—then or now.

God had allowed Moab to increase in might for one reason. He was going to punish Israel for their sin by using a

neighboring nation whom He would bring to power for this one special purpose. Moab brutally oppressed Israel for 18 long years.

The people of Moab were direct descendants of Lot (Genesis 19:30-38). We are left to wonder how much effect living in Sodom had on Lot and his family. Surrounded by the wickedness rampant in the city, Lot's daughters were influenced more than even he probably realized at the time. Moab was the son produced from an incestuous act between Lot and his oldest daughter (Genesis 19:36-37). Ben-Ammi, the father of the Ammonites, resulted from a second revolting episode with his youngest daughter (Genesis 19:38). This disgusting beginning lingered, as nothing good was ever mentioned in the Bible about the Moabites or the Ammonites; only condemnation.

Moabites were very religious, but unfortunately, they did not worship God. They had adopted the mythology and practices associated with the god Moloch from the neighboring brother/nation of Ammon and changed its name to Chemosh (I Kings 11:7). The Bible and secular archeology agree in regard to the religious practices common to the worship of Moloch and Chemosh.

Typically, the god was fabricated as a large, hollow, iron character, standing upright with arms outstretched as if ready to hold an offering. A large fire would be built inside the statue, and with proper attention, could reach tremendously high temperatures and even begin to glow slightly red with the formidable heat generated by the internal fire. Once heated as described, live infants were

laid on the glowing hot arms in an act of worship. The assembled crowd would watch reverently as the child would be completely consumed. They called it “The Act of Grinning” because, as the body of the innocent would react to the tremendous physical violence done to it, the facial muscles would contract and form a haunting smile.

We could have a very long discussion at this point regarding the parallels between this deplorable behavior from centuries past, and our national problem today that we calmly call “Abortion”. The similarities are frighteningly clear! History shows that God’s patience for any nation wanes remarkably after they begin embracing the concept of child sacrifice. We as a nation are much too sophisticated to use a hideous iron idol for our expiation. Our idols are much more akin to those of the Israelites found in Ezekiel 14:3. “*Idols of the heart*”, as God refers to them, are those ideas that lead a nation to allow deep seated selfishness to determine actions. Most abortions in our world today are done for convenience sake—“the child is not in our plans right now.” It rears it’s head as a monstrous *idol of the heart* that is just as macabre and repulsive as anything Moab could have imagined and built.

God used a simple, relatively obscure man to destroy Moab. We are given details regarding an assassination that cause us to cringe a bit as we read the narrative. We also see a small bit of comic relief in the story. After thrusting his dagger into the body of Eglon the king, Ehud locked the doors behind him and calmly left. The palace staff noticed the doors were locked and assumed that Eglon was “using the bathroom” in his private facility. Ehud made his escape

during that delay. Interestingly, in the book of Psalms, God calls Moab His “wash basin” (Psalm 60:8), a disgusting pot that might also be found in a room like the one referenced in the passage in Judges.

Following the death of the king of Moab, Israel rose to war and rid themselves of their tyrants. They enjoyed a time of peace for the next 80 years—until the people of Israel once again became complacent and began worshipping other gods. And God brought the Philistines into their lives to bring them back to Himself yet once again. And we are then introduced to the next deliverer appointed by God.

Ruth 3:16

When Ruth came to her mother-in-law, Naomi asked, “How did it go, my daughter?” Then she told her everything Boaz had done for her.

Pictures, or types, of the work of redemption as it relates to our salvation are found throughout Scripture. But none are as well defined and clearly exemplified as in this little love story between Boaz and Ruth.

The Old Testament contains the Law that was given to Moses as the people of Israel left Egypt. We remember quite well the “Ten Commandments”, as we often refer to them, but the first ten were followed by many, many more. Some we embrace still today as good advice on how to live a Godly life. Others, we look at in disbelief and scratch our heads in wonder, incredulous at what we see written in front of us in the pages of Scripture.

Arguably, the strangest may well be the law regarding the Kinsman-Redeemer. Found in Deuteronomy 25:5-10, Scripture lays out details that in our day and time seem a bit unnerving and difficult to comprehend.

⁵ If brothers are living together and one of them dies without a son, his widow must not marry outside the family. Her husband’s brother

shall take her and marry her and fulfill the duty of a brother-in-law to her. ⁶ The first son she bears shall carry on the name of the dead brother so that his name will not be blotted out from Israel.⁷ However, if a man does not want to marry his brother's wife, she shall go to the elders at the town gate and say, "My husband's brother refuses to carry on his brother's name in Israel. He will not fulfill the duty of a brother-in-law to me."⁸ Then the elders of his town shall summon him and talk to him. If he persists in saying, "I do not want to marry her,"⁹ his brother's widow shall go up to him in the presence of the elders, take off one of his sandals, spit in his face and say, "This is what is done to the man who will not build up his brother's family line."¹⁰ That man's line shall be known in Israel as The Family of the Unsandaled.

We have the grand privilege of witnessing this law played out in its entirety in the book of Ruth. We see it nowhere else in Scripture. It is a love story without equal, with repercussions to our relationship with God. We call Jesus our Redeemer. To the Hebrew, the term is more accurately "Kinsman-Redeemer".

Elimelech and Naomi had left Israel many years previous to escape the ravages of a severe famine. God had commanded His people to remain and not blend in with their neighboring countries (Malachi 2:11). They were to be set apart to God and Him alone. Their two boys married foreign women, another forbidden practice (Deuteronomy 7:3-4). Finally, after the death of her husband and both sons, Naomi reluctantly decided that her only recourse was to return to her home in Israel. Ultimately, her daughter-in-law Ruth, a Moabite, went with her.

We are reminded no fewer than 7 times in the book of Ruth that this young lady was indeed a Moabite, and as such should have been excluded from residency and acceptance in Israel (Deuteronomy 23:3). But as the story continues, we read of her commitment to follow the God of Naomi.

We do not know for sure why Ruth chose the path she did. Understand that the Moabites were a heathen nation, steeped in child sacrifice as a regular part of their godless worship. Maybe she had caught a glimpse of the one true God when she married into the little Israelite family and decided that is what she wanted for her own life.

She committed to a life with her mother-in-law Naomi and was prepared to suffer the destitution that would most certainly be ahead of two widows with no male relatives to care for them. So, they returned home and began the process of surviving life on a daily basis.

The law allowed for the care of indigents and the poor by commanding that they be allowed to glean in the harvest fields and pick up anything that fell to the side (Leviticus 19:9-10). This was the life facing Naomi and Ruth. Poor, broken, and with little chance of making a better life for themselves, they continued on.

God works in mysterious ways. Somehow, Ruth found herself gleaning in the fields of Boaz, a kindly, older gentleman, well respected and wealthy. The relationship between Ruth and Boaz blossomed quickly. But Boaz, being a man who respected the Mosaic Law, understood

that his hands were tied in regard to Ruth. The law clearly stated that, with her widow status, she was required to make the first overture towards him.

As time progressed along, Naomi began to recall the Law and the one slim hope that was still available for her honorable daughter-in-law. The law of the kinsman-redeemer from Deuteronomy 25 was her only chance, and a long shot at best.

So, Naomi hatched a plan to launch her daughter-in-law into a world she never dreamed might be a possibility. It was the middle of the harvest season and she knew that Boaz would be spending the night at the threshing floor. Ruth was told to approach Boaz after dark, quietly, and make her submissive request according to the Law. She was to uncover his feet and lay down and when he noticed her, she was to ask him to cover her with his garment.

Everything fell into place exactly as planned. Ruth, following the letter of the law, made her request that Boaz exercise his responsibility as kinsman-redeemer and marry her. He gladly accepted the request and sent Ruth home to Naomi with the good news. He then began the process that fell to him to redeem her unto himself and make her his bride.

The parallels to salvation are striking. Let's walk through them together.

1. Ruth had no ability of her own to solve her problem of total destitution. It would require someone of means

and a willingness to redeem to solve the issue at hand. We, likewise, are corrupt in our sin and have no chance to contain or remedy our problem on our own. We need a Redeemer as well.

2. She recognized Boaz as the person who could remedy her problem. We must understand that Jesus is our only option as well.

3. Ruth humbly presented herself before her Kinsman-Redeemer. She could have confronted Boaz publicly, but she chose rather to approach him at night. Should he choose not to make a commitment to a Moabite, she would not bring disgrace on him in any way. We approach our Savior in humility as well, understanding that we are nothing compared to Him.

4. Boaz was not only able, but very willing to pay any cost necessary to perform his duty. Our God was ready, willing and able to pay the extreme price for our sin.

5. One small issue came to light when Boaz realized that there was a Kinsman-Redeemer closer than he that, by law, had first chance to redeem. This un-named person, the only un-named character in this entire story by the way, deferred on his responsibility and granted Boaz the right to redeem. This un-named person represents the Law. It could not save us from our sins. It was not able. We needed someone else—Jesus—to step in and do what was required by the law.

6. Ruth simply made her request known to Boaz. Everything else fell to him to accomplish. She could not do anything else but wait. Our salvation is a product of God and not of anything that we might attempt to accomplish.

Naomi asked a very poignant question of Ruth. “How did it go my daughter?” If I may ask the same question of you. “How did it go when you asked God to solve your problem with depravity and sin?” I would quite conservatively guess that Ruth responded to Naomi in joyful excitement and laughter, telling all about her adventure and the results that it would bring. Our joy is in our relationship with our Savior as well (Nehemiah 8:10).

One final thought. We find Ruth prominently displayed in the genealogy of Jesus (Matthew 1:5). Imagine, a cursed Moabite in the family line of Jesus! It is a testament to the ability of our God to forgive anyone of anything. All we need to do is ask.

1 Samuel 3:16

*but Eli called him and said, "Samuel, my son."
Samuel answered, "Here I am."*

As I have studied this verse, and the underlying story that surrounds it, I have come to the conclusion that we would do well to consider three distinct aspects.

First of all, judgment is often a difficult reality to accept. We see God work and we marvel at the good that He does for us and for others, but we cringe when righteous punishment is apportioned instead. Like a parent training up a child to understand right and wrong, God is ever at work in our lives correcting us as well (Proverbs 3:11-12). In this passage we see God's hand of chastisement fall heavily on a man who was held to a higher level of accountability than most. Eli was a priest of God, and as such, should have understood and reacted to sin when he clearly saw it practiced by his own children.

Eli's sons had turned their service to God into a scheme for profit and sex. And Eli did little to correct the situation. He saw their actions and talked to them about their sin, but he did nothing to stop them.

Those who lead God's people, who are charged with ministry and teaching, will be judged more strictly (James 3:1). In my lifetime I have seen the rise and tragic fall of many church "leaders" who began well, but failed miserably in their responsibility to maintain their actions and lives above reproach.

King David, known for great successes in life, also perpetrated tremendous blunders. But when confronted by God for his actions, he immediately humbled himself and admitted his deficiency and moral failing. That character trait earned him a title that should be envied by everyone—*"A man after God's own heart"* (1 Samuel 13:14).

Eli knew better but chose to overlook or ignore his son's blatant misjudgments. But God was not oblivious to their actions and relayed a message to Eli through a little boy named Samuel. It is quite apparent when reading the Bible, that God uses even the very young at times to announce or initiate His perfect plan. And so it was at this moment.

Secondly, do not forget Hannah, Samuel's mother. She fulfilled a tremendous pledge to God when she handed her son over to Eli (1 Samuel 1:28). The sins of Eli's sons were well known in the community. It would be naïve to think that Hannah was not aware of what Eli's sons were doing. What kind of mother would leave a young, impressionable child in a situation like that?

We live in an extremely litigious society, spawned by a growing lack of commitment to honor one's word. It would seem that the days of faithfully following through

with all personal promises are drawing to a close. Pledges are kept only when it is deemed as convenient, or advantageous to do so. An absolute moral obligation to follow through on a personal guarantee is more an exception than a general rule.

In the eleventh chapter of Hebrews God lists an assortment of individuals drawn from the history recorded in the Bible, recounting those that He considered heroes of faith. We remember Abel, Enoch, Noah, and the other big hitters of the Word. But when we come near the end of the list, we find Jephthah included as well. His story is less memorable, probably because it does not fit well into a children's Sunday school curriculum. Many are not even aware of the narrative found in Judges 10-12.

Jephthah became the leader and judge of Israel for a short time. He led well but at one key juncture in his life he made a strange and unique vow to God. He promised to sacrifice to God whatever came out of his house to meet him if God would give him victory over his enemies (Judges 11:30-31).

As Scripture recounts the events of that moment. God did indeed allow him to triumph over his foes and he promptly went home, and to his horror, he was met by his daughter, celebrating his heroic return.

There are those who would want to focus on and debate the morality regarding whether or not Jephthah would offer his own daughter as a sacrifice to God. That truth is secondary to the most pressing issue found in this story. Faced with a commitment that would be frightfully difficult

and disadvantageous to implement, Jephthah is to be admired for his conviction to maintain his honor, whatever that may have actually looked like in detail. In short, he absolutely kept his word.

Hannah had made a solemn promise to her God, and she kept her word. We dare not overlook her example of commitment. It should be our goal as well, to be an honorable people who's word stands as a testament to the world that we will keep our promises, no matter what.

Finally, one cannot leave this passage without mentioning the fact that Samuel is clearly identified as an unsaved little boy in verse 7. By the time we get to verse 21, Samuel had a change of heart, and had quite obviously come to know God in a very personal relationship. He was appointed by God as God's prophet—His chosen instrument to deliver His message directly to the people of Israel.

Samuel met God somewhere early on in his life. 1 Samuel 3:16 may have brought him quite near that point of recognition.

2 Samuel 3:16

Her husband, however, went with her, weeping behind her all the way to Bahurim. Then Abner said to him, "Go back home!" So he went back.

King David is a bit of an enigma. We understand that he was *"a man after God's own heart."* (1 Samuel 13:14). His humility before God was commendable. However, much of his personal life was a complete unmitigated disaster. Poor choices coupled with strenuous circumstances led to some absolutely despicable actions on his part. One could very aptly quantify David's abilities as a husband and father as a colossal train wreck.

During his early years serving in Saul's court, David found himself ever increasingly at odds with his king. Saul was bent on destroying his competition and schemed to rid the earth of the young man (1 Samuel 18:12). Upon hearing that his daughter Michal had expressed feelings for David, he decided to place her between himself and David, ever hoping for a chance to destroy him.

Interestingly, there is only one place in all of Scripture where the love of a woman towards a man is recorded. In 1 Samuel 18:20 it is stated quite clearly that Michal loved David. How deep or endearing those emotions may have

been is left to conjecture. Ironically, there is no reciprocation of those feelings by David registered in the text of the Bible. They were married however and soon after, Saul made the decision to murder David. Michal caught wind of the impending crime and, placed herself in great danger when she chose to help her husband escape her father's fury.

With David's sudden absence, Saul's response was utter disappointment and a decision to give Michal to another man, Paltiel, in marriage (1 Samuel 25:44). That act was probably an attempt to humiliate David and prevent his eventual return. Unfortunately, we are given no indication how Michal felt about this turn of events.

Upon Saul's death, David remembered Michal and made arrangements to retrieve her to himself, completely ignoring any marital encumbrance that might be in existence at the time. He quite simply took her away from her husband and forced her to come to live in his house as a wife once again.

This 3:16 text introduces us to a heart broken man weeping uncontrollably and trailing along behind his wife who had been forcibly removed from their home. We see in this story, a first-hand account of what the love of a man towards his wife should look like. It is a delicate, touching moment, that we rarely see displayed in Scriptural narrative. We learn to know a man with no fear of showing the emotional torment in his soul. And it ends with an unmerciful, abrupt confrontation and threat. Paltiel

recognized that he was outmatched and promptly was forced to give up all hope and retreat in sadness.

One can only imagine the probable mix of emotions that Michal might have felt, witnessing the actions of David, her former husband—who is now her husband once again. She had been forcibly ripped from her life with Paltiel, and with no say on her own behalf, was forced to live again with David as husband and wife. She watched as a weeping husband, who obviously loved her, was turned away and forced to go home. Fading into the sunset or disappearing over the distant horizon—he was gone forever. No one could experience that and feel nothing.

We feel comfortable holding King David up as an example of a man greatly used by God. But moments like this one in the life of David can make it difficult to embrace him fully. God forgives. Even the most despicable things done by David were forgiven completely by a loving God. How comforting to know that same Savior is dealing with our transgressions each day as well, even when our failures are catastrophic.

1 Kings 3:16

Now two prostitutes came to the king and stood before him.

Society then, as it does now, looked down upon those who earned their living by selling their bodies for pleasure. It is an old profession, but not a respected one. The rampant rise of HIV and STD's in our generation, stands as a testament to God's commands against sexual promiscuity. The entire chapter of Proverbs 7 deals with the thoughts and actions of an adulterous woman. We catch a glimpse of the thoughts, the emotions, and the personality of someone caught in the sin of adultery. Interestingly, we find her described not as a victim, but as a predator, stalking her prey and awaiting the chance to devour.

These two predators were granted an audience with the king to settle a dispute between themselves regarding the true relationship of a baby. They tell of a tragic death of one of their babies, and now there was a quarrel over who the surviving child actually belonged to. Solomon was tasked with discerning an equitable solution to the drama, and there was clearly no direct Bible verse that he could look at to form an opinion.

God brought four characters onto the stage in front of all of Israel. If we can lay aside the occupation of the mothers

for just one moment, let's try to look at each actor in front of us through the eyes of a loving God.

One woman had lost her son in an untimely, tragic death—she rolled over in her sleep and crushed or asphyxiated her own child! That kind of trauma must have run extremely deep, so deep in fact, that she stooped to kidnapping. She would probably be doomed to relive in her thoughts those pivotal moments over and over the remainder of her life.

The second woman had her beloved child stolen from her, abducted while she slept beside him! And she knew the perpetrator of the kidnapping. If there had been any kind of friendship there initially, it had disappeared. She was in the fight of her life to protect her son. The bond between mother and child is impenetrable.

The surviving child was doomed to be raised in the household of a woman of ill repute. Forever to be scandalized as a product of illicit relations with a random, unknown man. Even in our day we must admit that the progeny of a prostitute faces tremendous odds for any success in life. Our culture even has an official swear word in our vocabulary that references a child born to a mother who is not married.

Usually overlooked, is the child who died unexpectedly. Ironically, he may have been the real winner in this tragic tale. We believe the innocent, those who have not reached an age of accountability, are recalled to their Father's bosom (2 Samuel 12:23), where their eternity has been set since before the beginning of time. By God's grace, he was

spared the shame of his mother's occupation and has been celebrating in Heaven for centuries!

2 Kings 3:16

Thus saith the Lord, "Make this valley full of ditches."

The Northern Kingdom of Israel was in dire trouble. Jehoram was the ninth king in a long line of horrible leaders. He came from a family that was beyond dysfunctional. His father was Ahab and his mother, Jezebel. Those two characters are noted for the evil atrocities they brought upon their personal enemies. The Bible simply says that Jehoram wasn't quite as bad as his parents. That is hardly a compliment.

The politics of that day led Jehoram and Israel to go to war once again with their neighbors, the Moabites. Having convinced Judah, the southern kingdom of Israel, and Edom to join forces with him, the three kings and their armies set out to annihilate the people of Moab.

Their seven-day, round about march took them along a path that led through the desert. And they found themselves sorely unprepared and without water (II Kings 3:9). Realizing that disaster was imminent, they finally turned to God.

Enter Elisha.

God spoke to his people through prophets during this time. Elisha was God's chosen representative and a man to be feared and revered because of his relationship to an Almighty God. The three kings requested an audience with the prophet and asked him for his advice from God (II Kings 3:12).

A careful reading of the Bible brings an interesting concept to the forefront. Nearly every miracle that God ever performed and recorded in Scripture followed a set of steps entirely unique to itself. Elisha asked for a musician to come and provide "mood music" as he prepared to relay God's commands to the people gathered. I assume after a sufficient song or two, he gave God's words to the three kings, "Go and dig ditches."

It is interesting to note that nearly all of the hyper-faith, "miracle working" religious practitioners of our generation have a single tried and true method of displaying the "works of God". A careful observer will quickly and easily recognize the rote methods employed by these charlatans. Their repetitive methods stand in stark contrast to the accounts recorded in Scripture. Elisha told Naaman to dip himself in a river seven times, a widow to collect all of the large jars that she could find, he called a mother bear out of the woods to maul some arrogant youth, and he raised a boy from the dead by lying on top of him. None of those acts even slightly resemble the currently often deployed method of a slight push on the forehead, or a request for money.

Belief and faith are sometimes challenging. One can imagine that these armies were perplexed with the thought that they would now be required to dig ditches. There are times when God may give us a command that from our perspective may seem ridiculous or a waste of time. Time always shows God to be the wise one and we to be the fools.

Digging ditches would have been seen as a demeaning position in life. Hard physical work, dirty, demanding and tiring, with no rhyme or reason that made any sense. But to survive, they needed to obey a very simple command. When the ditches had been dug, the water miraculously came.

The challenge before us as well, is that we become followers of Christ that do not refuse to obey. We are told plainly to “*Trust in the Lord with all your heart.*” (Proverbs 3:5). That part we often can do reasonably well. It is the last half of that verse that may cause most of us to stumble at times. “*And lean not on your own understanding.*” Many of us find it difficult to follow along blindly. We are much more confident of our causes if we can understand all of the intricacies and minutia of God’s plans. Sometimes it is enough for us to simply “do”, even though we do not understand everything as completely as we might wish that we could. May we be willing to “dig the ditches” that God commands for us to have ready in our lives as well.

1 Chronicles 3:16

And the sons of Jehoiakim were Jeconiah his son, and Zedekiah, his son.

An adequate understanding of this passage requires a mention of King Josiah. We remember the boy who became king of Judah at eight years of age (II Chronicles 34:1) and went on to reform the country spectacularly by his 26th birthday (II Chronicles 34:8). He died a hero's death and was buried with honors in Jerusalem (II Chronicles 34:24-25). His Godly legacy was set in place solidly, plainly visible for his sons to follow. Tragically, they ignored his foundation and followed their own path.

The story then might become quite convoluted if multiple passages of Scripture are not consulted. Josiah had four sons, and the oldest, Jehoiakim, would normally have ascended the throne in place of the father. However, the people chose his younger brother, Jehoahaz (a.k.a. Shallum) in his place. Rabbinical literature adamantly proposes that Jehoiakim was so immoral and unethical that he was deemed unfit to be king. So Jehoahaz took the position of leadership at age 23 and the Bible, sadly, defines his short tenure of three months as “*evil in the sight of God.*” (II Kings 23:32).

After Jehoahaz was removed by the king of Egypt and carried into captivity (II Kings 23:34), Jehoiakim, at 25 years of age, pushed himself forward to fill the vacancy. Secular literature describes a man completely vacant of decency and moral guidelines. There he is described as a tyrant, living in incestuous relationships with his mother, daughter-in-law, and stepmother. He was known to murder men indiscriminately and take their wives and violate them and seize their property. It is of no surprise then to see God lash out at him through the prophet Jeremiah. In Jeremiah 22:18-19, God describes the moment of his death as “*He will have the burial of a donkey, dragged away and thrown outside the gates of Jerusalem.*”

One can only imagine what effects a scene like that might have on a young son. Enter, a very young man named Jeconiah. The Bible gives us the name of his mother as Nehushta (II Kings 24:8). Many years previous, when Moses led the Israelites from bondage in Egypt, they had quarreled with God and were punished with fiery, poisonous, deadly serpents. Their only chance at survival if bitten, was to look upon a bronze snake attached to a pole that had been built by Moses. They simply needed to look and live. (Numbers 21:4-8). The people of Israel kept that icon and 500 years later were found to be worshipping it. They called the idol “Nehushtan” (II Kings 18:4).

Pedigree does not determine destiny. But it can tremendously influence the life choices and direction in life for a son or daughter. Jeconiah, also known as Jehoiachin, chose poorly. His short-lived reign of 3 months and ten days was filled with enough evil to be called out by God

and condemned through the prophet Jeremiah (Jeremiah 22:24-28). Babylon, the prevailing world power, took him from his position to Babylon where he was imprisoned for 36 years. After Nebuchadnezzar's death, his son released Jeconiah from prison and gave him an honored seat at his own table (II Kings 25:27-30).

As Jeconiah was relieved of his duties as king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar saw fit to command his uncle, Zedekiah to fill his empty seat. Zedekiah would aptly be remembered as the last king of Judah before God took the nation into captivity in Babylon for seventy years. Zedekiah's eleven-year reign was turbulent and ended with a thirty month siege of Jerusalem. The Babylonians prevailed and during the final moments, Zedekiah, his army and his family and assorted other leaders attempted to escape the city. They were captured, however and Zedekiah was sentenced to prison (II Kings 25:4-7).

History is replete with heinous characters, capable of some of the most despicable torture and mistreatment. Zedekiah was the recipient of a particularly abhorrent gesture. Bound and shackled, he was forced to watch his sons gruesomely put to death right in front of him. And to add insult, his captors made sure that those murders would be the last thing that he ever saw, by gouging out his eyes and blinding him forever. He spent the remainder of his life in prison.

Jehoiakim and Zedekiah were technically brothers; both were sons of Josiah. They had, without doubt, witnessed firsthand the success of their father and all of his accomplishments. One is forced to ask the question, "How

can an apple fall so far from the tree?” We live in a world broken by sin. Our sin nature is capable of much. May we ever be careful to live according to the teachings of God’s Word.

II Chronicles 3:16

He made interwoven chains and put them on top of the pillars. He also made a hundred pomegranates and attached them to the chains.

Metallurgy in the world of the Bible is a fascinating subject. Our current educational system promotes the concept of evolution and proposes that man has been getting smarter and more technically advanced as time advances. The Bible describes something far different. The curse of sin that God delivered to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden was far reaching (Genesis 3:17-19). Through the Bible we find hints here and there that ancient mankind may well have been far more intelligent and ingenious than academia might want to admit. Even secular archeology has uncovered unexplainable artifacts.

In our technologically advanced world, we find the use of metal springs quite common. The various alloys used can differ greatly, but one barrier was not crossed until late in the 20th Century. Steel springs are measured and quantified by the number of deflections that they can absorb before they begin to falter and exhibit a decline in tension. Our best, for many years, were tested and evaluated by how many “millions” of deflections they could withstand.

The finest chariots of the ancient Egyptians were equipped with bronze springs. Nearly impervious to oxidation, they exhibited a quality beyond our understanding. Testing proved it necessary to quantify them by “billions” of deflections before fatigue became a factor. Modern man did not possess the technology to reproduce those bronze springs until very late in the 20th Century.

King Solomon, a man specially gifted by God with tremendous knowledge and wisdom (I Kings 4:29-34), built a monumental temple to God. The provisions for constructing the amazing edifice were amassed by King David. I Chronicles 29:2-5 mentions a line item of 3,000 talents of pure gold. That weight is roughly equivalent to 110 tons. At the current market price of today, the value of that gift is a staggering \$5 ½ billion. A rough accounting of all of the time and material used to build that incredible building described in Scripture tallies to nearly \$250 billion.

David’s design (I Chronicles 28:11-18) incorporated two huge metal pillars, freestanding on either side of the entrance to the Temple. Made of a copper alloy, most likely bronze, they would have been an imposing sight to see. Each stood twenty-seven feet tall with a seven and one half foot tall capital. Their circumference was measured at eighteen feet, which places their diameter at nearly six feet across. Jeremiah states that the walls of the castings were three to four inches thick (Jeremiah 52:20-23). Some quick calculations confirm that these two behemoths weighed in at approximately fifteen tons each.

II Chronicles 3:16 describes the intricacies that festooned each of those capitals. Pomegranates were a common fruit in that culture. Anyone with a basic knowledge of metallurgy will recognize the technical challenge in casting one hundred detailed bronze fruit, attaching those fruit to interwoven chains of bronze, attaching those chains to nearly thirty five foot tall bronze columns that weighed thirty thousand pounds each, and had been transported somehow nearly thirty five miles from where they were cast, to Jerusalem (II Chronicles 4:17). The logistics alone are staggering.

The artistry, the talent, the manhours, the technology, the devotion of God—all are found hiding between the lines of this simple passage. Pause for a moment and reflect upon your relationship to God. Would you be willing to put forth the kind of effort that these worshippers did those many years ago?

Nehemiah 3:16

Beyond him, Nehemiah son of Azbuk, ruler of a half-district of Beth Zur, made repairs up to a point opposite the tombs^[4] of David, as far as the artificial pool and the House of the Heroes.

Let's remove one possible point of confusion early in our discussion. The Nehemiah found in this verse is not the Nehemiah from which the book derives its name. They are two different people who happened to share the same name.

Much of the book of Nehemiah reads a bit like a boring engineer's report on a construction project. Many of the names are difficult to pronounce and we don't readily identify with the physical aspects of location or the scope of the activity defined in this narrative. The rebuilding of the wall, from our perspective, may seem like a trivial matter. It was, however, a key issue that needed attention. Jerusalem had been utterly destroyed by the Babylonian army (II Kings 25:8-21). It had laid waste for seventy years, in complete disrepair, until Nehemiah arrived to oversee the rebuilding of the wall surrounding Jerusalem.

The wall was more than simply a security issue. It gave the city definition and an identity once again. Its sheer size

stood as testament that Jerusalem was a formidable entity, worthy of respect, and was indeed something to be considered and not just ignored. With the leadership of Nehemiah, a plan was orchestrated to reconstruct the damaged walls surrounding Jerusalem. God approved and took note of all of it and recorded this footnote in history for us to see. With organization in place, the construction project began, and finished less than two months later.

A beautiful spiritual lesson can be found in the names of the gates of Jerusalem mentioned in the reconstruction summary. The plan of salvation and our ensuing Christian walk can be seen in detail as we take a tour of the walls of Jerusalem by way of a construction progress report.

The Sheep Gate. We begin at the Sheep Gate. The sacrificial animals were brought in through this gate into Jerusalem. Jesus was the Lamb of God. He was the Passover Lamb, the ultimate sacrifice offered once for all of time. There is a notation that the men of Jericho worked on the wall next to this gate. Jericho was a cursed city, a city of sin. Jesus carried our sin to the cross, bearing all of the sin of the world. This gate also reminds us that we are sheep, wandering our own way, lost. Jesus is the Great Shepherd, who came to search for and save those who are lost. It is fitting that our tour begins with the person of Jesus.

The Fish Gate. We would do well to recall the first command given by Jesus to new converts. He directed them to go and tell others what God had done for them. As Jesus called his disciples, He said that He would make

them fishers of men. In fact, He stated that even He had come to seek and to save that which was lost. Spreading the good news about the salvation available to all is one of the most important aspects of being a Christian. Unfortunately, it is also the most neglected by many. The Fish Gate reminds us that we have an obligation to tell others about the love of God.

The Jeshanah Gate. Translated into English, the name would become the Old Gate. Our world that we live in today is one that accentuates and strives for that which is new. Many want the newest this or that, and it is human nature to look toward possessions or cultural practices from that view. But the Bible encourages us to look back to the old ways. God is the same yesterday, today, and forever. He never changes and the Bible remains ever true. The human heart has not changed over the years. We need to look to that which has proven to be correct and valid in the past. We are fallen creatures with a sin nature, susceptible to degrading moral standards and ever increasing sinfulness. As I look back at my few years upon this earth, I can see a decline in the values of the society that I live in. Many of the old ways were better, and we need to grasp hold of, and embrace, those things worth keeping.

The Valley Gate. This gate reminds us that there will undoubtedly be times in our life when we will suffer deeply. Life is not a cake walk, and we can expect difficulties. King David understood the valleys well as he mentioned in the 23rd Psalm. For the Christian, the walk through the valley is not a lonely one. God has promised to be with us during the dark times in life, and it is a comfort to know that is

true. It is also during these challenging times that we have the potential to grow the most. Our joy is in the Lord, even in the valley.

The Dung Gate. In a world that used beasts of burden to accomplish many of the normal day to day aspects of life, there was a need to clean up after them. Refuse of that nature cannot remain in a city for long or health problems will arise. This gate was devoted to this very unglamorous but most necessary task. The honest individual will admit that we all have things in our lives that should not have residence there. We are called to live a righteous lifestyle as children of God. There will be times in our lives when some unmentionable things need to be cast out through the dung gate of our heart. Our spiritual health depends upon cleanliness.

The Fountain Gate. For the Christian, the joy associated with our salvation and walk with God is not to be bottled up within us. We are to share the love of God with the very dark world that we live in. Jesus said that the result of the Holy Spirit indwelling us is that He will be a fountain bubbling up through our lives. We should not be afraid to pour out our hearts into the lives of those around us.

The Water Gate. Note that no repairs were necessary on this gate. In the Bible, we see the analogy of Scripture with water. We are washed by the Word of God. We are cleansed by the Word. The Bible is not in need of repair, it does not need to be adjusted to become useful for our day. It is the one thing in life that we can be absolutely sure of. It is as relevant today as it was two thousand years ago, and will be

in another two thousand years. Unchanging and applicable in every situation, the Bible, as is water, is not only necessary for cleanliness, but life cannot go on without it. We need the Word of God in our lives. We cannot live well without it.

The Horse Gate. In days of warfare, the army traditionally marched out through this gate, led by those on horseback and chariots. Paul emphasizes in the New Testament that we are involved in a spiritual battle every day. Our warfare is ongoing and very real, and we cannot let down our guard for even a moment, as the enemy will take advantage of any weakness found in our hearts.

The East Gate. Each morning, as the sun rose above the horizon and the new day began, the East Gate was the first to be opened. The uncertainty associated with the darkness dissipated, and the excitement of daybreak took root. We look forward to a time when our Lord will return. The dark night of sin will be ended and a glorious new day will dawn. Jesus will enter through the East Gate, and a new day that will never end, will begin.

The Gate Miphkad. Visitors to Jerusalem were to enter through this gate. It was the gate of inspection and review. Travel visas, or other documents, were checked at this gate before the traveler was allowed to proceed. This was also the gate through which a returning army entered back into the city. King David would meet his troops there, and the crowds were present to cheer them on in celebration of a job well done. We will one day stand before Jesus in review, at the judgment seat of Christ. For the Christian, all that we

have done will be open for evaluation, and our rewards will be handed to us personally by our Savior. It is not a matter of salvation at this point. That issue was settled at the cross. This time of inspection is focused upon our actions as a child of God since the moment of our new birth.

The Sheep Gate. We end our tour at the Sheep Gate. Our lives should revolve around the person of Jesus Christ. It is because of Him that we live and have our being. He is the sum total of all that is important. He is the Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and the End.

And sandwiched in the middle of all of these construction details and wonderful spiritual pictures, is a simple, unassuming recounting of one man's part in a huge project. There are many lessons that one could draw from this passage. This Nehemiah was willing to work. Not all of those present were willing to get their hands dirty, and God mentioned that fact and recorded it in Scripture for all to see for all of eternity. It took much personal sacrifice, and was a dangerous commitment for anyone to take as well. It speaks of what a community that works together can accomplish. We would do well to consider our own involvement in God's work, whatever He has asked us to do.

And we can be assured that God will take note of our actions and accomplishments as well, as we work for Him.

Job 3:16

*Or why was I not hidden away in the ground like a stillborn child,
like an infant who never saw the light of day?*

Does an unborn child who dies before birth go to Heaven? If so, where do we find the Biblical precedent for this idea? The curse bestowed upon Eve in Genesis 3:16 paved the way for extreme sorrow from miscarriages, stillborn births, infant mortality, and childhood death. Unfortunately, God never addresses the theology of infant death directly, but there are hints throughout the Bible that speak quite closely to the subject. While not a proof text in the strictest sense, the first half of the third chapter of Job is a tremendous supporting argument for the belief that the innocent are with God in death.

Interestingly, some of the best supporting passages for this debate are found in the book of Revelation, a book that we would most normally associate with end time prophecy. In Revelation 3:5 it is written, *The one who is victorious will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out the name of that person from the book of life, but will acknowledge that name before my Father and his angels.* God is big enough to have planned in eternity past, the entire history of this planet. Every person, every circumstance, every event, is orchestrated by an Almighty God. Life begins in the womb at conception

(Psalm 22:10). God has written into the book of life the name of every person born into this world, or is yet to be born, as well as every person who might not have survived long enough to experience life.

This understanding would guarantee that the innocent before God are written in the book and carried to God upon their unfortunate demise. God desires all to come to a saving knowledge of Him. There is no better way to reinforce that concept than to write every name into the book, and only after a final refusal of the free gift of Salvation, would a name be blotted out.

Confirmation of this conclusion is presented in Psalm 69:28. David, as he enumerated the sins of those who were persecuting him, prayed, *May they be blotted out of the book of life and not be listed with the righteous*. It stands then that God has the ability to erase names from that same book if He so desires and deems it the righteous thing to do. Even Moses confronted God concerning this subject when he struggled with the Israelites in the desert. As he had been with God on Mt. Sinai, receiving the commandments, the people had been busy building a calf idol. Moses realized that God was ready to judge the people for their sin, and he cried out that God should delete his name from the book if only to save the rest of the community of Israel (Exodus 32:32). God's reply is quite interesting. In verse 33 He simply replies, *Whoever has sinned against me I will blot out of my book*.

A summation statement might go something like this. God decided before time began to write the name of every person who has come, or is yet to come, into this world

into His book of life, reflecting His desire that all of humanity spend eternity with Him one day. Only after a complete refusal of His gracious offer, would He ever delete their name from His list, condemning them to an eternity separated from Him in torture and darkness. And that once deleted or erased, that name could never be reentered onto the pages of the book.

In Second Samuel, the eleventh and twelfth chapter, we find the story of David's sin with Bathsheba and the child that was born of that illicit affair. God decreed that the child would die. David watched helplessly as his little son lie sick for the next seven days and finally succumbed to his ailments. David's response to those around him was direct and to the point. *I will go to him, but he will not return to me* (II Samuel 12:23) is a phrase on which we hang much of our belief concerning those who have not reached an age of accountability. David's sincere confidence that he would one day see his son again in Glory gives us hope and assurance as well, that the innocent in our own lives will be in Heaven and we will spend all of eternity together.

Proverbs 3:16

Long life is in her right hand, in her left hand are riches and honor.

Wisdom is an elusive commodity. We live in a world today that misconstrues knowledge as a substitute for wisdom. Computers and the internet give us easy access to vast amounts of information and knowledge. And as our technology increases, it is tempting to hold it up as the answer to all of life's challenges. King Solomon was granted his request for wisdom to govern God's people (I Kings 3:1-5). It is fitting that a man familiar with the advantages of obtaining and then using wisdom, would impart his understanding of its subtle nuances.

The third chapter of Proverbs is a notable description of wisdom. Solomon held it out as a precious character asset that everyone should seek to attain in their life. Wisdom would probably best be defined as having the ability to see life choices and decisions through God's eyes, to have the spiritual maturity to consider God and His commands first and foremost, and to pattern our lives after the greatest example—Jesus.

Proverbs 3:16 addresses three areas of our lives that are of great importance to most people living in this world today. It is part of our innate nature to have a desire to live a long,

healthy, life filled with joy and peace. Easy access to money is often seen as the vehicle that allows that process to unfold. Also, we would wish to be accepted by others and not ostracized for our actions or condition in life. In short, we would all desire respect from others.

As this verse addresses the very issues we are consistently concerned about, we are introduced to a unique element to achieve that success—wisdom. Knowledge and wisdom are often linked to a degree. It is helpful to have some of both. But they are, in actuality, quite different. Quite simply put, we can equate knowledge with “book learning”. We go to school to amass a coherent and useful amount of knowledge and understanding of the world around us. Wisdom is the ability to use well what we have, for God’s work and His glory.

History is replete with fables of waters that restore vitality and youth once again. Alexander the Great was said to have found a river of paradise. Many Europeans of the Middle Ages believed in a mythical king known as Prestor John, who’s kingdom had a fountain of youth and a river of gold. Ponce De Leon came to the New World in search of the fabled “Fountain of Youth”. And even today, our media is filled with myriads of cures and restorative aids. We simply need to purchase and become a believer, too. Mankind has an inner desire to “live long and prosper”, to quote a well know television character.

Proverbs 3:13 states that happiness is inexorably linked to wisdom. Hebrews 12:2 mentions that Jesus endured the cross *for the joy that was set before Him*. As we draw close to

God, we find our joy and happiness is to be found in Him (Psalm 16:11). We all are looking for happiness and contentment. The unsaved world is confused about where that satisfaction is to be found.

If we exhibit a deep-rooted desire to obtain Godly wisdom, and we should by the way (Proverbs 4:8), how do we succeed in our quest? *The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, Proverbs 9:10* tells us plainly. Our understanding of the absolute majesty of God is key. The closer we draw to God, the larger and more magnificent His power and glory should become to us. Fear of God is an absolute respect and reverence of who He is.

Reverential fear is only possible when our heart realizes how insignificant we are compared to an Almighty God. Humility stands as our litmus test (Proverbs 11:2). Understand, though, that God does not define humility as timidity or reservation.

During the Great Depression years, before breakfast cereal became a staple in the diet of nearly every American, there was a makeshift substitute. Old, dried out bread would be toasted crispy brown, buttered, laid in a shallow dish, and drizzled with milk. In seconds, the bread became a soppy mess. A popular cartoon from many years ago called “The Timid Soul” featured a weak, nervous character named “Caspar Milquetoast”. In my generation, “milquetoast” and a spineless, frightened, shrinking person became synonymous. That is not the kind of humility that God is looking for.

One of the best Biblical definitions of humility is “power under control”. Our daughter used to have a horse that was raised as a show horse before she became its owner. Everything in that horse’s life centered around its ability to perform in the ring on command. I watched my young daughter climb up in the saddle of a calm, patient horse. In mere moments he transformed himself into the show horse he was bred to be. His head would come up, nostrils flaring, his tail would arch, and he would begin prancing in excitement! And yet that little girl could control 1200 pounds of pure adrenaline with a mere word or touch. Humility. Power under control.

God has no intension of squelching our personalities when we serve Him. He created us with the character traits that we have. Many of the heroes of the Bible had strong personalities, and yet God used them greatly, after they allowed Him control of their lives. They obeyed.

True obedience is a product of wisdom (Deuteronomy 4:5-6). We are in no better place than when we are using our spiritual gifts serving our God. Setting our own personal wants and wishes aside may be difficult at first, but as time progresses, we can find, with a little practice, His desires become our desires.

God’s Word is powerful (Hebrews 4:12). We must see it as the sole source of our understanding of who God is. And when we read it, it will change our lives. Wisdom resides in Scripture (Psalm 19:7). Wisdom does not rain down from Heaven, nor does it appear on our doorstep packaged

neatly in a cardboard box. It is found in the pages of the Bible.

And finally, pray (James 1:5). Strangely, an Almighty Creator God desires that we petition Him for everything in our life. His plan is to have a relationship with us—for us to talk to Him and He to respond back. Man had that perfect relationship in the Garden of Eden, but it disappeared when Adam sinned. We have struggled with the concept ever since. Quite simply, if we want wisdom, all we need do is ask of Him, and He will give.

So, will possessing a great amount of wisdom guarantee a long life with lots of money and honor? No. But it will ensure that the days we have will be filled with joy. Riches and honor are not always counted in dollars. More often it can be defined by the quality and quantity of relationships with family and friends. *Blessed are those who find wisdom, those who gain understanding. Proverbs 3:13)*

Ecclesiastes 3:16

And I saw something else under the sun: In the place of judgment—wickedness was there, in the place of justice—wickedness was there.

Solomon began the book of Ecclesiastes with a commentary on the world around him that could be summed up with his words, “*everything is meaningless*” (Ecclesiastes 1:1b). He decried the wearisomeness of life and the vanity that he saw everywhere around him in the lives of the people that he led. We find the word *meaningless* used often throughout the beginning of this book. After introducing many different areas of life that he analyzed as flawed and failing, in the third chapter, he arrived at the issue of judgement and justice.

It is notable that every culture on earth has a system of justice, a method for determining guilt and administering punishment as necessary. Solomon, likewise, recognized that all mankind possesses a sin nature. We carry that flaw with us into everything that we endeavor to bring about. It touches and colors every achievement or failure, resulting in problems that must eventually be addressed and settled.

Our sin nature is a cruel taskmaster (John 8:34). We go through life, struggling to do our best, only to see failure and imperfection infect everything we put our effort into

(Romans 3:23). Perfection is an elusive goal that exists just beyond our reach. We dare not allow ourselves to be jaded to this concept (I John 1:8-10). Ignorance of a problem is never a solution.

The French theologian, John Calvin, defined the Christian experience into five essential tenets. I personally find it difficult to agree completely with much of his interpretation of Scripture, but he quite accurately characterized our immense problem with sin. Today we often refer to his thoughts using the anacronym TULIP. Here the “T” stands for “Total Depravity of Man”. This doctrine promotes the concept that all of us possess a sin nature that is so base and depraved, that, unchecked, every person is capable of even the most heinous of actions against man and against God (Micah 7:2-4). It is only His mercy and grace that keeps us from massive moral failure (Psalm 145:8-9).

Verse sixteen focuses our attention on the judicial system. Here in America, we have immense pride in what our founding fathers presented to us. The myriad of checks and balances between all areas of government works remarkably well. But where mankind inserts his efforts, sin tarnishes. An honest appraisal of our involvement requires an admission of moments of failure and travesty. Our legal system does not always work without error.

Solomon recognized and condemned justice then, and now, as fatally flawed. He pointed plainly to the fact that sin, even the smallest of sins, left unchecked and unaddressed, eventuates in wickedness. The depths of

which can be a terrifying place to explore. Our hearts are, indeed, desperately wicked and deceitful (Jeremiah 17:9).

We serve a God who is the ultimate Judge (Psalm 50:6). His attention and concern for justice runs consistently through Scripture (Hebrews 10:30). In verse seventeen, Solomon immediately segues into the fact that God will bring everyone into judgement one day. Passages in the Bible that reference the Millennial reign of Christ, point to a God who will rule the entire world in perfect justice. We will finally see first-hand what perfect judgement and justice actually looks like.

Judicial responsibility carries a certain amount of prestige and power that can easily be misappropriated and used for ill-gotten gain. Solomon recognized the problem in his day, and it has not disappeared today. Biblically, there exists a corporate responsibility among the followers of God to maintain a justice system that is above reproach and, above all, fair (Isaiah 1:17). Just how that is achieved is the challenge before us. If left unchallenged, our sin nature will always take us places that we would not have dreamed possible. May we be ever vigilant.

Isaiah 3:16

The LORD says, “The women of Zion are haughty, walking along with outstretched necks, flirting with their eyes, strutting along with swaying hips, with ornaments jingling on their ankles.”

Even a casual reading of the Old Testament leaves one with the understanding that the people of Israel were miserably inept at following God commands. Their short-lived attempts to follow God inevitably ended in tragic failure and eventual remorse. The truth that they never quite grasped was that God was their judge, jury, and executioner each time their disobedience rose to the surface.

God holds the men of a nation to a higher standard of accountability. He appointed them to shoulder the responsibility of leadership (I Corinthians 16:13). That is not to say that they are more important than the women or more adept in any way. This issue is not about which sex is more talented or gifted (Galatians 3:28). It is quite simply God’s choice, His sovereignty in action. The responsibility is real and consistently held in the Bible. And with greater responsibility comes greater accountability.

Women are not forbidden to be leaders. In the absence of suitable male leadership, God, at times, placed women in those empty positions (Judges 4-5). His sovereign preference is simply that the male is to lead the way, and suffer the consequences of the judgement of God if he fails.

This passage is unique from others in that it calls out a portion of the population of Israel that is rarely mentioned in judgement—the women.

God addresses the women of Jerusalem specifically. This passage is not a metaphor for life, or some kind of parable to be considered. Rather, it is a detailed description of the physical actions of a group of ladies that, by implication, are representative of the majority female population of the city, as well as the nation.

Isaiah first points to a serious character flaw called pride. He describes the women of Jerusalem as haughty. In the original language, the word describes someone that is arrogant, maybe even disdainful of others around them. To use a current colloquial phrase, they were very “high maintenance”.

Then, secondly, he continues to describe a subtle aspect of their personality and character that we might easily identify in our own culture. Our world seems to be in a downward spiral as it sexualizes nearly every aspect of society. We use promiscuity to market food, clothing, sports, automobiles—nearly everything is tainted by sex in one way or another. Our children are exposed to things on television, internet and print ads that a generation ago would have been unthinkable. We talk about the private parts of the body openly as if it should be everyday dinner table conversation.

God created sex (Genesis 5:2). It is a beautiful gift shared by a man and a woman in a marriage relationship. Used anywhere else, for any other purpose, it is wrong. The

people of Israel struggled with sex and promiscuity in their day as well. Often it was even tied to religion. Their worship rituals that they adopted from the people around them involved all types of sexual deviancy (Numbers 25:1-3). And the women of Jerusalem were caught up in the subtle nuances of their publicly displayed sexuality. Isaiah said it was to be found in the way they dressed, the way they flirted with their eyes, even in the way they walked down the street. They were anything but demure, proper ladies.

The impending judgement that was prophesied to befall them was thorough and complete. The words of Isaiah in the remaining verses of this chapter show God to be true to His character. He will not be mocked (Galatians 6:7). He hates sin and will punish severely those who promote iniquity and continue to do wrong (Leviticus 5:17).

Jeremiah 3:16

In those days, when your numbers have increased greatly in the land,” declares the LORD, “people will no longer say, ‘The ark of the covenant of the LORD.’ It will never enter their minds or be remembered; it will not be missed, nor will another one be made.

“Where is the Ark of the Covenant?”

Countless students of eschatology have asked that question. Hollywood gave its answer when “Raiders of the Lost Ark” was released into movie theaters years ago. A careful reading of Scripture brings to light that it disappeared from Biblical history near the time that Nebuchadnezzar brought his troops from Babylon and took Israel into captivity—along with all of the gold articles from the Temple.

The Bible registers little concern or accounting for any of the other sacred items misplaced or lost during that time period. Recall that the Ark was just one of several pieces of “furniture” from the Temple. No one seems as concerned about the final destination of the table of showbread, or the alter of incense, or the lampstand. Few seem troubled that several items that were once cataloged as being in the Ark, were already missing many years earlier (I Kings 8:9). It is interesting to wonder and imagine what might have happened to the Ark. Countless theories promote one thought or another. The Apocryphal book of

II Maccabees tells a tale of Jeremiah hiding all of the temple furnishings in a cave on Mt. Sinai and then camouflaging the entrance.

The focus of this passage, however, is upon something far bigger than the Ark. The simple words *in those days* takes us immediately to a time in the future called the Millennial Reign of Christ. Reading the book of Jeremiah is like hearing from God on a cloudy, dreary day. Jeremiah was a weeping, lamenting prophet of God tasked with delivering a scalding message of gloom and doom. But scattered through this book are bright spots when the sun peaks through the dense clouds and we see an amazing picture of the future of Israel. The Millennial Reign is that very bright spot.

Nearly everything we know about the one thousand year reign, is found in little snippets of information throughout the Old Testament. Sunlight seven times brighter than what we experience on the brightest days now (Isaiah 30:26), animals that have lost their fear and danger to man (Isaiah 11:6), life spans increasing to centuries instead of just decades (Isaiah 65:20), are just a few of the changes that the world will see when Jesus rules the world from a throne in Jerusalem.

The ecstasy of experiencing the perfect rule of Jesus for a thousand years will preclude every thought or symbol from antiquity. The world will not need the religious relics of the past to understand and experience God. We will have Him “in the flesh” right before our eyes. No longer will we need to live by faith. We will see and experience the magnificent, blinding glory of God.

The Ark, throughout the Bible, was a great example of a type, or picture, of Jesus Christ. The Ark was made of two substances, wood and gold. It foreshadowed the dual nature of Christ—100% man, 100% God. It contained the tablets of stone commonly referred to as The Ten Commandments. Jesus is the Word of God who came to fulfill the Word of God. He is our daily bread of life, referenced by the pot of manna stored in the chest. And He is also our High Priest representing us before God for all of eternity. The Ark contained the budded staff of Aaron.

The world will no longer need these pictures or foreshadowing. We will simply be able to look towards Jerusalem and know that the real person is right there and is doing all that He said He would. What an exciting time that will be.

Lamentations 3:16

He has broken my teeth with gravel; he has trampled me in the dust.

Lamentations was written by Jeremiah, the “weeping prophet” (Jeremiah 9:1), a man with the ability to identify emotionally with the people he ministered to. On display is extreme empathy that is unlike any of the other prophets that God gave to Israel. His message of impending judgement was replete with details of severity. Jeremiah saw Israel through God’s eyes, and was torn emotionally to know that death and absolute destruction was very, very close.

The emotion found in this book is beyond anything else in the Bible. We need more preachers of the Gospel who are genuinely moved by the message they preach. Many years ago, there was a gentleman who said that Dwight L. Moody was the only man who he thought had the right to preach about Hell. When asked why he would make a comment such as that, he replied, “Because he always preaches it with tears in his voice.” In Lamentations we see Jeremiah weeping over Jerusalem. Six centuries later, Jesus stood overlooking the same city, weeping over her impending destruction (Matthew 23:37).

Each chapter of Lamentations, in the Hebrew, forms an acrostic. There are twenty-two letters in the Hebrew alphabet, and each chapter has twenty-two verses that begin with each succeeding letter. Except chapter three. It has sixty-six verses, so there are groups of three verses that begin with each letter. Verse sixteen begins a new triplet of verses.

Babylonian troops would arrive soon to carry out God's judgement against Israel. Recall how deeply they had failed Him. They worshipped other gods and disregarded the one true God. Sexual promiscuity along with all kinds of sexual deviancy filled their daily lives (II Kings 17:7-17). A careful study of world history shows an interesting fact that we would do well to consider today. The final degradation that God tolerates in any society is that of child sacrifice. Worship of Moloch, Chemosh, and Ba'al led them to sacrifice their own children in the fire. Their tenure ended soon after they crossed that line (Jeremiah 19:5). Most abortions today are performed because the arrival of the child is not opportune. Our nation is sacrificing millions of children upon the altar of "inconvenience."

God decreed 70 years of captivity for His people. He chose that specific number for a reason. For 490 years, the people of Israel had worked the ground of the Promised Land, producing crops of all kinds. God's law, given through Moses, required a Sabbath rest for the land each seventh year. It was to lay fallow for that year, unworked and resting. Israel had failed to follow that guideline. God informed them that the land would get its seventy years of

rest—while they suffered their punishment in a land 800 miles away (II Chronicles 36:21).

From our perspective, we might wonder how God could punish with the severity chronicled in the book of Lamentations. Chapter three lists: broken bones, early ageing skin and muscle diseases, bitterness, poverty, hardship, chains, dragged and mangled, arrows, broken teeth, and trampled on the ground. Rather than astonishment at the harshness of the discipline, our attitude should be amazement that He allowed them to live. The wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23). That truth has never changed since before time began. Our curiosity and wonder must focus on the mystery of God's mercy and grace. In one word, His love.

God judged Israel for its horrendous sins. He decreed for them, 70 years of captivity in a heathen nation. 70 years of serving a godless people. 70 years of looking back on what might have been had they obeyed God. 70 years of being separated from their land and from their God. But, in His mercy, God sent them to Babylon.

Ancient historians describe a city-nation advanced beyond any other. Even God declared Babylon to be the premier world government, never to be equaled again (Daniel 2:37-38). The descriptions found in ancient texts describe a city fourteen miles square, surrounded by an unbroken wall 300 feet tall and 90 feet thick. Along the wall, at intervals, were towers that stretched five to six hundred feet in height. Inside the city walls were buildings that topped out at a

fantastic 800 feet in height. Many with indoor bronze pipe plumbing.

Up stream along the Euphrates River was a flood control dam that diverted a major portion of the river flow around the city. A controlled amount consistently flowed through the heart of the city, effectively dividing it in half. Draw bridges allowed access across the river during the day, and were pulled up at night. There may have even been subterranean tunnels under the river to access the other side of the city.

The Babylonians collected gold. Fabulous wealth filled the city. Nebuchadnezzar married a lady from Lebanon, a mountainous region known for its huge cedar trees. She grew homesick, so he built his bride a mountain garden, we know it as the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. God removed His people from their land and punished them severely for 70 years—but tempered that punishment by sending them to the richest, most technologically advanced place on earth in that day—Babylon.

Ezekiel 3:16

At the end of seven days the word of the LORD came to me.

The glory of God is beyond human description. Any attempt to read the first chapter of Ezekiel and picture the scene he described will leave even the most imaginative person in awe. Creatures with intersecting wheels and four faces and six wings—it is beyond anything anyone but Ezekiel has ever seen.

Ezekiel was called by God to minister to His people during their captivity in Babylon. He was a priest with no temple to work in and no sacrifices to offer. So, he did whatever he could for his God. It was during those darkest days that we find him whisked away to Tel Aviv near the Kebar River to meet with the exiled Israelites there. Upon arrival, Ezekiel sat among them for seven days and waited for God to speak to him.

In our culture of immediate gratification, we might overlook a verse like this one. Who has time to wait for seven whole days doing nothing? In the book of Psalms alone, God tells us more than twenty-five times that we are to *wait on Him*. Patience is a virtue, to be sure, but there is far more at stake when we wait, than just learning patience.

Isaiah 40:31 speaks of waiting. *But they that wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint.* The Hebrew word for “wait” in this passage has a nautical background. The root of the word is a rope making term. It speaks of twisting or entwining several things together. Rope gets its strength from the twisting process. The delicate, easily torn fibers are blended together to make them incredibly stronger than before. How much stronger might we be if we “waited” upon God, entwining our little bit with His greatness?

Ezekiel waited. He waited and waited and waited—seven long days. At the end of those seven days, God showed up. We must understand and trust that God will always be there. He does not work on our timetable, but His. It takes a confident man to just sit and wait. Our natural tendency is to step up and at least do something. God’s plans take time, sometimes centuries, to complete. We must trust Him enough to be able to wait for Him, no matter how long it might take.

Job had three friends who, when they heard of the troubles that he was experiencing, came to visit him in his time of trial. The Bible says that when they saw him, they were so shocked that they sat around him for seven days, saying nothing (Job 2:11-13). Often times we think poorly of these men for the words of misunderstanding that they reiterated to Job as their visit to him continued. But you have to admire that fact that they were willing to set aside a week of their busy schedules to sit next to him and say nothing. I then ask myself, is there anyone in my life that

would do that for me? Would I be willing sit for a week with one of my friends?

But why should we wait upon God?

Because He measures all the waters of the earth in the palm of His hands, He marked off the heavens and collects every particle of dust on the earth and puts them into a basket (Isaiah 40:12) He knows the exact weight of all of the mountains, islands and hills (Isaiah 40:12). He causes earthly rulers to wither with just the touch of His breath (Isaiah 40:24). He brings out the stars each night calling them each by name (Isaiah 40:26).

That is the God upon whom we must wait. We wait upon Him because He is God and we are not. We are helpless without Him. When we begin to understand that simple truth, waiting, no matter how long that may take, is the only thing we can do.

Daniel 3:16

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to him, “King Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter.

Note that these three men standing before Nebuchadnezzar do not address him with the “O king, live forever” phrase that would have been the proper way to speak to a man who saw himself as the ruler of the entire world. They have no interest in stroking his ego or placating his temperament. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego understood why they were being held in contempt, but they were also adamantly convinced that nothing would change their actions.

Two verses previous to this, the Bible stipulates that King Nebuchadnezzar was filled with rage and fury. They were looking into the eyes of a man with a tremendously fiery disposition. The massive mood swings in the king’s personality speaks of a probable mental disorder. They were dealing with an angry, irrational human monster.

They stood in judgement before a king who had built a hideous gold statue and commanded that everyone bow in worship in its presence. The Bible gives a description of the idol as being in the image of a man, roughly 90 feet tall

and 9 feet wide. Stop for just a moment and consider those dimensions. If I were sculpted by the same craftsman, my approximately foot and a half thickness would translate to a fifteen-foot tall, very, very skinny, giant.

This monument to man was drastically disproportional. Man too often does not see himself in the same way that God does. We were made in the image of God. When we drift from Him, we attempt to redefine our proportions, our abilities, and our goodness. We begin to judge ourselves by our own standards instead of God's Word and we end up creating a hideous looking creature that has lost most of its resemblance to God.

These three Hebrew men stood before the most powerful man in the world and told him that they would stand true to their beliefs and would not even attempt to argue their case before him. Quite frankly, they didn't care what the king thought. They were confident in their God, and chose to stand their ground, no matter the consequence. Oh, that we had that kind of faith and trust in God each day!

And understand that they did not have any guarantees that they would survive any of this. Their choice was based solely upon their understanding of God, their relationship to be more specific. They were willing to die that day rather than disappoint their God.

That day they were miraculously saved from destruction. The outcome of this story is more of an exception than the rule in real life. The Bible is filled with stories of people who stood their ground for God...and then were brutally

mistreated or even murdered. The challenge for us is to stand firm in our faith, no matter what the consequences might be.

Joel 3:16

The LORD will roar from Zion and thunder from Jerusalem; the earth and the heavens will tremble. But the LORD will be a refuge for his people, a stronghold for the people of Israel.

Much of the tiny book of Joel talks of the end of world history. There is a time in the future, after God has caught up the church to Himself, that those who remain must suffer the wrath of God in judgement (Hebrews 10:31). It will be a time unmatched in the history of the world (Matthew 24:21). Terrible punishment awaits those who have failed to commit their lives to Christ (Nahum 1:2).

We live in a world that would prefer to view God as loving and kind. What loving God would send someone to Hell? He is loving and kind, but He is also the judge of this world (Psalm 75:7). He hates sin, and will judge it firmly and finally someday. That fact makes some uncomfortable.

Joel warns of the impending doom that awaits those who turn their backs on God. The third chapter is largely focused on a moment known commonly in eschatology as the Battle of Armageddon. There is coming a day when God will gather the armies of the world for one final war, and the death and destruction of that battle is almost unfathomable. Revelation 9:16 talks of a numberless

horde, some translations say 200 million men. Massive numbers of people will die as God pours out His righteous wrath upon the earth.

This 3:16 demonstrates a sharply defined contrast. The judgement of God will be unimaginably frightening. Everything that has been known to be stable and a solid foundation, will tremble at His presence. But...God will treat His people remarkably differently. In His sovereignty He chose the little nation of Israel. They are the apple of his eye, and even though they have failed Him time and again, His interest and focus on them never changes (Zechariah 2:8).

Paul mentions that relationship when he points to the fact that Israel's failure and turning from God paved the way for our salvation. Imagine what their acceptance of God will mean for the entire world (Romans 11:12).

The leaders of this world would do well to look at world events with a Bible always on the table. God will never forget Israel—ever (Isaiah 44:1-28).

Nahum 3:16

You have increased the number of your merchants till they are more numerous than the stars in the sky, but like locusts they strip the land and then fly away.

Few nations have descended into the darkness of indecency and violence as deeply as did the Assyrians. Approximately a century and a half before Nahum, a man named Jonah visited their capital city, Nineveh, and explained to the population that God would judge them severely for their misdeeds (Jonah 3:4). And believe me, they had done wrong!

The Assyrians were a ruthless people. History records a nation that would go conquering across the countryside at will. They would move through an area so quickly that they did not take time to stop and plunder the cities that they would capture. Essentially, their methods involved the cold-blooded murder of every man, woman and child in a city. They would then typically decapitate all of the bodies and stack the heads of their victims in a large pile at the city gate. It was their “calling card” that warned everyone else to stay away from the city, it belonged to the Assyrians. And they would fiercely fight anyone who would try to expropriate anything from them.

We may find it difficult to believe, but God loved these heartless people and wanted to make sure they were aware of His offer of salvation. Enter, the prophet Jonah. It is no wonder Jonah did not want to travel 800 miles to go to Nineveh and tell them about the love of God (Jonah 4:1-3). He was probably very much aware of their reputation and would have rather seen the wrath of God fall upon them in just judgment. But he reluctantly went, and the result was the largest revival recorded in the Bible. It seems that nearly the entire city, 120,000 people, repented of their ways, and came to know the Lord (Jonah 3:5). We may see quite a number from Nineveh in Heaven someday. The revival was incredible, but it did not continue through the generations that followed. Sadly, a century and a half later, they had turned their backs on God and plunged back into their heinous behaviors.

The Word of God holds that a people who have heard the truth and turned from it will be punished more severely than those who have not heard and are living in ignorance of God (Luke 12:47-48). The Assyrians once had a firm grip on who God is, but let go of that foundation to pursue wealth. And that is what God is addressing through Nahum in verse sixteen.

Nahum's message to the Assyrians was one of absolute impending doom. God had given them mercy and grace once before and they shunned the privilege. Now they would be judged in righteous wrath for their errors. It is fascinating that God pauses to address their merchandising and finances. He warns them that their quest for money and profit would be a key element in their downfall. One

cannot ignore the emphasis our culture puts upon the pursuit of wealth in our own country. We who were once the greatest country on the face of the earth are now trillions of dollars in debt, and slipping very quickly into the depths of godless behaviors.

In Nahum 1:12 God addresses the people of Nineveh. *Thus saith the LORD; Though they be quiet, and likewise many, yet thus shall they be cut down, when he shall pass through. Though I have afflicted thee, I will afflict thee no more.* This verse a remarkable reminder to the Assyrians that we did not understand until relatively recent archeological excavations turned up a stone tablet with a key inscription. The words *quiet and likewise many* quite honestly, did not make much sense to translators over the many years. But they faithfully carried the words on with accuracy and attention to detail.

We may struggle with the phrasing, but the people of Nineveh understood it perfectly. We have learned through archeology that their system of laws had certain concepts that were the basis for much of their legal system. Our system has that in common. In our legal realm, we see the phrase, “innocent until proven guilty” and understand the reference very well. “Quiet and likewise many” was a basic notion that guided their judicial system. It referred to the idea that there was a tremendous amount of corporate responsibility in their culture. The actions of few affect the lives of many, and so the many had the responsibility to bring the few troublemakers into line. Because, in their world, punishment was to be meted out to all, not just those guilty of committing a crime. Everyone associated with the crime would pay equally, the perpetrator, the bystander

who might have been able stop it as well as the family who raised the individual to believe that he could do wrong and get away with it. Corporate responsibility was paramount in their legal system.

Regardless of how we may feel about the validity of the legal premise, we need to recognize that God was talking to them in language that they would understand very clearly. They, as a nation, would suffer for what they, as a nation, had allowed to happen. God would hold them corporately responsible.

God talks to us just as plainly, if we will only listen. Punishment is looming for those who disobey His commands. He may indeed be slow to anger, but eventually, if the line is crossed, judgment falls on the guilty.

Habakkuk 3:16

*I heard and my heart pounded, my lips quivered at the sound; decay
crept into my bones, and my legs trembled. Yet I will wait
patiently for the day of calamity to come on the nation invading us.*

We find at the very end of this book, that this entire book is meant to be a song. Chapter three should be seen as a personal prayer of Habakkuk to God. It is his intimate response to the message that God has commanded that he relay to the people of Israel. A careful study of the prophecy of Habakkuk reveals that he was a man of many questions. He looked at the things happening around him and asked God about His seemingly indifferent attitude. Why would a just, righteous God allow such things to continue unchecked?

Habakkuk saw the godless behavior of the vile people of Israel, and asked why a righteous God would not personally deal with their iniquity and exact punishment upon them. He wanted to see justice in his own time. God, however, informed him that judgement would come in the form of the Babylonians, a brutal, godless nation—far worse than the people of God had ever been. Yet God was going to raise them up to defeat His own cherished people. God

continues then to explain that the Babylonians will suffer punishment also for their sins.

God has answered Habakkuk's questions sufficiently to cause him to burst forth in praise to God. He talks of God's splendor and righteous wrath and judgement. By the time he gets to verse sixteen, we see an interesting occurrence. Upon hearing all that God was planning to do, Habakkuk described a very physical reaction to God's decrees. His heart was racing, his lips and legs quivered and shook, and he could hardly stand for the fear that he experienced. I must ask myself a very poignant question. When was the last time I had a visceral reaction to God's Word?

Throughout Scripture, we read of the many men of God who felt tremendous emotional trauma as they experienced the failures of the people of God. When have I ever cried out at the shame and dishonor of the sin of my nation? When have I ever fallen on my face before God and pleaded for the forgiveness of someone's else's sin? Has the heinousness of my own sin ever brought me to tears before a holy God? I will admit that too often I am jaded to the concept of such an emotional display.

Habakkuk declared that he was prepared to wait patiently for God's plan of judgment to play out on God's timetable. He would watch his own people fall to Babylon, and trust God to fulfil His promise to bring Babylon to its knees at the proper time as well.

Zephaniah 3:16

On that day they will say to Jerusalem, ‘Do not fear, Zion: do not let your hands hang limp.

Zephaniah delivered a difficult message to the people of Israel. He brought warning of impending doom to God’s chosen people, as well as all of the surrounding nations. His pronouncement of coming justice spelled out in detail what His judgement would look like. God was ready to punish His children as a loving Father (Revelation 3:19).

Throughout this book, Zephaniah, at key moments, used the phrase *on that day*. Those occasions immediately transport our thoughts from the historical past into the coming future. Though experiencing punishment now, there will come a day when all will be made new, and absolute peace will become the norm. A perfect relationship between God and His people will be reestablished once again (Jeremiah 23:3-8).

As the book ends, Zephaniah’s forecast of clouds of doom break forth into the bright sunshine of the glory of God and His beautiful, complete restoration of the scattered remnant of Israel. When Jesus returns and establishes His permanent dwelling with man, Israel will be placed in a position of honor and respect. No more will the nations

look down on her in contempt and loathing (Isaiah 49:23). She will lead and the world will watch in wonder.

Verse sixteen continues the praise to God beginning with the phrase *on that day*, affirming that the descriptions immediately following are for a day in the future. Jerusalem will no longer have any reason to live in fear. God will be her personal protector in perpetuity (Isaiah 49:11). The mystery of exactly why God chose to show a meager group of people such extreme favor still stands today (Deuteronomy 14:2). It speaks of His love, it demonstrates His ability to orchestrate the events of this world, and it is a visual reminder that He is Sovereign. His reasoning and resulting actions are His prerogative and right. His thoughts are so far above ours that He has no responsibility to explain them to us, but in His love, He often does (Isaiah 55:8-9).

Zion is a name that refers here to Jerusalem. In the original Hebrew, the root of the word speaks of a barren, arid landscape. A conspicuous desert. But by adding a key suffix to the end of the word, it's definition augments to that of a commanding landmark, a guidepost, something that a traveler might look to for guidance and direction. How appropriate. In His sovereignty, God chose an insignificant group of people that He named Israel, and will one day once again set them high on a hill as an example for the world to look upon in wonder and amazement at what God has done.

Jerusalem, *do not let your hands hang limp*, do not give up or just stand there and do nothing. Remember who you are

and, more importantly, who's you are (Psalm 100:3). That is good advice for any Christian as well today. Verse seventeen continues building on the idea that God is near, and takes great delight in His own. When all accounts are settled and sin has been permanently eradicated from our vocabulary, God's perfect delight in His chosen ones will cause Him to rejoice and sing.

God sings? Pause for just a moment and consider the implications of that little comment. We have seen what the spoken Word of God can do. In Genesis 1, He spoke and the universe, in all of its vast dimensions and absolute beauty, appeared. Power and majesty hardly seem like adequate words to define that moment. I find myself contemplating how beautiful and incredible His singing voice must be. We understand what His spoken voice can do. How exciting it will be to hear His song and witness and experience the results. We can only imagine—for now.

Malachi 3:16

Then those who feared the LORD talked with each other, and the LORD listened and heard. A scroll of remembrance was written in his presence concerning those who feared the LORD and honored his name.

In context, this verse buttresses the fact that God has always had a faithful remnant of people who are His true followers (I Kings 19:18). That is an important fact to remember as we go through life. Recall from the passage in I Kings how Elisha had just experienced an incredible miracle on the mountain top at Carmel. But he bowed to the pull of his emotions and ran into the desert in abject fear. It was there that God reminded him that he was not alone. *Yet I reserve seven thousand in Israel—all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and whose mouths have not kissed him I Kings 19:18.)* God always has a faithful remnant that stay close to Him and continue on.

Overall, in Malachi's day, circumstances looked bleak for those who would follow God. He was the last of the prophets of God until John the Baptist came on the scene 400 years later in Matthew. The followers of God found support when they came together. It has always been God's plan that our relationship with Him would be inclusive of relationships with others. We cannot function properly

alone. In the first chapter of Genesis, God created the entire universe during that first week, and when He looked at His accomplishment at the end of each day, He said “*It is good.*”

That is, until Genesis 2. In verse 18 we read “*The LORD said, ‘It is **not good** (emphasis mine) for man to be alone.*” Mankind was created as a social being. We need each other. We have a deep-seated desire to be with, and interact with, others. When even normal people withdraw from social contact, they soon begin to exhibit odd and sometimes bizarre behaviors.

Many years ago, a business tycoon by the name of Howard Hughes rose to fame. His wealth and acclaim led to eccentricity and reclusiveness in his latter years. The wealthiest man in the world at that time, died of complications resulting from drug abuse. His six-foot-four frame carried barely ninety pounds of weight, had very long hair, and long fingernails and toenails. Living alone, separated from almost all human contact, destroyed his life. When he died in 1976, he left behind a \$1.5 billion fortune.

Today, the church fills an empty space in our lives. We can come together as believers and experience corporate worship. And God will be there. Where two or more are gathered in His name, He is there (Matthew 18:20). Assembling together allows us the opportunity to exhort one another, to challenge each other to continue in the faith, to pray for one another (Hebrews 10:25). Our Lord is intensely interested in our wellbeing. He will be there and will listen to our joys and sorrows.

The scroll mentioned in this verse is most likely an allegorical tool. Although I would not be surprised to see actual scrolls or books in Heaven. God has the ability to recall absolutely everything. He has no need of records of any kind. Anything that might be written in Heaven would be for our benefit, and not God's necessity.

The ancient Babylonians, Medes and Persians kept a running record of their kingdom's histories and accomplishments. This recording was written down each day in the presence of the king to ensure accuracy and attention to detail. Each book was then filed away for safekeeping. The insinuation of the allegory is that God knows who is righteous and just, and will reward each person accordingly.

Interestingly, the last word of the Old Testament in the original Hebrew text is translated into English best as "curse". In context, God is warning everyone who reads the closing words of Malachi that there is a coming Savior, a promised deliverer that they dare not miss. If they fail to recognize the Messiah, and ignore His coming, and reject His presence, the resulting curse of God will be final and complete. A warning without equal!

The Old Testament begins with a subtle reference to the person of Jesus (Genesis 1:1), and ends with a warning not to miss the Messiah and the redemption plan of God (Malachi 3:18). Jesus Christ must be the focus of our lives. I trust that as you continue in your walk with God, your fascination with the Savior never ends, and that the reading

and study of the Word of God becomes an ever increasing part of your life.

Matthew 3:16

As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him.

Coronation ceremonies for earthly kings would normally have much more pomp and circumstance than the moment recorded here in Matthew. All four Gospels tell this story, each containing a detail or two unique to the writer's perspective of the event. Just prior to this, verse thirteen of Matthew chapter three says that "*Jesus arrived*". In the Greek, that word is *paraginomai*, and could be correctly translated as "to make a public appearance". This moment was Jesus' first step into the public eye. The relative obscurity of His last 30 years in Nazareth would soon be only a memory as He was announced and declared by John to be the Messiah.

Gathering all of the other Gospel accounts together, we are left with the assumption that there were most likely quite a number of people in attendance that day. John's unique physical presence, along with his message and delivery, drew huge crowds (Mark 1:5). The people recognized him to be a prophet of God and were touched by the fact that God had essentially been silent for 400 years. The last

prophet that had spoken with this kind of clarity and fervor was Malachi, four centuries past.

John's message was one of repentance. He simply pointed at the sin in the culture and personal lives of the people and reminded everyone that a righteous God demanded a change of heart. And people were drawn to this "Hell fire and brimstone" type of message (Matthew 3:7-10). Truth is always a refreshing thing to hear, even when it might step on our toes a bit.

The early church struggled with understanding this seminal moment in the life of their Christ. The issue at hand was the seemingly incongruent idea of a sinless Savior being baptized by a man who clearly said that he was baptizing people as a symbol of their turn from sin. Why would Jesus need to be baptized? And there were those, unfortunately, who ran with the idea that Jesus must have needed somehow to confess and repent of wrongdoing. Nothing could have been further from the truth.

As we read the narrative, John protested profusely at the thought of baptizing Jesus. He insisted that Jesus should baptize him instead. John was well aware that the Messiah would be the sinless Lamb of God, perfect in every way. This made no sense to him whatever, but Jesus confirmed that it must happen.

There was no question that John understood that his job was to identify and present the Messiah to the world. This baptism would not be in recognition of sin, but in

recognition of who Jesus actually is. One could almost call it a coronation of sorts.

The word “baptize” is a transliteration of the Greek word “baptizo”. It quite literally means “to immerse or sink”. A ship lost at sea was “baptizo”. The 1611 translators realized that King James had only been sprinkled and not immersed at his baptism, so they chose to transliterate the word rather than actually translate it and cause turmoil in the Anglican Church of England.

Jesus was immersed, and as He came up out of the water, Luke adds that Jesus was praying (Luke 3:21). He was in communion with the Father the entire time. The Bible then says that the heavens opened.

Mark chose a verb that occurs only one other time in the New Testament, where it is used to describe the veil of the temple ripped from top to bottom at Jesus’ crucifixion. He records that the heavens were “ripped” open. It was a dramatic event as the sky was suddenly torn apart in front of all those listening and watching. It is no coincidence that in Isaiah 64:1, after many chapters of describing the coming of the Messiah, the prophet cried out, *“Oh, that you would rip open the heavens and come down.”*

We are left to believe that all of those in attendance that day witnessed the entire scenario, probably with eyes wide as the Holy Spirit came down and alighted upon Jesus very gently, followed by a voice from heaven calling out the pleasure of God. This moment was dramatic and

memorable. No doubt talked about in the following days, weeks, months, and years to follow.

Fast forward now to the end of His ministry. Just prior to His crucifixion, Jesus walked into the temple and cleared out those who are buying and selling there (Matthew 21:12-13). This act infuriated the religious leaders of the day. The following morning, as He was entering the temple courts once again, He was stopped by the chief priests and elders of Israel and asked to validate His authority (Matthew 21:23).

Jesus' reply was fascinating as He pointed them right back to John the Baptist and questioned them as to where John's authority had come from. The underlying insinuation is that the authority of Jesus was officially affirmed that day when John baptized Jesus in the Jordan. The Spirit anointed Him, the Father verbally confirmed Him, and Jesus proceeded in full authority to act, forgive sins, heal the sick, raise the dead, remove demons, and determine truth and destiny.

Mark 3:16

These are the twelve he appointed: Simon (to whom he gave the name Peter)

Jesus, near the beginning of His ministry, chose twelve men to draw close to Himself and teach in an extraordinary way. The greatest teacher the world has ever known, poured His life into those twelve individuals and powerfully affected their lives. That effort was dramatically multiplied as the early church began spreading the news of the gospel—led by these very men. The question might arise, “Why only twelve? Why not a hundred or a thousand?” The answer lies in the reality that even the strongest Christian alive today would struggle to make a profound difference in that many lives. We would do well to follow the example of The Master and not necessarily look for massive numbers, but choose carefully, and invest our limited time in a smaller segment of our circle of acquaintances. Quality trumps quantity nearly every time in the effort of affecting a genuine change in the lives of people.

Peter was the first disciple to be called by the Savior. Jesus found him busily earning a living at his chosen occupation—that of a fisherman on the Sea of Galilee. A stereotypical man in that profession would probably have a hot temper and a vulgar tongue. Braving the open water

each day and night, working never ending hours, bearing the heat of summer and the cold of winter, dealing with the fish marketers, he was uneducated, rough, tough, gruff, and very physical. A self-made survivor of life. And probably well paid. James and John, two other disciples called at nearly the same time, left their father with the boat, the nets, and the “*hired men*”.

Heart transformations of this caliber and depth are rare. The impact of Jesus’ teachings and actions upon this man’s life are astonishing. Luke includes an interesting interaction between Christ and Peter upon their initial meeting. His name was still Simon at the time, and he was cleaning his nets on the shore of the lake when Jesus walked into view, teaching a large group of people who had come out to see Him. The crowd pressed in around Jesus, so He asked to get into Simon’s boat, have him push out into the water a short distance and then Jesus could teach from that vantage point.

After finishing His talk, He told Simon to go out into deeper water and let down his nets and fish. Simon protested just a bit because the fishing that night had been fruitless, but he finally consented.

A miracle catch, broken nets, two boats filled to the brim with squirming, flopping fish pulled to the shore...and Simon’s reaction was to fall on his knees before Jesus and exclaim, “*Go away from me LORD, I am a sinful man!*” (Luke 5:8). In my mind I see a burly “man’s man” completely broken in the shame of who he is and the recognition of who Jesus is.

With Jesus' assurance that they would now fish for men (Luke 5:10), they left two boats filled to the brim with fish and followed Christ. Peter would make mistakes during the next three years, but Jesus showed him love and compassion each time. It can be a comfort to each of us today to know that He will work with us similarly.

Spiritual maturity is directly linked to being in the presence of Christ. Today, it must occur with Bible study and prayer. In Peter's case, it was first-hand exposure that brought him to the point of being a leader in the early church. It should not be seen as coincidence that at their first meeting, Jesus told Peter to "*Follow me.*" (Matthew 4:19). Just prior to the ascension, Jesus pulled Peter aside and again told him to "*Follow me.*" (John 21:19). Remember that it was Peter who was the first of the disciples to declare that Jesus was the Messiah (Mark 8:29). And as the church began to spread throughout the world, it was Peter who contested with the Jews that the Gospel was for Gentiles as well (Acts 11:17).

Luke 3:16

John answered them all, “I baptize you with water. But one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

Public speaking is an art to be mastered. A proficient speaker capable of holding an audience’s attention and engaging them is a somewhat rare commodity. In our English language we often describe an audience with the words “they paid attention.” Attention is “paid” because in our culture, as in every other culture of the world, it is a valuable currency. Consideration and thought is the goal of anyone engaged in attempting to persuade another of their beliefs.

Businesses and speech coaches have adopted a general set of guidelines for a prospective speaker to follow to ensure that their communication skills are at a premium level. An analysis of John’s presentation recorded for us in Luke 3, from the view of a contemporary educational curriculum, reveals why he was so successful at attracting such large crowds and keeping their attention.

1. **Start with the unexpected**—Picture in your mind as John stepped up to speak and screamed at the audience gathered there, “*You brood of vipers...*”

2. **Make it about them**—He continues yelling and pointing his fingers directly in their faces as he says, “*Who warned you to flee the coming wrath?*”

3. **Arouse emotion**—*I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children...*(Matthew 3:9).

4. **Use a prop or analogy**—“*Produce fruit in keeping with repentance...*”

5. **Keep it moving**—“*And do not begin to say to yourselves...*”

6. **Get to the point**—“*Every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down...*”

7. **Keep it interactive**—The people then began asking sincere questions of John, “*What should we do then?...?*”

8. **Keep it short**—(I have read this passage and it takes me exactly 45 seconds.)

9. **Your physical presence has a huge effect on your audience**—John lived out in the desert, wore camel skins and had a diet of locusts and honey (Matthew 3:4).

John the Baptist was six months older than Jesus (Luke 1:26). In keeping with the Law, they each began their respective ministries around the age of thirty (Number 4:3), so John had been preaching for a number of months before Jesus stepped out of the obscurity of Nazareth. John understood that his appointed purpose in life was to announce the Messiah to the world (Isaiah 40:3-5).

In the society of the day, it was not uncommon for a slave to carry the sandals or shoes of a wealthy or influential individual. His comment concerning his personal unworthiness would have brought questions to their minds. The contrast is striking. John was placing himself into a

status lower than that of a slave. There was no word in their culture, nor in ours today, for that position.

John's baptism was indeed a baptism of water, picturing the cleansing of the heart of the individual and their commitment to abstain from sinful practices that had been a part of their lives for so long. It served as a symbolic stake in the ground to say, "Here is where I made a commitment to live a Godly life." But John alluded to the coming Messiah and His impending requirement that true baptism would be a far more reaching enterprise. The change in one's life would occur at a spiritual level, not just an emotional one. It is a direct hint of the coming gift of the Holy Spirit that would be imparted to all believers upon their conversion (Romans 5:5).

Baptism by fire is the final phrase that we must characterize and understand. I suspect that it may have a dual definition. A baptism of fire could refer to a time of testing. In the Old Testament, the people of Israel were to bring the trophies of war to the Tabernacle and the priests. The nonperishable things were to be subjected to the heat of an open fire to ceremonially cleanse them before they could be taken back home and used (Numbers 31:21-23). We as followers of God will have times of testing in our own lives. In our culture we use the phrase "trial by fire" to describe these difficult moments and the challenges that are contained in each.

One cannot overlook the distinct possibility, in keeping with John's pointed message, he may have also been alluding to the final judgment of God. The burning fires of

Hell are very, very real indeed. God will one day sentence all of His enemies and we will witness the wrath of an Almighty God as He pours out His wrath upon the earth (Nahum 1:2-6).

We are comfortable with the understanding that God is love. We hear it taught from pulpits all across the nation. Far less well received is the message of truth that God is a vengeful being (Deuteronomy 32:35). He will judge and His judgment is always righteous and perfect. We would do well to take heed of the warning found in Hebrews 10:31-32— *For we know Him who said, “Vengeance is Mine; I will repay,” and again, “The Lord will judge His people.” It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.*

John 3:16

For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him, should not perish, but have everlasting life.

A Pharisee by the name of Nicodemus came to Jesus at night with sincere questions concerning the relationship between Jesus and God. As an individual highly educated in the religious beliefs and ways of the Jewish people, he, probably somewhat reluctantly, had to admit that the signs and wonders that Jesus was performing were obviously not of man, but from God.

Understand that this meeting was a genuine risk for a man in Nicodemus' position. If word got around that he had a private audience with this fellow Jesus, it would tarnish his religious reputation irreparably. The Pharisaical traditions were centuries in the making, and nearly impossible to ignore. And yet he was curious enough to take this bold step, though only at night.

Immediately following his first statement, Jesus skillfully steered the conversation towards salvation, and began to discuss with Nicodemus what it means to be “*born again*”. Nicodemus was absolutely clueless as to having any

understanding of what Jesus was talking about. Being “*born again*” made no sense to him whatever.

When the narrative arrives at the tenth verse of this chapter, Jesus is noticeably sharp and disappointed with Nicodemus’ lack of understanding of the Old Testament. The insinuation is obviously towards the thought that he should have understood the concept of Salvation.

The question at hand is quite simple. Were people saved in the Old Testament in much the same way as we are today? That question is worthy of an answer.

Jesus, as he walked this earth, addressed salvation on a number of occasions. It is interesting that there is no one, single verse in the Old Testament or the New that includes all that we would say is required for someone to become a Christian. One must look through several passages to gain an understanding of what God expects from us and what He then does in response.

God describes Salvation as the most difficult thing that He has ever done. Creating the vast expanse of the universe, with all of it’s billions and billions of galaxies, each filled with billions of stars, individually different and unique, was a simple accomplishment for Him. In Genesis 1:16, He gives it but a casual mention, and in Psalm 8:3, describes it as “*finger work*”. Yet when the topic of His Salvation is considered, the phrase found in Isaiah is telling—“*the strong arm of the Lord has worked Salvation for Him.*” (Isaiah 44:3). Finger work versus a strong arm is quite a comparison.

Our Salvation is a tremendously complicated thing. There are a myriad of things that God does on His side of the equation. He sanctifies us, He justifies us, He adopts us, He forgives us...and I could go on and on. But on our side of the equation, we simply need to accept Him as our personal Savior. We do not earn or deserve our standing with an almighty God (Ephesians 2:8). It is His work, and His alone, that grants us grace and mercy and the promise of Heaven and a relationship with Him while we are here on earth.

I have been able to locate no ONE verse to explain salvation completely in all of it's complexity, but the story of the thief on the cross beside Jesus is as thorough an examination of the topic as there is to be found. In the story recorded in all four Gospels, we find that the thief recognized that:

1. He was a sinner. He understood clearly that he had done many things wrong in his life.

2. He was unable to help himself. His predicament was unquestionably beyond his control and he would need assistance to survive.

3. He was condemned to die. Our sentence, pronounced by God himself, is that our guilt is worthy of death.

4. He recognized Jesus as innocent. Jesus lived an absolutely pure, sinless life. That qualified Him as the perfect sacrifice to pay for our misdeeds.

5. He recognized Jesus as God. The God/Man came to redeem all of us.

6. He saw Jesus as someone close to him and who could identify with him. It is a beautiful thought to know that

Jesus can identify with us on a very personal level. He experienced all of the things that we do in our lives—but without sin.

7. He believed that Jesus was someone who could make a difference in his life.

8. He called out to Jesus in a personal way in the only way he knew how.

9. He heard Jesus respond to him in a very personal way.

10. He received immediate confirmation from his Savior that a transaction had been made and that his future would be alongside Jesus in Heaven forever.

There are verses in the Old Testament that, if quoted without their references, would sound quite New Testament like. I believe that Jesus, the Apostles, and the early Church used these very verses as they talked and explained to all, the truth about Jesus and what He did.

He who winneth souls is wise. Proverbs 11:30

And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. Ezekiel 36:27

“Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, every one according to his ways,” says the Lord God. “Repent, and turn from all your transgressions, so that iniquity will not be your ruin. Cast away from you all the transgressions which you have committed, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit. For why should you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of one who dies,” says the Lord God. “Therefore turn and live!” Ezekiel 18:31-32

Note: a. how each will be judged individually, b. the call to repentance, c. get a new heart and a new spirit, and d. turn and live. That sounds exactly like the New Testament phrases we use extensively in our evangelism training! It is not hard to come to the conclusion that individuals were held accountable the very same way we are. God expected them to come to a place of repentance, and that that experience would be life changing. The one thing different is that we have the Holy Spirit indwelling us today. (They did not all have that privilege, though some did, like John the Baptist (Luke 1:5).) It is not a big step to say that they were born dead in their trespasses and sins and were made spiritually alive when they made a heart-felt acceptance of God. *A new heart and a new spirit* is exactly how salvation is explained throughout the New Testament.

Jesus censured Nicodemus rather harshly for his failure to understand this very basic and most important concept of how to obtain a right relationship with God. “*Ye MUST (emphasis mine) be born again*”.

This verse, John 3:16, is probably the most well-known verse in the Bible. We often teach it to our children as their very first verse committed to memory. We hold it forth as a simple, yet profound, explanation of the gift of Salvation.

For God so loved the world—Salvation is not about us. It is all about God and His character and attributes. We deserve nothing but Hell. He was not obligated to extend mercy and grace toward us. In First Peter 1:12, we are reminded of Salvation and are told that “*Even angels long to look into these things.*” That little phrase might be easy to overlook and

miss the subtle truth hiding there. In the Greek, the original language contains the idea that the angels are looking intently at this entire concept of Salvation in awe and wonder at what God is accomplishing. You see, angels are not afforded forgiveness as mankind is. Those who followed Satan are condemned to an eternity of fire and punishment—the same punishment we deserve—but we are granted an option. Salvation. They are watching and praising God as each sinner repents and is confirmed as a child of God (Luke 15:10).

That He gave—The generosity of God is overwhelming. “*While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.*” (Romans 5:8). Having been a math major in college, I find it tempting to examine this gift from a mathematical perspective. Let’s generate some basic numbers for some simple calculations. Jesus suffered the torture of the cross for approximately six hours, or 21,600 seconds. Suppose one billion people will come to know the Lord as their personal Savior during all of history. Divide 21,600 seconds by 1,000,000,000 people and you arrive at the mathematical conclusion that Jesus endured the shame of the cross for .0000216 seconds for me. But let me be quick to add that we CANNOT calculate the gift of God that way. It must go another direction completely. If I had been the ONLY person in history who had ever come to the point of asking God for His gift of Salvation, Jesus would have endured and paid it all for me. The gift of God is entirely personal, extended to each one individually.

His only begotten Son—The relationship between the Trinity is beyond understanding. How God can be three distinct

Persons and yet considered One is beyond human comprehension. We simply must accept the fact and continue on. To attempt to define very much would be pure conjecture on my part, so I will not even attempt it at this time. Quite simply, God is One and yet God is God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit, three Persons working and collaborating so perfectly together that they are indistinguishable in their actions and character. A mystery to be revealed someday in Heaven.

That whosoever believeth in Him—It would be wrong to assume that all it takes is belief. Even demons believe and tremble (James 2:19). There is a danger in focusing in on only one verse in Scripture to prove a point. This is an example of that concept. We must consider additional passages of Scripture to arrive at a proper understanding. Salvation requires a number of things. Added to simple belief is a recognition of who God is (Acts 16:31), repentance from sin (Acts 2:38), and a degree of humility (Acts 16:19).

Should not perish—Hell is unimaginably terrible. We get glimpses throughout Scripture of the place God has created for the final judgment and completion of His wrath. The following list is by no means complete: torment is currently ongoing (Luke 16:19-31), it is hot (Matthew 13:50), dark (II Peter 2:4), loneliness (II Thessalonians 1:9), falling into a vast bottomless abyss (Revelation 9:1-12), stench (Revelation 21:8), and there is no exit door, it is eternal (II Thessalonians 1:9).

But have everlasting life—Eternity is a very, very long time. We struggle to understand infinity. One of my favorite

attempts to help describe eternity is this one. Suppose there was a solid granite mountain 100 miles long, 100 miles wide, and 100 miles tall. Now suppose that there was a very small chickadee that would arrive at the summit of this mountain once every thousand years and would wipe its little beak and sharpen it a bit, wearing away an infinitesimal amount of the rock. When that mountain has been completely eroded away by that little chickadee, one day of eternity will still not have passed! Think the most amazing thought you can think about what Heaven might be like and understand that you are probably not even close to a description of the grandeurs of eternity (II Corinthians 2:9).

Acts 3:16

By faith in the name of Jesus, this man whom you see and know was made strong. It is Jesus' name and the faith that comes through him that has completely healed him, as you can all see.

Peter had come a long way from that little fishing boat out on the Sea of Galilee. The burly man groveling at Jesus' feet and crying out in the shame of his sin (Luke 5:8) had matured to become one of the greatest communicators of the Gospel.

In the verses that lead up to this statement, the Scriptural narrative tells of Peter and John entering through the gate called "Beautiful". Luke, the writer of Acts, is using the common name for the Nicanor Gate, the eastern entrance to the Court of the Gentiles. The historian Josephus describes this gate as being seventy-five feet tall and plated in beautiful Corinthian brass, making it more valuable than any that were plated in silver or gold. Josephus went on to say that it required twenty men to open and close the gate each day.

Begging for alms was common in this culture. The Roman government did not have any programs in place to care for indigent people, so they were left to fend for themselves in any way they knew how. Prime spots were highly prized

among those involved in this method of obtaining money. We are left to consider the fact that some nameless individual(s) took time out of their day to place this poor man in his prescribed location daily—he was a regular, clearly recognizable by all who frequented this area of the temple grounds. This nameless man asked for financial assistance, and Peter responded with a dramatic healing.

Luke, it is generally accepted, was a medical doctor (Colossians 4:14). It is fascinating how God allowed the unique character of his authors to shine through His Words. The Holy Spirit prompted them completely on what to write, but God, in His infinite power, allowed their own choice of words to fit His perfectly. As Peter took the beggar by the right hand and commanded him to “*rise up and walk*”, Luke’s medical training rose to the surface with somewhat professional medical jargon.

The phrasing in verse seven is quite technical and peculiar to the area of medicine. The word translated as “*feet*” is used only by Luke, and occurs nowhere else in Scripture. It is a discriminatory word that differentiates the bones of the heel from the overall foot. “*Ankles*” is also a medical phrase absent from other passages of the Bible. The record continues to describe the healing as “*he jumped to his feet*”. This phrase describes the sudden relocation of an articulated joint, a uniquely precise medical diagnosis from a man obviously familiar with human anatomy.

The healing and the resulting actions of the restored individual leaping about began to draw a curious crowd and Peter seized the opportunity to share the Good News of

Jesus with those willing to listen. His message was simple and perfect. He pointed everyone to the person of Jesus by referencing the power of the name of Jesus.

Semitic culture tended to prescribe more to someone's name than just the pronunciation of a jumble of random alphabetic symbols. The people of that day felt that a name was also a designation of character or being, and thus, the nature of the person was carried along with the use of their name. That may seem a bit foreign to us today, unless you consider our cultural view of reputation. When we talk of someone's reputation, we are talking about something that expresses their essence and the power, or lack of power, that their name might convey. For example, we might say that simply using someone's name can "open doors" when another's cannot.

Peter talks to those gathered around him of faith. Even today we have tremendous misunderstanding in many churches regarding this topic. Some fly off to one end of the spectrum and preach a "hyper-faith" such that, "If I have enough faith, God is obligated by His promise to fulfill my wishes." That is an unfortunate interpretation. True faith, as God defines it, is proposed all through the Scripture. Yes, there are a few select passages that might seem on the surface to promote necessity of "super-abundant" faith (Matthew 17:20), but the Bible cannot be interpreted in that fashion. Good hermeneutics requires that one must rely on the entirety of Scripture to fully comprehend the complex issues of our understanding of God and how He works. If great faith is the sole ingredient for healing, why do the faith healers of our day not walk

through a children's hospital and clear the wards completely? I know of no one with more faith than a little child. Even Jesus agreed with that assessment of children (Matthew 18:2-4).

Faith is simple and yet complex. We receive the ability to exhibit faith directly from God. It is a gift of grace (Ephesians 2:8-9). The human condition is such that were it not for God's input into our lives, our depravity and sin nature would not of itself generate anything that is good (Jeremiah 17:9). Faith is also a commodity to ensconce and build. The establishment of our faith has a direct link to our exposure to the Word (Romans 10:17). By implication, faith can be increased by constant and consistent use. When we see God work in a particularly difficult situation, our confidence and belief—faith—is strengthened to withstand an even bigger trial in the future.

Our faith initiates from Christ.

Our faith inculcates from our relationship with Christ.

Our faith increases from our trust in Christ.

It is Jesus at the center of this concept of faith and not us.

Romans 3:16

Ruin and misery mark their ways.

John Calvin, the French theologian and reformer during the Protestant Reformation in the 1500's, proposed a key foundational element of the character of man. The concept credited to him is known today as "The Total Depravity of Man." The doctrine essentially states that because of the fall of man in the Garden of Eden, every person is born with a sin nature (Romans 5:12). That nature is morally corrupt (Titus 1:15-16), enslaved to sin (John 8:34), at enmity with God (Romans 8:7), and unable to even look to God—without God's involvement (I John 4:19).

Scripture contains a myriad of verses that support this concept. Jeremiah 17:9 states that, "*The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked.*" Calvin's idea does not mean that we are all going to sin in the most heinous fashion, but that we each have the capability or capacity of doing so. God told Cain that sin desired to have him but that he must learn to master it (Genesis 4:7). That very day he committed murder. History is full of examples of people who were otherwise as normal as anyone might be, but when pushed to their limits, they snapped and did unspeakable things. How many times after a mass shooting

do we hear the comment, “I would have never thought that they were capable of such a thing.”

The middle seven verses of the third chapter of Romans is a laundry list of the debase actions of sinful man—worthlessness, lying, cursing, bitterness, and murder—and that leads us to the verse at hand.

“Ruin and misery mark their ways,” does not reference a benign train of thought. It speaks of an active effort to tear down and destroy. Satan from the very beginning has set his sights upon the dissolution of the perfect plan of God. He tempted Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, and successfully destroyed the perfect relationship that they enjoyed with God each day.

Even today we see the disintegration of marriages, severely strained family relationships, gender confusion, homosexuality—all craftily engineered to tear down and destroy the rules and laws put in place by God at creation to make our world make sense and have proper order. Without that order that comes with moral stability, we are faced with confusion and chaos. But we cannot blame Satan for all of our failures. Unsaved mankind has a very, very dark heart (Jeremiah 17:9). It is no surprise then that the sinful heart of the unsaved world would gravitate towards these tragic behaviors and promote their advancement in our culture.

Mankind is very adept at implementing ways of ruining or destroying the hallmarks of Gods law. The simple introduction of a small amount of wrong can bring a culture

to ignore a long-held command of God, just as a very small amount of cyanide in an otherwise unmarked bottle of Coke could do irreparable harm. Likewise, a small amount of untruth mixed into an otherwise legitimate behavior, can destroy it completely. Once a small token sin is acceptable, it is far easier to justify stepping just a bit further out of the boundaries established by the Word.

Abortion is a prime example. (I personally believe that abortion in all forms is murder. I cannot justify killing an unborn child). Prior to 1973, abortion was severely restricted or banned in most states. In 1973, the United States Supreme Court ruled that states could not restrict abortion until the twelfth week of pregnancy. After the twelfth week, states were permitted to severely limit or ban abortions completely. Fast forward forty-six years. In 2019, the great state of New York became the first to officially extend that timeline restriction to the twenty-fourth week of pregnancy. Before the twenty-fourth week of her pregnancy, a woman can request an abortion for any reason whatever. (And “illegal” abortions are no longer a criminal offense.) Medical journals confirm the survival of premature births as early as 21 weeks and four days! Vermont codified a law in June of that same year making abortion a “fundamental right”, with no legal limits. Since 1973, legal abortion has “ruined” the potential lifetime achievements of over fifty million babies in the United States alone. And we as a nation are now paying the price of this tragedy.

Following close behind destruction, is hurt and misery (Deuteronomy 28:15-68). Divorce is devastating to

everyone involved. The emotional toll is deep and extended. Ignored research proves that gender confusion leads to despair and hopelessness, and often suicide. The destruction of the family is causing our country immense harm in every social way. Left to our sinful desires, man ruins everything he touches. And Satan is more than happy to validate our atrocious choices.

This verse hints that we can look at misery as a signpost that marks the location of problematic behavior—sin. Too often in our culture we simply attempt to treat the symptoms of social injustice, or economic inequality, rather than admit that we have sin issue plaguing our nation today. The social, economic, emotional, and physical problems that we are experiencing at a national level, as well as a personal level, are the result of hearts not right with God.

Ruin and misery mark their way. When will we learn to read the signpost and make a right choice about how to solve our issues? It requires a change in our hearts that is orchestrated by a loving God. It is our only hope.

I Corinthians 3:16

*Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that
God's Spirit dwells in your midst?*

Paul makes an assumption in this passage that the reader has put his or her trust and faith in Jesus Christ as Savior. The moment that transaction takes place, God's Spirit indwells the believer (I Corinthians 12:13). Salvation is then sealed and guaranteed (Ephesians 1:13-14). The Holy Spirit will be present forever (John 14:14), given by God as a pledge that the future will be as He said it would (II Corinthians 1:21-22).

I. The metaphor in play in this verse is that of the Temple. The people of Paul's day were familiar with an amazing edifice built by Herod over forty-six years for the Jewish people (John 2:20). It was an imposing structure (Matthew 24:1), filled with intricate detail and grandiose splendor. Herod saw it as a statement to the world of who he was.

The human body is likewise an astonishing structure, literally crafted by hand by God Almighty. Genesis declares that out of the dust, God **formed** (emphasis mine) man (Genesis 2:7). We are created in His image and for His glory, by the greatest builder the world has ever seen. Our physical body is a masterpiece of creation, the crowning

touch of creation week (Ephesians 2:10). Science is discovering daily new insights into the intricacy and beauty of its inner workings, even down to the molecular structure known as DNA. No man-made temple could ever show the glory of God as does our physical self. A fitting abode for the Holy Spirit.

II. Upon entering the Promised Land, God clearly informed the people of Israel that they were to establish a place where they could worship God. The Tabernacle was to be permanently placed in Jerusalem and God stated that His presence would be there. Likewise, Solomon's Temple served under identical considerations. God said that His glory would be found in the Temple at Jerusalem. God would reveal Himself there to His worshippers. And the glory of His presence would be there, and only there.

Christianity is meant to be a life well lived. Others are watching our every behavior and judging our attempts to follow God's designs. As they observe our actions and reactions to the difficulties in life, they are forming opinions about the reality of God and are deeply influenced by what they perceive to be truth in our daily lives. God is revealed to the world in a very visceral way in the everyday lives of His children. God's presence is meant to be seen and found in the example of our lives.

III. Temples are a place of sacrifice. We must not forget the altar. It is a poorly designed edifice that does not include an altar in the spiritual architecture. We are called to be a living sacrifice (Romans 12:1). The Old Testament

offerings were brought and presented to God at the Temple (Leviticus 17:2-4). It was an act of worship.

If we do not bring ourselves to God and give our everything to Him first, our service to others in this world can easily become a mere social agenda. When we show mercy to those that we come in contact with, we must be showing them God, or our efforts are worthless. All that we do is for the glory of God (Colossians 3:17).

IV. And finally, a temple is a holy place. The Temple was consecrated to God. Everything in it was holy and set apart for one purpose—God.

We, likewise, are to be holy. It speaks of attention to purity. But purity is a consequence or outgrowth of something more basic. The root of a successful Christian walk is that of consecration (II Corinthians 6:17). To be separated from the world and combined with God. And when we are consecrated to God, He is able to work His greatest works among us (Joshua 3:5).

II Corinthians 3:16

But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away.

Types, shadows, or pictures of New Testament theology and truths abound throughout the Old Testament. While many are left for us to discover in our personal study of Scripture, some are referenced by the New Testament writers for us to plainly see and recognize. The Old and New Testaments are inexorably linked in this fashion, and the stories from the Old often give us unique insights that we might otherwise have missed or overlooked.

Paul reminds us of the treasured relationship that Moses had with God. Moses talked with God as any man might talk to his best friend (Exodus 33:11). That is not something that God made special accommodations just for him to enjoy. His communication with God on a very personal, everyday level is a statement of fact, not irregularity (Psalm 17:6). Nowhere in Scripture do we find God ever discouraging man from talking with Him or carrying on a conversation with Him. Keeping reverence? Yes (Hebrews 12:28). Enjoying intimacy? Absolutely (Jeremiah 31:3). Did God communicate back to Moses in a bit more direct manner than He does with us today? Probably. It was, after all, a unique moment in history.

As Paul wrote this letter to the church at Corinth, his thoughts were turned to the history of Israel and their leader, Moses, and the physical effects that he experienced from being in the presence of God. Even as God caused a significant measure of His Glory to be shrouded in smoke, its effects on Moses as he was merely in its vicinity, caused his face to quite literally glow brightly.

Exodus 34:29-35

²⁹ When Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the two tablets of the covenant law in his hands, he was not aware that his face was radiant because he had spoken with the LORD. ³⁰ When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, his face was radiant, and they were afraid to come near him. ³¹ But Moses called to them; so Aaron and all the leaders of the community came back to him, and he spoke to them. ³² Afterward all the Israelites came near him, and he gave them all the commands the LORD had given him on Mount Sinai.

³³ When Moses finished speaking to them, he put a veil over his face. ³⁴ But whenever he entered the LORD's presence to speak with him, he removed the veil until he came out. And when he came out and told the Israelites what he had been commanded, ³⁵ they saw that his face was radiant. Then Moses would put the veil back over his face until he went in to speak with the LORD.

Israel was prevented from directly observing the reflected glory of God by a simple veil. Paul builds upon this point as he discusses the differences between the Old Covenant the New Covenant introduced by Christ. The inferior has given way to the superior (Hebrews 8:6). No longer is the glory of God a fading, conditional experience. For the Christian today, we have the Holy Spirit in residence in our

physical selves (Ezekiel 36:27), and the glory of God is inside of us, to be observed by others in our actions and behaviors (Matthew 5:16).

The moment of Jesus' death on the cross was marked by an unmistakable sign in the Temple in Jerusalem. The great veil that separated the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies was torn from top to bottom (Matthew 27:51). A familiarity with the floor plan of the Temple renders a key aspect of that event. As a priest walked into the first room, called the Holy Place, he saw The Golden Lampstand on the left, with seven oil lamps burning brightly. To the right was the Table of Shewbread where twelve loaves of bread were laid out, freshly baked, each week. Straight ahead, with its back against the veil, was the Altar of Incense, that burned continuously. Immediately on the other side of the thirty-foot tall veil in the Holy of Holies was the Ark of the Covenant. The veil completely obstructed any view of the Holy of Holies, as a priest was allowed to enter that sacred room only once per year on the Day of Atonement (Hebrews 9:7).

The veil was torn entirely through from top to bottom, effectively placing the Altar of Incense adjacent to the Ark. The burning of fragrant incense is a picture of prayer to God (Psalm 141:2). The Mercy Seat on top of the Ark of the Covenant was where God said that His presence and glory would be physically seen (Exodus 25:17-22). The torn veil signifies that we can now approach our Heavenly Father directly and boldly in prayer (Hebrews 4:16), with no need of an earthly priest as an intermediary. Jesus is now

our High Priest and has taken care of everything for us in that regard.

The contrasts between The Law and our Salvation wrought by Jesus Christ are striking.

1. Our understanding of right and wrong is no longer a reference chiseled into stone tablets and laid hidden in an Ark (Exodus 25:16), but our laws are written on our hearts by the Holy Spirit. Don't misunderstand, we still have the Bible as written record and reference to God's desires for our lives, but the Holy Spirit living in us illuminates Scripture so we can understand it thoroughly and completely (John 14:26). And if we are willing to listen, He is always reminding us of those commands and laws that we need to implement in our lives.

2. We are commanded to follow Christ (John 8:12), a far better role model than trying to follow the written words recorded in the Law, for in Him we see God (John 14:9), and are motivated to follow in His steps, guided by the Holy Spirit. We need to tuck Scripture deep inside our hearts, but God intends that we do that for a reason. It is to spur us on to do good works and be His hands and feet here in this world for the time He has granted us (Hebrews 10:24). We are not just repositories of the Word, we are to be examples of the Word in application to those we are in contact with each day.

3. The Law was so complex and detailed that, while perfect, it was unable to perfect the hearts of man (Roman 3:20). As we read the Old Testament, it is easy to see how the followers of God during that time could easily become distracted with following the details and minutia of the

Law's requirements and completely lose sight of the truth contained therein. The Holy Spirit in us is working daily to clean up our lives, if we are open to hearing His gentle prodding and encouragement. Sanctification by the Holy Spirit is a daily, ongoing experience for the Christian today (I Corinthians 6:11).

4. The glory reflected on Moses' face would be bright as he exited the Tent of Meeting, and he covered his face with the veil. But it would gradually fade until Moses again returned to meet with God. Our relationship and time with God is not incremental, but continuous. The Holy Spirit indwells us from the moment of Salvation and His glory is ever present and unfading.

At Salvation, the veil of ignorance of the truth about God is lifted and forever discarded. Because of this great gift, we can experience a relationship unknown to most in the Old Testament era. The Holy Spirit did not indwell all believers at that time. Only a few experienced the wonders of His presence and guidance in their lives. Oh, that we would allow the Holy Spirit to shine forth in our own lives, by living after the example set by our Savior, Jesus Christ.

Galatians 3:16

The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. Scripture does not say “and to seeds,” meaning many people, but “and to your seed,” meaning one person, who is Christ.

Covenant is an integral method of how God conducts business with man. Knowing that we as humans are incapable of holding a promise of any kind faithfully enough to be binding, God took it upon Himself to design and execute His own commitment toward us. His words have never failed, and are the glue that binds His promises together in perpetuity. In context, this verse becomes a part of Paul’s argument to the church at Galatia that there is no disagreement between the covenant God made with Abraham on Mt Moriah and the covenant He made with Israel and Moses on Mt. Sinai. They both point to a coming Messiah, Jesus Christ.

We begin our discussion in the third chapter of Genesis, specifically where God began to curse the Serpent for deceiving Adam and Eve. He finished with, “*And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring (seed) and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.*” (Genesis 3:15)

The theme of the Bible can accurately be stated as “God’s Plan for the Redemption of Man.” Early in Genesis, we see God referencing an “*offspring*” that would one day satisfactorily offer proper restitution to redeem mankind from deserved death. But we don’t actually see the name “Messiah” until the ninth chapter of Daniel. In Genesis chapter three, the “*offspring*” or “*seed*” is a nameless, faceless person of promise. We recognize Him today as Jesus.

Fast forward a couple of millennia and we find God approaching a man by the name of Abraham. Genesis 22 describes an amazing story of testing and trials to prove Abraham’s worthiness to God for His chosen task. In verse fifteen, the pre-incarnate Christ is introduced as “*the angel of the LORD*”, and we see His pronouncement of a promise to Abraham. There is a subtle irony in the delivered message. Verse eighteen says, “*and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me.*” The very one giving the message to Abraham is also the “*offspring*” or “*seed*” mentioned in the announcement.

Some time prior to this moment, God had cut a covenant with Abraham promising that He is, was, and always will be, who and what He claims to be. And that He would bless and keep Abraham and fulfill all of His promises to him.

Fast forward again a little over 700 years, and we have a front row seat as Moses delivers Israel from Egypt. Their sojourn in Egypt left them bereft of any kind of government or system of laws, so God saw fit to furnish them with a new, additional covenant, the Mosaic Law.

The introduction of the Law did not negate or abolish the promise in Genesis 3, nor did it hinder the promises to Abraham from Genesis 22.

The Law identified sin, supplied a temporary solution for payment to secure remission of sin, but was designed for obsolescence (Hebrews 8:13). It was never intended to be the ultimate finale in the redemption plan of man. It could not secure the necessary righteousness needed by man to solve his issue with his sin nature. There was need of a better covenant to come (Jeremiah 31:31-34).

As Jesus celebrated His last Passover with His disciples, He defined a new covenant that would soon be implemented that would satisfy all existing promises from the past. The plan in place since before the foundation of the earth would soon be completed at the cross (I Peter 1:19-20). After the meal that night, Jesus passed a cup around the table and said, “*This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you.*” (Luke 22:21). The blood spilled that next day on the cross would satisfy the wrath of God and pay the price for our salvation (Hebrews 10:10). God’s plan for the redemption of man was complete.

“*The seed*”, Jesus Christ, was first promised in Genesis 3, identified as a substitute on Mt. Moriah, confirmed as propitiatory on Mt. Sinai, and revealed to the world as innocent on Mt. Calvary.

Ephesians 3:16

*I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with
power through his Spirit in your inner being,*

Ephesus, in the first century, could have been described as the most religious city on earth. The inhabitants of this metropolis placed a large share of their identity in a marble building known as The Temple of Artemis. The Greek historian and writer, Antipater of Sidon, described that structure with these immortalized words:

*I have set my eyes on the wall of lofty Babylon on which is a road for
chariots, and the statue of Zeus by the Alpheus, and the hanging
gardens, and the colossus of the Sun, and the huge labor of the high
pyramids and the vast tomb of Mausolus; but when I saw the house
of Artemis that mounted the clouds, those other marvels lost their
brilliance, and I said, "Lo, apart from Olympus, the Sun never
looked on aught so grand."*

At 450 feet long, 225 feet wide and 60 feet tall, its 127 columns had, by this time frame, been a statement to the world for over three centuries. The Ephesian Artemis is not to be confused with the Roman Artemis. The Ephesians were fiercely loyal and protective of their version of the god and kept a sincere distinction. The crowds of people who journeyed from distant locations to worship,

brought their gifts and money to the Temple. As a result of this massive influx of cash, the city of Ephesus increased to become the world's largest banking system of its day.

The panorama of sin that the Ephesian church faced each day was debilitating. The spiritual tenebrosity was incredibly dark. Godlessness fosters all kinds of unimaginable sin. Those following the teachings of Jesus in those days, would have been very noticeable as they lived their lives and held to a Godly standard. Paul realized their predicament was dire and he genuinely prayed for them. This was a man who understood spiritual warfare and the toll that the battle can take on the human psyche.

Paul's prayer was specific for these people. His desire was that God would boundlessly supply what the Ephesians needed—an infusion of power from the Holy Spirit. He also understood that God's supply was measureless and that our use of God's gifts is only limited by ourselves. D. L. Moody once said, "The world has yet to see what God can do with a man fully consecrated to him. By God's help, I aim to be that man."

Types and shadows of New Testament theology are scattered throughout the Old Testament. One type, or symbol, that is to be found quite consistently is that of the correlation of oil and the Holy Spirit. Luke 4:18 cements the two together nicely. "*The Spirit is upon Me, because He has anointed me to preach...*" Anointing in this culture was nearly always done with oil. As you read Scripture, note each time oil is mentioned and ask yourself, "What might this reference teach me about the Holy Spirit?"

One such passage that applies especially well to this discussion is found in II Kings 4:1-7.

Now the wife of the son of one of the prophets cried out to Elisha, "Your servant, my husband, is dead. You know that your servant honored the Lord with fear. But the man to whom he owed money has come to take my two children to make them serve him." ²Elisha said to her, "What can I do for you? Tell me, what do you have in the house?" And she said, "Your servant has nothing in the house except a jar of oil." ³Then he said, "Go around and get jars from all your neighbors. Get empty jars, many of them. ⁴Then go in and shut the door behind you and your sons. Pour the oil into all these jars, and set aside each one that is full." ⁵So she went from him and shut the door behind her and her sons. They took the jars to her, and she poured. ⁶When the jars were full, she said to her son, "Bring me another jar." And he said to her, "There is not one jar left." Then the oil stopped flowing. ⁷She came and told the man of God. And he said, "Go and sell the oil and pay what you owe. You and your sons can live on the rest."

While the story is a wonderful statement about God's genuine concern for even a poor widow, woven into the narrative is a stellar truth concerning our relationship with the Holy Spirit. The woman had a small amount of oil. (Keep in mind the analogy of "oil equals the Holy Spirit.") She was told to gather as many jars as she could find, close the door, and pour out the oil and fill each of them. The oil stopped flowing when the last jar was filled.

The only limit on the amount of oil in that little room that day, was the number of jars that the family had collected

beforehand. Had they collected more at the beginning, the oil would still have been available and would have filled them all. The only limit on the Holy Spirit in our own lives today are the self-imposed constraints that we subscribe to (I Thessalonians 5:19). God will give His Spirit abundantly and without limit (Titus 3:6). We simply need to be a willing vessel that God can use.

We must identify with the fact that, in and of ourselves, we are nothing. It is only through the working of the Holy Spirit that we can do anything of lasting worth and value. We need, we require, His power to sustain us in all that we do.

Philippians 3:16

Only let us live up to what we have already attained.

Context is paramount when studying and determining the meaning of a particular passage of Scripture. Verse 16 must be considered in light of the verses before it. Paul has spent significant effort to convince those reading his letter, that God's plan for their lives is that they progress in their spiritual maturity (verse 12), always looking forward to the goal (verse 13), straining in sincere effort to attain it (verse 14), and that this mindset is a mark of spiritual maturity (verse 15).

The word “*only*” in this verse is translated as “*nevertheless*” in the King James Version. It is a subtle reminder to consider what has just been verified in the preceding verses. Paul has built the case that the Christian life must be one that has a definite direction of travel, and that course must be toward God and His commands and laws. And as that man or woman progresses along that road, God will confirm their correct choices, and point out the wrong ones, so that their maturity and completeness in Christ may continue to gain ground. Consider verse sixteen to be a caveat, a warning, that while the principle of spiritual maturity mapped out previously is true, our human nature is such that we tend to ignore the fact that there are conditions that

must be met to follow this course of events perfectly as God intends.

First, Paul is warning Christians to live up to their faith and convictions. What have we attained? A Godly life should be filled with an increase of knowledge concerning who God is and what He defines for each our lives. The best source for that information is Bible study (Joshua 1:8). We should have attained a thirst for the Word of God (Psalm 42:1). God gave us His Word for a reason far greater than going to church to hear a pastor preach from it once per week. To immerse one's self in daily study is not unlike talking with a best friend daily. Without it, we hardly know the other, mere acquaintances, casually meeting on the road of life. We should also be living a life that exhibits a clearer understanding of the Word. *We are washed by the water of the Word* (Ephesians 5:26). Our lives should be cleaner and more authentic now that when we started the journey (I John 3:3).

What have we attained? We are meant to live by principle, not by impulse. We should have attained an inner compass that guides our every choice. To run the race simply by impulse, affected by eternal influences, can lead to disaster. We must be guided by our moral conscience that comes from an understanding of the Word and the illumination guided by the Holy Spirit that indwells us (Psalm 143:10). History describes for us how the French royalty of days gone by would be kept hidden away in their "royal" furnishings, eating their "royal" food, talking to the other "royals" in attendance. All the while, it was actually an unknown minion, a lackey of the court, who carried out and

performed their “royal” decrees. Likewise, many Christians lock their principles in highly guarded enclosures, never allowing them to see the light of day, and truly affect their lives.

What have we attained? When we act upon our beliefs, and we experience the work of God firsthand, we learn that we can indeed trust Him (Psalm 9:10). When that stone is set as a foundation, we can continue building a deeper, more expanded trust of God and live our lives accordingly. We should have attained a working relationship with God that dictates how we live life. Allowing Him to guide us, trusting Him completely in every task set before us, and experiencing the joy of being involved in His perfect plan rather than our own flawed attempts at trying to gain fulfillment our own selfish way (Psalm 16:11).

Secondly, Paul is admonishing his readers to continue on in the same manner as you have begun (II Timothy 3:14). Picking up the analogy of travelling along on a road, the Christian life should be one of walking circumspectly right down the middle, placing each footstep cleanly on the stuttered white lines. Our human nature is to wander as we walk along, looking at the flowers along the roadside, maybe even taking a short foray into the ditch now and again. Temptations can be extremely enticing if we are not on our guard against the distinct possibility of their existence (I Corinthians 10:13). When caution is discarded, and we make the slightest deviation from the white lines guiding our every step, the initial angle of departure may seem innocuous enough that we ignore the misstep (Colossians 3:5-6). And for a great while, our direction of

travel seems quite close to our original course. But taken to its eventual end, even the most acute angle of redirection ultimately ends far from our intended goal.

Thirdly, Paul is reminding us of an ever-present reality. We have not arrived at our destination yet. What have we attained? The implication contained in that phrase insinuates that what we have accomplished is only a partial possession of a much greater whole. Our Christian walk is a daily surrendering of ourselves to God (Romans 12:1). We press on to holiness and Godliness, allowing God to work in us and through us, creating the man or woman He has designed us to be (Philippians 3:14). It is a process that takes a lifetime.

Our sanctification will not be complete until we arrive in Heaven. Until then, we walk the road of life, uphill and down, understanding that with each step forward, the horizon, Heaven, becomes clearer and more beautiful.

Colossians 3:16

Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts.

Let—We have a choice. God created us with a free will to do and act as we so desire. It is up to us to decide if we will live life with an allowance of the teachings of God to influence us directly. Paul implores us to consider and permit it to be so. We are without excuse. Romans 1:20 explains that our God has made His existence plainly visible to all and has implanted in our hearts a certain sense of basic right and wrong. We are then given the opportunity to live a life of relationship with God, or choose a life of doom and failure apart from Him.

The message of Christ—is also the message of God the Father. We tend to want to remember only the things which allow us to feel comfortable in the presence of God. The entire message of Jesus includes the complete list of the attributes of God. Jesus reminded the disciples that when they looked upon Him, and saw His behaviors and understood His emotions and thoughts, they were catching a glimpse of the complete character and personage of God (John 14:9). To be sure, the message of Christ includes all that He said and did during His ministry on this earth. It includes His death,

burial, resurrection, and ascension as well. The Old Testament prophecies and descriptions of the coming Messiah, the theophanies, the moments when the pre-incarnate Christ appears in the Biblical narrative interacting with man, must also be included. And in the judgment to come that is foretold in both Old and New Testament passages we see our Savior coming as Conquering King, leading the armies of Heaven (Revelation 19:11-16). All of this totality is the message of Christ.

Dwell among you richly—To dwell indicates permanent residency. When we reside in our home, our domicile, we are comfortable with our surroundings. We are familiar with all that is near us and we can use those things with impunity because they are ours. Others are not welcome to simply barge in unannounced or take from our things that which they might desire to take. When we allow our understanding of the character and attributes and teaching of God to permeate our everyday lives, we learn to appreciate our precious possession. We learn to use our knowledge of God in all areas of our lives, and we are much better for the experience (Colossians 1:10).

As you teach and admonish one another—We are created as social beings. We are meant to be gregarious. We need each other for support, for love, for happiness, for fulfillment, for chastisement, for correction...I could go on and on. God created the universe in Genesis. The only time that He ever looked at His creation and failed to confirm that “*It is good*” was when He looked at Adam’s loneliness and declared that it is “*not good for man to be alone*.”(Genesis 2:18) Corporate worship is a natural

outgrowth of a right relationship with God. It is quite simply the way we were created to be—together.

With all wisdom—Wisdom is from God and nowhere else (Proverbs 9:10). We find it prominently displayed in the pages of Scripture. It is not something that comes to us naturally by some strange method of osmosis or something else as equally bizarre. We gain wisdom by familiarizing ourselves with the truth of the Word (Proverbs 2:6). It is there that we find the rules and laws that God has ordained for us. We cannot successfully ignore them any more than we can ignore a physical law like gravity. And as we gain understanding of what God expects of us, we learn to see events in our lives from God's perfect perspective. Godly wisdom is held up to us as a great asset to make all effort to attain (Proverbs 4:7).

Through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit—There are those who wish to define this statement into three distinct areas and that true worship must include an entry from each area to be valid and complete. I disagree. Worship of God does not have a liturgy that must be followed to be acceptable. Our human tendency is to create additional rules to explain the details left out of a command of God. God is worthy of worship (Revelation 4:11). That fact is pre-eminent. All personal preferences or cultural biases fade into obscurity. Whether we sing a passage of Scripture put to the music of the current culture, or we sing a sacred hymn of the faith from ages past, or indulge ourselves in a contemporary song of praise—God is worthy of the praise of His people (Psalm 22:3), whatever that may look like today or tomorrow. He is worthy (Psalm 145:3).

Singing to God—Praise is to be directed toward God. It is all about Him (Psalm 147:1). It is interesting to note how often in the current contemporary style of music in our worship services, the focus of the song is upon us, or our feelings, or what we receive from Him. We see concerts on the stages of our sanctuaries now instead of God. We have bowls of ear plugs at the door of our churches for those who need less volume in their lives. We create an emotional experience for the people in the room. Where is the focus on God in all of that static? With all of the noise and the clutter we forget Psalm 46:10—*Be still and know that I am God.*

With gratitude in your hearts—The foundation of our thankfulness rests solidly upon the bedrock of our understanding of the character and attributes of God. When we truly understand that the thoughts of God are incredibly superior to our own (Isaiah 55:8-9), and that His plans are beyond our ability to comprehend fully (Jeremiah 29:11), a humble heart must acknowledge that we are not deserving of such attention and love (Romans 6:23).

II Thessalonians 3:16

Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times and in every way. The Lord be with all of you.

It might be easy to overlook or disregard a verse such as this and categorize it as a mundane perfunctory closing remark that completes a letter, much like we might, without much thought, use the phrase “sincerely yours”. But, “*All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.*” (I Timothy 3:16-17). God could have left it out if He had so desired, but He chose for it to be exactly as it is, so we will treat it with integrity as any other passage.

In many Middle Eastern societies today, a cordial greeting often includes a phrase similar to “Peace to you.” In that culture, peace is not assumed as it often is in our part of the world. We greet with words like, “How are you today?” The underlying assumption is that the person we are talking to is not an enemy by default. Middle Eastern cultures do not embrace that concept. They assume strife unless assured of something different.

But we must admit that even in our society today, the world seems to be falling ever further into misalignment with the

Word of God and that chaos and danger are lurking everywhere (John 16:33). We would never purchase a fictitious book for our young children entitled “The Invisible Child-Eating Crocodiles That Live Absolutely Everywhere!” And yet we understand the realities of life are not so dissimilar. We yearn for peace. It is our deepest longing.

Humanity looks for peace for a myriad of reasons. Our search may originate from a selfish and ignoble frame of reference. Laziness, dereliction of duty, personal pleasure, or a cowardly attitude—all can instigate a search for peace. We want the absence of strife and elimination of problems. But in God’s perfect plan, peace is not predicated on either of those conditions in life. We can experience peace in the middle of the storms of life (Matthew 8:26). It is a matter of trust.

True, perfect peace comes from God (Philippians 4:7). Note the seemingly benign word “*himself*” situated so very unassumingly. A proper understanding of the placement of this pronoun and what it signifies culminates in the recognition of the majesty before us. It hints at His title and position as Lord. Jesus is the living definition of peace. He is indeed “The Lord of Peace” (John 16:33), and yet also the “Man of Sorrows, Acquainted With Grief” (Isaiah 53:3). He exemplified peace and tranquility in spite of the endless agitation that defined His life during His ministry.

We may wonder how peace can coincide with difficulties in our lives. It is the challenge of all who live on this earth to see the events of our lives from God’s perspective. All

things that God allows to infiltrate our little circle of tranquility are meant for our good (Romans 8:28), so that we will be better, stronger Christians for having been carried through the trial. It requires that we resign our own will to His. Calamity may bring outward troubles, but the resistance of our emotions and feelings to that same disaster cause an inward struggle to take place. Peace is seated deep within our hearts. And our lack of peace allows unrest and dissatisfaction to entrench itself deep in our hearts. Anything buried that deeply requires a keen plan of rescue and rehabilitation.

Peace from God is also perfect. The phrase “*at all times*” speaks of an unbroken peace. It is perpetual and unending. We need not survive simply by hanging on to the roller coaster ride of life. We have a Savior who is the author of peace, He is the giver of peace, and He is the bearer of peace. He brings it personally. The last phrase, “*The Lord be with you*”, speaks to that issue. The only place where our emotional, turmoil tossed heart will find comfort and solitude is at the feet of Jesus. Mary learned that truth (Luke 10:38-42). May we recognize it as well and apply it to our own lives.

I Timothy 3:16

Beyond all question, the mystery from which true godliness springs is great:

*He appeared in the flesh,
was vindicated by the Spirit,
was seen by angels,
was preached among the nations,
was believed on in the world,
was taken up in glory.*

Without question, understanding God and His plan for the salvation of man is the greatest mystery of all. Why He would cherish mankind who failed Him so miserably, and yet He loved us so much as to plan, from before the foundation of the world (Ephesians 1:4), a way of escape and redemption (Psalm 68:20), and full restoration into fellowship with Him (Hosea 6:1). Even angels are enamored with the idea and long to understand the mind of God (I Peter 1:12). In addition to the restoration promised with Salvation, comes the tools for sanctification. So that we can become more and more like Him (Romans 12:2).

He appeared in the flesh—Paul is affirming the virgin birth of Christ, but he is also confirming that Jesus existed in

eternity past as God (Philippians 2:6). He was and is the express image of God the Father (Hebrews 1:3). From this condition, He was manifested, or made visible, to those who dwell on the earth. But His full glory was veiled during His sojourn here as a man. He willingly set aside His Heavenly prerogatives and lowered His position and lived a completely human life. 100% God, and yet 100% man. We catch a glimpse of His genuine self on the mount of transfiguration, when His veil was peeled back for a moment and the disciples who were there saw His full glory shine like lightning (Luke 9:28-36). He was, and is, the image of the invisible God (Colossians 1:15), but was not recognized by the world for who He truly was. To many, He was little more than a little baby in a manger who grew up to fool the world as the greatest con man who ever lived. Nothing could be further from the truth. Interestingly, there are no passages that say that Jesus ever stopped being human. He is still the God/Man who has gone on before us and we will see Him in bodily form again when He returns and sets everything right. His step into our existence was a huge, permanent step downward. No doubt, He is still God, but He has placed Himself into our humanity to relate to us through all of eternity. That is what loves looks like.

Was vindicated by the Spirit—In all that He took upon Himself in lowering his condition to that of ours, He was not justified in His flesh. The world caught glimpses of His glory when it appeared at key moments during His life on earth. There were angels at His birth (Luke 2:8-10). There were glorious things seen at His baptism when the sky was ripped open for all there to witness (Mark 1:9-11).

Momentous happenings during His crucifixion (Matthew 27:45, 51, 52), and His resurrection by the power of the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:11) testify to His claims and the validity of His message. No one will ever dishonor Him again.

Was seen by angels—Jesus came from Heaven (John 1:1). He existed before the New Testament in Heaven, and was surrounded by myriads of myriads of angels (Revelation 5:11).

Was preached among the nations—The first century Jews struggled with this concept. Salvation has always been for everyone, not just the Jewish people (Romans 10:12-13). Jesus' first sermon, when He began His ministry, was delivered in His hometown synagogue. When they heard Him talk of Gentile acceptance into the Kingdom of God, they became so angry that they attempted to kill Him that very day (Luke 4:14-30). But Adam and Eve were not Jews. Noah and his family were not of Jewish origin either. Yes, Jesus came to the Jews first, but that truth did not automatically exclude Gentiles from God's redemptive plan (Romans 1:16). Throughout the Mosaic Law, God placed rules governing the possibility that a Gentile might choose to become a part of the nation of Israel. The process was striking—all they need do is to follow the laws of God (Exodus 12:48), and they were to be treated as any other Jew in the nation of Israel.

Was believed on in the world—The message of the redemption of man has been told from that time until now. Some have believed, others have turned their back on the truth and

have suffered unimaginable regret for having done so. The human race is without excuse. We can look on the created world around us and if honest, stop and consider the awesome majesty behind it all. The fingerprints of God are everywhere. We just need to garner an honest assessment. We have 7 complete ancient works of Plato in museums and private collections around the world. I have never met anyone who doubts that Plato existed and wrote what he did. Yet the oldest copy we have to date was penned 1,200 years after his death. Plato's student, Aristotle, also wrote his thoughts for all to ponder. We have 49 copies of his "original" works, yet the oldest was penned 1,400 years after he died. I have not met anyone who doubts his existence in history. The most prolifically reproduced ancient book is Homer's Iliad. No one casts doubt on his reality because we have 643 original copies of his book dating all the way back to 500 years after he died. Compare these numbers to the Bible. We have no fewer than 24,000 original manuscripts, the earliest from only 30 years after Jesus died and rose again. And yet how many refuse to believe His story?! As Josh McDowell put it years ago, "It is evidence that demands a verdict."

Was taken up into glory—Eleven people witnessed the ascension of Jesus into Heaven. The lives of those disciples were so profoundly affected by their walk with Jesus for three years, that they turned the world of their day upside down with their message. Jesus sits now at the right hand of the Father, awaiting the Father's command to go and gather His children from the earth. It is a day that the disciples longed for. I hope we all do as well.

II Timothy 3:16

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness

Books abound in our world today. The internet is a trove of information—some good, some bad. Imagine the voracity of an individual with the fortitude to sit down with the entire Encyclopedia Britannica 2010, the last printed edition, and read all thirty-two volumes cover to cover. The first recorded example of someone reading through the entire set was Fath Ali, the Shah of Persia, who, in 1797, read through the complete third edition which contained 18 volumes. Upon reading the entirety of the encyclopedia, he extended his official title to include “Most Formidable Lord and Master of the Encyclopedia Britannica.”

The publishers of the encyclopedia, to the best of their ability, kept everything true and accurate. But it differs from the Bible in one major, unmistakable aspect. The Bible is “The Word of God.” It does not just contain the words of God, nor is it a repository for the ideas and thoughts of someone who understood humanity very, very well. The entirety of Scripture falls into the category of “The Very Words of God.” It is truth, just like the encyclopedia, it is thorough, just like the encyclopedia, it

had many authors, just like the encyclopedia, but there the similarity stops.

The Word of God created the universe and all that is in it. When God spoke, things happened. And wonderfully and magnificently so. When we read the words of the Bible, we are taking the very words of God into our being and the result is that we will be profoundly changed. God's Word does not go out from Him and return empty or without effect (Isaiah 55:11). Whether we plan for the change or not, God says His Word will make a difference in some way.

It is through Scripture that we know who God is and His character. The Bible demonstrates the lives of those who have lived many years ago for us to learn from their mistakes and good choices. It also teaches absolute right and wrong. Our culture today is all about relativism. "If my own interpretation deems something acceptable, then I can ignore all other oppressive truths, and continue on my merry way." We dare not let that be the guiding authority in our culture. We must return to the Bible.

Some have adopted the thought that the Bible contains the words of God, and they are quick to add that there are some things that just don't apply to our world today. To cherry pick bits that are palatable and leave others off the table is a dangerous thing to do. We need an absolute set of right and wrong, good and bad, to be a society that is not lost in total chaos.

More than thirty people had a hand in writing Scripture over approximately 1,500 years of time. They were led by the Holy Spirit in such a way as to allow their personalities to show through the words, and yet, what they penned, were the very words of God, inspired and perfect in every way.

Hebrews 3:16

*Who were they who heard and rebelled? Were they not all those
Moses led out of Egypt?*

Once upon a time there was a certain gentleman who was known for his constant complaining. Every day he ate his breakfast in a local diner, and the waitresses there made it their personal goal to try to appease his seemingly unsatisfiable personality. His complaints were always minor but sure to be registered. His toast was either too dark or too light, the eggs were undercooked or overcooked, the coffee was too hot or too cool...it seemed impossible to get his breakfast just right. Soon, they decided to keep a record of his complaints to determine what he considered “just right”.

After months of never-ending complaints, they felt they had finally determined his exact preferences, and all gathered around that fateful morning as he was seated and ordered his morning meal. The entire staff made every effort and took special care preparing his meal that day to ensure absolute perfection. His coffee was poured at its ideal temperature, his juice had precisely the right amount of pulp, the toast was impeccably browned, with just a hint of the butter beginning to melt, and his two eggs—one scrambled to absolutely splendid detail, the other sunny

side up, fried with its edges showing just a slight tinge of crisp. The plate was a work of art, perfect in every way.

The head waitress delivered the food, carefully serving from his right side, as he had so often reminded them. Placing a plate fit for royalty gracefully in front of him, she stepped back a bit to see his response. He shook his head in disgust! What could possibly be wrong? She wondered. “Is everything to your liking?” she asked. “Are your eggs OK?” “No”, he complained. “You scrambled the wrong one!”

Complainers abound in our world today. They have always been present in every time frame and in every culture. They are people who find fault and express dissatisfaction. Psychologists group these personalities into two categories. First, there are the chronic complainers. Some research suggests that making a habit of complaining can “re-wire” the brain so that those particular thinking orientations become ingrained. It is possible to re-wire this re-wiring to make it more positive, of course, but chronic complainers probably don’t think it would work all that well.

The second type of complaint is the familiar “venting.” Venting is expressing emotional dissatisfaction. It turns out that people who vent have an agenda. They tend to be focused on themselves and their own—presumably negative—experience. By showing their anger, frustration, or disappointment, they are soliciting attention from their confidantes. They can feel validated by receiving attention and sympathy. Venters are particularly likely to discount advice and proposed solutions to their problems. They

aren't looking to solve anything; they simply want validation.

Moses faced both of these groups of people throughout the entire wilderness trek for nearly forty years. Complaining is a flaw of sinners. It is part of our condition as frail humans who are plagued with a sin nature.

After experiencing the miraculous deliverance from Egypt, with all of the plagues and death God delivered to their enemy, the Israelites still complained bitterly. Repeated dissatisfaction concerning water (Numbers 20:2-5, 21:5), when they had manna from Heaven, they wanted meat (11:4-6). They grumbled about the leadership of Moses (Numbers 14:2-5). Even Aaron and Miriam, Moses' siblings complained about Moses' Cushite wife (Numbers 12:1).

God continued to supply all of their needs. Their clothes did not wear out (Deuteronomy 8:4). Even that seemed to not be enough. According to James 4:1-3, our own dissatisfaction and complaining stem from not getting what we expect or want. Can you spell the word "selfish"?

Our response to life and the friction between our expectations and reality must be tempered by Philippians 2:14-15. There we read:

Do everything without grumbling or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation. Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky.

Those around us are watching our actions and reactions to events in our lives. To eliminate grumbling and complaining from our repertoire will be so unique and noticeable, we will stand out from the crowd in the world we live in—a Godly example that they will admire and maybe desire to apply to their own lives as well.

James 3:16

For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.

First of all, let's define envy, so that we can recognize it better when it raises its ugly head in our lives. Envy has an element of desire in it. We look at other people and deep inside we would wish for that same advantage or positive aspect in our own lives. That desire is not necessarily bad. We should look to the Godly example in others and desire to emulate their practices. The other element, what makes envy a sin, is the resentment that can creep in when we believe that life is going well for the other person, and not for us.

Most sin worms its way into our lives on a hook. Lust offers excitement, greed promises wealth; there are many sins that are at least briefly pleasurable. That's the bait, the wiggly worm that seems so enticing. But sin always comes with a hook. Envy is a bit different. It is, in fishing terms, a lure—it looks so captivating, but in reality it is all hook and no bait. There is no upside, no rush of momentary pleasure. It comes into our lives uninvited. And we accept it all too readily.

Envy is like a lion hunting for a meal. It is never alone. Other members of its pride hide in the brush, waiting for their chance to join in the kill. Idolatry is there, deflecting our eyes off of Christ and refocusing them on the thing that we so desire. Ingratitude is there as well. We allow the lingering thought into our minds that God does not supply for us like He does for someone else. It is just not fair. Pride, the self-centered one, tells us that we deserve the blessing more than the other person does and ultimately, if we attained their standing in life, others would look upon us with the respect that we so obviously deserve more than they.

At the Last Supper, Jesus dealt with this creature we call envy. The greatest human being who ever walked the face of the earth (Hebrews 12:2) was reclining at the table. The only person in the room without any sin whatsoever (Hebrews 4:15), had just shared with His disciples the Passover Meal. It would be one of their last moments together before He surrendered his life as a propitiating sacrifice for their sins (Romans 3:25). He demonstrated a most touching, symbolic event what we now call The Lord's Supper and He washed each of their feet. Jesus was about to allow men to sacrifice Him as an innocent lamb—and a debate started over who was greatest among the twelve men.

It is significant and a bit unnerving how easily this sin reared its ugly head in that room. Jesus had just told them that one of them was a traitor and that He would be mercilessly tortured and murdered on a Roman cross. They should have responded in horror and mourning for what was

about to take place. Instead, they each asserted their prominence in God's plan for the world. Jesus could have lambasted them and severely reprimanded them for their disgusting behavior, but He chose rather to simply take their eyes off of themselves and put their focus back onto Him (Luke 22:25-26).

Envy and selfishness and ambition go hand in hand. They work together seamlessly to create havoc and ruin. The disorder mentioned in this verse is referring to a reordering of God's perfect plan. Our lives should always be: God first (Exodus 20:3-5), others second (Philippians 2:3), and ourselves a very distant third (Philippians 2:5-8). When that order is disrupted, all kinds of sin can grab a foothold in our hearts. Envy always creates strife, an element that never has a positive outcome. Tension, worry, disrespect, and anger are usually then close behind.

We must simply get our lives aligned with God's purpose and plan by putting our focus directly upon Him. There is an acronym I learned many years ago. **J**esus, **O**thers, **Y**ourself. We will only experience true joy when our lives are ordered according to God's model.

1 Peter 3:16

keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.

Verse sixteen is a continuation of a concept begun in verse 15, so we will look at the two verses together. Peter begins this thought with the phrase “*Sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts.*” That statement is at the root origin, the core, of our faith. It is the basis of our existence in Him. It is the basis of our hope.

In the south, hillsides are often covered in magnificent pine trees. As storms rage through an area, it is not uncommon to see a large specimen fallen to the forest floor with a rather sizeable root ball still attached, pulled right out of the ground. Why one drops to the ground, and another remains standing straight and tall is often based on whether or not the tree has a central, deeply running root. It cannot withstand the pressure of the wind without a significant tap root anchoring it steadfastly into the ground. Our hope as Christians is the tap root that gives us stability in the world that is filled with the chaos of the storms of life.

Jesus was asked by His disciples to teach them how to pray. His response was a model prayer that we often refer to as

the “Lord’s Prayer.” It is recorded for us in Matthew 6: 9-13 and begins: “*Our Father which art in Heaven, hallowed by Thy name.*” Our Lord held His Father in very high regard and established for us the premise that His name is to be hallowed. The first priority of Jesus is the name of the Father. And as followers of Jesus, it must be ours as well.

The word translated as “hallowed” in this this prayer, is the very same word Paul uses when he says that we are to “sanctify” Christ. We are to hallow Christ as Lord in our hearts. Jesus and the Father are one, therefore, hallowing God and hollowing Jesus is one and the same thing. Let’s consider that thought for just a moment.

Do we look at life each morning with the attitude that our ultimate purpose in being alive and a Christian is to hallow the name of Jesus? The theme of the Bible, from cover to cover, is the plan for the redemption of man. Crafting and executing His design for our Salvation is a corner stone of who God is. Everything God orchestrates on this earth is fashioned to bring people closer to Him. He is, after all, Emmanuel, God with us. The reality is that we are alive today and given the opportunity to show the world what value and honor we place in the person of Jesus Christ.

“How do we sanctify or hallow Christ as Lord in our hearts?” We declare to the world and point to the hope that we have in God. Our hope, our confidence, our assurance in the name of Jesus and His promises, is the tap root, the anchor, that keeps us standing when others around us fall. We dare not look down on them or present ourselves in pride, but rather in meekness and honesty,

share our testimony by helping them as we are able, so that they cannot point to hypocrisy and bring a black mark to the name of Jesus.

Paul also mentions that we are to be prepared to give our answer, our testimony, to those who see us as holding to a different code of conduct. The original language carries a hint of excitement or zeal with the command. As we experience challenges in life, continuing to hold up our Savior as our complete and only hope, our joy amid the trials will be evident. A dark world notices light when it comes into view. Our hearts must be ready and willing to share with genuine honesty, reflecting the confidence, the hope, that we have in God.

II Peter 3:16

He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction.

One cannot read this passage without the remembering the point of contention that existed between Peter and Paul at one moment in their lives. In Galatians 2:11-21, Paul recounts an episode where he publicly challenged Peter's interpretation of Scripture. Peter was withdrawing from Gentiles and treating them differently than the Jewish brethren, and Paul publicly confronted him and forced him to admit his mistake. Here, that tension seems to be gone, and their relationship restored. It is the mark of a Godly man who can admit his mistake, ask for forgiveness, and restore relationship. Recall how often King David failed God and yet begged for forgiveness when challenged concerning the error of his ways. He was described as "*a man after God's own heart*" (I Samuel 13:14).

Peter's comments at this juncture are referencing Paul's writings. He points out that Paul is very consistent in his message concerning salvation and its characteristics and the necessity for it to be a part of everyone's life. Specifically regarding this matter, Peter has just spent the greater part

of the third chapter speaking of the judgment of God that will be coming upon this earth. He reminds the readers of the great flood of Noah's day, and how God, during the second day of creation, placed the waters into position that would flood the earth, ready and waiting for that day of judgement (II Peter 3:6). Peter continues as he assures everyone that the fire that will one day destroy the earth at the second and final judgement of God, was also created and set in place and is being stored and held for that very day yet to come (II Peter 3:7).

Consistency is the hallmark of Paul's letters to the churches. Peter points out that the content of the Pauline message is coherent and consonant with the rest of the Bible. There may also be a subtle reference here to the concept that as the Holy Spirit influenced and led the writers of Scripture in the process of penning the Word of God, He allowed their personalities to show through the inspired writing. Each of the authors in the Biblical texts has a unique style and choice of vocabulary that is often distinct from others. Somehow, God permitted their temperament, their personal identity, their individuality, to peek through as they wrote, yet perfectly preserving the content and message that is entirely the Word of God.

An infinite God has chosen to reveal Himself to us in written form, with a finite number of pages. That in itself is an astonishing feat. Scripture displays to us everything that God has determined to be necessary for us to understand and comprehend about Him. His mind, His thoughts, His actions are far beyond our ability to grasp and assimilate completely. There exists a significant amount of

mystery regarding God. We must trust the Bible to be correct and, if necessary, leave some of our questions or doubts on the table. They will undoubtedly be answered one day in Heaven.

Because we are dealing with Someone who is so far beyond our comprehension, Scripture will at times be quite deep and complex. But we dare not simply ignore the hard stuff and soak in just the milk of the Word (Hebrews 5:13). God's challenge to us is to continue searching the Scriptures, regardless of our theological degree, or lack thereof. With the Holy Spirit illuminating the Word of God to us as we arrive at a spiritual maturity level capable of understanding, we can tackle the difficult passages with as much enthusiasm as the simple ones.

Peter cautions concerning the misinterpretation of Scripture. It is a wise student of the Word who is very cautious about "proof texts" for one theological idea or another. Our human nature causes us to make things simple so that we can understand them easier. God's way of thought is not necessarily the same. Often, we must look at multiple passages found in the Bible pertaining to the common subject to come to a full understanding of the truth of the Word.

Let me give you an example from what may be the most difficult verse in the Bible. Deuteronomy 28:63 says, "*Just as it pleased the LORD to make you prosper and increase in number, so it will please him to ruin and destroy you. You will be uprooted from the land you are entering to possess.*" The context of this verse is couched in a dire warning from God that

the people of Israel were to follow His commands and decrees no matter what may come their way. Taken simply by itself, we might come to the conclusion that God enjoys toying with humans and is vindictive and enjoys witnessing His people suffer punishment. What a sad understanding of God that would be.

The truth is found when we consult other passages that define for us God's judgement (Psalm 75:7) and glory (Psalm 19:1) and love (Psalm 136:26) and righteousness (Psalm 11:7). When God blesses His people with grace and mercy, His glory is displayed to the universe (II Corinthians 4:15). When He punishes His people in righteousness, His glory is displayed to the universe (Isaiah 48:10). That truth may be a bit difficult to look squarely in the face and embrace. We are not God. We do not naturally think like God. But He shares with us His thoughts, subtly, in passages such as this one in II Peter.

Peter finishes with a warning to not take the interpretation of Scripture lightly, and certainly to avoid purposely twisting it to make it say what we might want to hear. It will end in ruin. My mind goes to the story of Jim Jones, a notorious cult leader of the 60's and 70's. Early in his career he infiltrated the Methodist denomination with the intent of spreading his belief in Marxism using the vehicle of religion. He developed a following as he carefully allied himself with various faith healers and even politicians at a national level and soon felt comfortable enough to leave the Methodist church and strike out on his own. He eventually took his flock of nearly 1,000 people to Guyana and set up a commune that he called Jonestown. Almost immediately,

stories began to leak out about possible child molestation and rape, among other atrocities. As local and international authority began closing in on the truth, he murdered a visiting congressman, Leo Ryan, and then coerced his entire group of followers to commit suicide. Jim Jones distorted and twisted Scripture so far that he left the bodies of 918 members of his congregation, and himself, rotting in the jungle to be found a day later by authorities.

Understanding Scripture in context and truth can be a challenge that is worth the effort. The big theological word is *hermeneutics*. Careful study, consulting other passages found in the Bible, learning to listen to the Holy Spirit's guidance, will make our personal Bible study far more effective. Even the difficult passages.

I John 3:16

This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters.

The ancient Greeks had four different words for love. One word described what we would recognize as romantic love, that fuzzy warm feeling you get when you are with someone that you really enjoy being close to in a physical way. Then there is the love between family and friends. Where people link together, arm in arm, with a common goal or vision. Thirdly, there is the love that someone might have for a favorite pair of slippers or an old dog who has been close for many years. And lastly, the perfect love of God. In Greek it is known as *agape* love, and it is characterized by this verse, being willing to sacrifice one's self for another who may not even deserve your gift to them.

John says that our definition and explanation of love is complete if we comprehend what Christ actually did for us on that cross. To grasp and interpret that moment in history is a challenge to accept and understand. Let's consider four major aspects of God's love.

1. The magnitude of the love of God can be measured by considering how undeserving we are of it. While we were still sinners, before we had an inclination of comprehension of who Jesus is, He went to the cross (Romans 5:6-8). I

firmly believe, had no one ever accepted the gift of salvation offered by God in all of history, the love of God would have compelled Jesus to go to the cross and suffer and die to pay for our sins—to make the offer of salvation and demonstrate love to everyone.

2. We must consider the price He was willing to pay to demonstrate love (John 15:13). Jesus experienced the torment of punishment for our sin, both spiritually and physically. On that cross we heard Him cry out that God had turned His face away from Him (Matthew 27:46). The creator of the universe willingly came into this world as a man in a physical body such as we have, and suffered intensely for us. That descent down to our level was an incredibly huge step.

3. The third measure of God's love is the good that you or I receive from His love. We find that God's intention all along, since before the foundation of the world, was that we spend eternity with Him (John 3:16). The greatest possible gift that we could ever receive is to spend even one moment with God, in His presence, experiencing Him in His fullness and glory. And we are offered an eternity of that perfection!

4. Finally, we must also add an understanding of how much God wanted to show us His love. He did not go to the cross begrudgingly or with the slightest trepidation or reluctance. Hebrews 12:2 probably says it best. *“fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the JOY (emphasis mine) set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.”*

God could have told us for all of eternity what love is. He could have told us for all of eternity that He is love. He

could have told us for all of eternity what characteristics to look for to recognize love. Instead, He chose to SHOW us what love is. And His death on the cross defined His love, declared His love, and demonstrated His love for the entire universe to see. The most memorized verse in the Bible says, “*For God so LOVED (emphasis mine) the world...*”

You see, our salvation, as amazing and awe inspiring as it may be, is not about us. Our salvation was orchestrated to show the universe, both the inhabitants of this earth and the hosts of Heaven, what love is. And our ultimate response to such a great love of God is to share and show that same love to others, by laying down our lives if necessary just as He did.

Revelation 3:16

So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth

The book of Revelation commences with the inclusion of seven letters to seven designated churches. These were actual churches at the time of John's writing, with issues pertinent to each. But these letters are for us today as well. Many expositors through history have posited that the seven churches represent sequential stages of church history. They held that the church in Ephesus, the first mentioned in Revelation, represents the early church of the Apostolic age, Smyrna, the church during the Roman persecution, and so on, all the way to the Laodicean church that represents the church of today. Whether or not that is so is a discussion for another day. Suffice it to say that there are a large number of coincidental issues mentioned in the letter to the church in Laodicea that define our present state of affairs in many of our churches at this moment in history.

We would do well to take note that this letter has nothing good to say about this church. God is condemning on all counts mentioned. The churches we see in America today have many things in common with the Laodicean church. Laodicea was nearly obliterated by an earthquake in AD 60.

The city was a fairly wealthy banking center and had a relatively strong feeling concerning self-sufficiency. They refused help from the Roman Empire and rebuilt the city themselves. They did not need someone else's charity. While that may be an admirable trait for people of a city, it is a dangerous one for a church. We cannot function independently of Christ. We need His power in our lives to be a credible witness in the world. We need His charity.

Having rebuilt the city, Laodicea had one remaining problem that plagued them. Their water supply was severely lacking. So, they piped water through an aqueduct from a nearby mountain to obtain the runoff from the melting snow in spring and summer. But by the time it traveled the length of the aqueduct, powered only by gravity, its slow trek allowed the ice-cold water to warm to air temperature. The suspended sediments precipitated out, making the water nearly undrinkable. In contrast, the town of Hierapolis nearby, had access to multiple hot springs. In every culture, it is common for people to indulge in drinking either cold or hot food and drink. Room temperature, tepid food and drink are rarely as palatable. Jesus was indeed speaking to a people who would have a special understanding of the analogy God used here. Lukewarm, tepid water is disgusting.

The issue at stake is that of spiritual complacency and having little or no desire to serve God with the zeal that He deserves. We are comfortable in our wealth, able to buy our way out of nearly any problem that may arise, and we feel that we do not need the power of the Holy Spirit to dictate anything that may take our eyes off of our goals that

we have set to impress ourselves. Our generous dose of pride has blinded us to the problem at hand. We have not yielded total control of our lives to Jesus.

Pressure to reconstrue church doctrine to fit nicely into a politically correct environment is massive in our culture. However, what God has clearly defined as sin millennia ago, has not changed in any way. Our prevailing culture of the day cannot be allowed to dictate what is considered sin and what is no longer of concern. God warned the Laodicean church that playing with truth in this fashion was a deadly game, with consequences for this life and beyond.

The phrase “*spit you out of my mouth*” could be translated quite adequately as “vomit”. That is a very pointed picture of disgust. God hates sin, and has described it in detail so carefully that it is impossible to miss in His Word. But many churches today are so absorbed by the cultural pressure to be politically correct, they avoid mention at all costs of the sin, and embrace the sinner, without question. Yes, we are to love the sinner, but we are also called to make every effort to eradicate the sin, rather than accept it into the church (Jude 23). It is a difficult balancing act to accept the sinner with loving, open arms, and still condemn the sin with the same hatred as God. But it is what the church has been called to do. The Laodiceans had failed this task miserably.