

# A CLOSER WALK



DEVOTIONS BY  
STEVE TROXEL

VOLUME 4

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## PREFACE

**I**n August of 1996, as my wife and I were on the way to the hospital for the birth of our daughter, I sent a short email to a few friends and family. Unaware at the time, this was the beginning of God's Daily Word Ministries. The updates on my daughter's birth changed to short words of encouragement and scripture verses, and later grew to full devotionals.

Over the last several years, God has led thousands of people from all over the world to be a part of this growing ministry. As of this printing our email list consists of over 27,000 individuals and we have distributed over 100,000 devotional books. This has been a wonderful journey of ever increasing faith.

God's message is a continuous call to draw nearer and to love and trust Him more. This is His message when He first calls us to believe in Jesus for the forgiveness of sin and be restored to a relationship which has been broken for so long. It's also His message when we have journeyed with Him for a long while but are continuously subject to the pulls of the world.

This book is the fourth volume of what is intended to be a six volume set. The devotional messages in each of these books are written to give some instruction from God's Word as well as application and encouragement to draw nearer to God through trust, love and worship. These messages are for those who are seeking as well as those who have trusted Jesus for many years. I firmly believe that, no matter where we are in our relationship with God, we ALL are being called to A Closer Walk!

Steve Troxel

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## RIGHT WHERE HE WANTS US

Joseph was the second youngest son of Jacob and greatly loved by his father. In fact, his brothers developed a jealous hatred for him because their father “loved Joseph more than any of his other sons” (Genesis 37:3). Their hatred for Joseph continued to grow until they “sold him for twenty shekels of silver to the Ishmaelites who took him to Egypt” (Genesis 37:28). Joseph was then sold to Potiphar, the captain of the guard for Pharaoh, and was soon falsely accused by Potiphar’s wife and thrown in jail.

At this point, Joseph could really have felt sorry for himself - things were definitely not going well! Only a short time before, Joseph’s path had seemed well established; his father loved him, he knew where he was going, and his life was filled with joy. Now, locked up and in a foreign land, Joseph’s life seemed to have taken a drastic turn for the worse.

### **Genesis 39:20-22**

*“But while Joseph was there in the prison, the Lord was with him; He showed him kindness and granted him favor in the eyes of the prison warden. So the warden put Joseph in charge of all those held in the prison, and he was made responsible for all that was done there.”*

It's safe to say that all of us, at different times during our walk with the Lord, feel like we've been sent far away and locked up. We feel distanced from God and unable to change our circumstances. Others seem to be pushing all the buttons and we sink into a deep despair.

But is it possible God is much closer than we think? "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you" (Hebrews 13:5). Is it possible He is working (even now!) this terrible situation toward the good? "In all things God works for the good of those who love Him" (Romans 8:28). And is it possible that in the middle of our "prison" God has much work for us to do?

While in jail, Joseph interpreted dreams for Pharaoh's officials (Genesis 40) and was then called to interpret a dream for Pharaoh; "I've heard it said of you that when you hear a dream you can interpret it" (Genesis 41:15). Joseph interpreted Pharaoh's dream and was placed in a position of great responsibility; "You shall be in charge of my palace, and all my people are to submit to your orders" (Genesis 41:40). It was God's plan to place Joseph in control of the distribution of food, and therefore, to save many lives...including the lives of his father and brothers (Genesis 42-48).

No matter what this day brings - no matter how trapped we feel - we must keep looking for God's good and trusting that His plan is unfolding. He is using our circumstances to mold us and draw us close to His side; and He's using our testimony of faith to encourage others to love Him more. We must believe that, even in the middle of our prison, God is in control and we are right where He wants us!

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## SUCH A TIME AS THIS

When the Persians overthrew the Babylonians and allowed the people of Israel to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple (538 BC), not all the Israelites chose to leave their new home. A whole generation had been born and raised under Babylonian captivity and many had become content with their life. The resulting Persian empire contained many Jewish communities.

When Xerxes was King of this vast empire he commanded the Queen to be displayed before all the visiting dignitaries at a banquet. But when the Queen refused, Xerxes removed her title and began to search for a replacement. The search resulted in a young Jewish girl named Esther being made Queen - not a normal position for a young Jew!

Meanwhile, a plot had developed to kill the Jews in all the provinces of Persia. Esther's cousin Mordecai knew of this plot and pleaded with Esther to approach the King for help, but Esther was understandably reluctant. She was being very well cared for and approaching the King without first being invited could lead to death. Mordecai encouraged Esther to view her life as being part of God's wonderful plan.

## **Esther 4:14**

*“For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father’s family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?”*

God allowed Esther to become Queen, not as a reward for being good, but “for such a time as this.” God could have used other methods to save the Jews, but He chose to invite a beautiful young woman to play a part. Esther put her life at risk, persuaded the King, and saved her people from certain destruction.

The wisdom and truth of Mordecai’s words resound through the ages: God’s work WILL be accomplished, His plan WILL unfold, deliverance WILL arise! It’s humbling, and often very freeing, to know that God really doesn’t need us - He’s perfectly capable without our help! But it’s also very comforting to know that God is inviting us to join Him in His work and walk by His side to certain victory.

We may never be invited to a role as dramatic as Esther’s, but we must join our Heavenly Father from right where we are today! We have come to our particular position - no matter how elevated, no matter how low - for the purpose of bringing Him glory and honor. Let’s listen carefully for what He’s asking us to do and understand we’re right where we need to be and right where He wants us! He has created us for a purpose. He has brought us to our present situation for such a time as this.

---

## A LIFETIME OF CONVICTION

**D**aniel was one of the first captives taken by the Babylonians in 605 BC. Upon his arrival in Babylon, Daniel was selected to receive three years of specialized training (as well as special food and drink) to prepare him for service in the palace. This special treatment would have caused Daniel to violate the laws of God, so he “resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine” (Daniel 1:8).

His convictions had a profound impact on those around him - especially his three closest friends who were soon thrown into a fiery furnace for refusing to bow to a golden image; “We want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up” (Daniel 3:18).

Daniel served seventy years under the kings of Babylon and his convictions earned him a place as the most trusted advisor in all the land. When the Persians defeated the Babylonians, the new king even “planned to set {Daniel} over the whole kingdom” (Daniel 6:3). But when the other officials became jealous, they convinced the king to pass a law forbidding prayer to anyone except the king.

Though he knew he would be severely punished, Daniel held to his convictions and prayed to God three times a day. For this violation

of the law, Daniel was thrown into a den of lions; but “God sent His angel, and He shut the mouths of the lions” (Daniel 6:22). When the king saw how God miraculously protected Daniel, he issued the following decree:

**Daniel 6:26**

*“I issue a decree that in every part of my kingdom people must fear and reverence the God of Daniel. For He is the living God and He endures forever.”*

There were many opportunities for Daniel to question his circumstances. He was taken into captivity at a young age, tempted with special treatment, despised by his peers, thrown to the lions, and served an entire lifetime under foreign rulers. But, without a single complaint, Daniel continued to trust God and serve Him without compromise. In the end, Daniel was used to encourage the Jews while in captivity and to draw an entire nation to a greater reverence of God. Shortly after the decree was issued 50,000 Jews were allowed to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple.

Stories like this are scattered all through God’s Word! We may not understand our circumstances or be able to see God’s plan, but we KNOW which way He’s calling us to walk. Let’s continue to serve and trust with all our heart. Let’s walk down His path without turning to the right or to the left. Regardless of our present circumstances, let’s determine once and for all to give Him a lifetime of conviction.

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## THE FATHER'S WILL

**W**e often consider how God uses all kinds of circumstances to draw us close to His side. The purpose of being drawn close is ultimately to be transformed to the image of His Son and to have intimate fellowship with Him for all eternity. But initially, the purpose of being drawn near is so we can be introduced to His Son.

The Kingdom of Heaven is open only to those who truly believe in Jesus. We may think this to be “intolerant,” but if we profess to believe the Bible is true there can be no other conclusion: “Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it” (Matthew 7:13-14). Our Father is drawing us near because the narrow gate is only open to those who are known to His Son.

### **Matthew 7:21-23**

*“Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the Kingdom of Heaven, but only he who does the will of My Father who is in Heaven. Many will say to Me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name drive out demons and perform many mir-*

*acles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from Me, you evil-doers!’”*

Clearly, being “good” does not ensure we are known by Jesus. Neither does going to church, reading our Bible, teaching Sunday School or even writing devotional messages! Jesus knows, and takes away the sin, of “only he who does the will of My Father.”

Fortunately, Jesus also tells us exactly how to do His Father’s will: “For My Father’s will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in Him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day” (John 6:40). The will of our Heavenly Father is to truly know and be known by His Son.

All the wonderful things we do in the name of Jesus count absolutely nothing toward granting us the gift of eternal life. True believers in a risen and glorified Lord will certainly desire to turn from a life of sin and obediently serve; “anyone who does not take his cross and follow Me is not worthy of Me” (Matthew 10:38). But entrance through the gate of eternal life is based **ONLY** on sincere belief, not on the results of belief.

We must spread this message throughout the world and, most importantly, we must receive this message into our own heart! All our “good” will be burned up and cast aside if done without first having placed the entirety of our life in His hands. He is drawing us near because belief in Jesus is both necessary and sufficient for our Salvation. He is drawing us near and inviting us to submit to the Father’s will.

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## A BELIEF THAT SAVES

**I**n the message “The Father’s Will” we saw that not all who do great things for God will enter Heaven, but “only he who does the will of My Father” (Matthew 7:21). We further saw that the Father’s will is “that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in Him shall have eternal life” (John 6:40). We are given the gift of eternal life because of our belief in Jesus, not because of ANYTHING we do; “all our righteous acts are like filthy rags” (Isaiah 64:6).

Salvation can never be earned, it is a gift to those who believe. However, we *must* understand what it means to believe and what changes will occur when we believe. “You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that - and shudder” (James 2:19). A saving belief is much more than just acknowledging God’s existence or even the existence of His Son - even the demons believe this!

Belief in Jesus is never simply an intellectual understanding. Belief implies a humble surrender. We will never “look to the Son” unless we first recognize our eternally lost condition due to sin; and we will never truly “believe in Him” until we accept our complete inability to save ourselves. A drowning man will never reach up for help until he first understands and accepts his need to be rescued.

To be rescued, we must believe so completely that we abandon all other “rescuers” and cling to the only One who can truly save; “any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be My disciple” (Luke 14:33). Giving up everything cannot save us, but true belief reveals the trivial nature of our worldly attachments and creates an understanding that everything belongs to Him. We see our life as lived for Him and do ALL for His glory.

**James 2:14,17**

*“What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? ... In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.”*

Belief must produce a change in our life or we know it is not a true belief - it is nothing more than dead intellectual understanding! At the moment we truly believe, we are “marked in Him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit” (Ephesians 1:13), and we become “a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!” (2 Corinthians 5:17). Belief creates change through the work of the Holy Spirit!!

If we lack the evidence of a changed life, we must not focus on creating the change. This type of change becomes self-righteous “filthy rags.” Rather, we must return to the cross and place ALL our trust in Jesus, believing He has paid the penalty for our sin and has granted us passage through the narrow gate to eternal life. As we completely turn over control to our Heavenly Father, fruit and good deeds will abound. Our life will be forever changed, but only when we begin with a belief that saves.

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## ETERNALLY SECURE

**I**n the last two messages we've considered how the gift of eternal life is given to "everyone who looks to the Son and believes in Him" (John 6:40). But we also saw that belief is much more than a mere acknowledgement of existence; "Even the demons believe that - and shudder" (James 2:19). Eternal life is a gift given only to those who so intensely believe that Jesus is the only way to receive forgiveness that they stand before a living God and enter into an eternal covenant.

Covenants were first introduced by God to Noah after the flood; "I establish My covenant with you: Never again will all life be cut off by the waters of a flood" (Genesis 9:11). Over the years, God made covenants with Abraham (Genesis 15), the nation of Israel through Moses (Exodus 19), and with David (2 Samuel 7). In each case, God initiated the covenant and clearly established the guidelines.

Through the prophet Jeremiah, God spoke about the new covenant He would make through Jesus; "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God and they will be my people" (Jeremiah 31:33). This new covenant was designed to be permanent and under God's complete protection: "I will make an everlasting covenant with them:

I will never stop doing good to them, and I will inspire them to fear Me, so that they will never turn away from Me” (Jeremiah 32:40). Through the prophet Ezekiel, God gave further indication of how this would be accomplished:

**Ezekiel 36:26-27**

*“I will give you a new heart and put a new Spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put My Spirit in you and move you to follow My decrees and be careful to keep My laws.”*

When we truly believe in Jesus we enter into a covenant and God transforms our heart by His Spirit, “a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance” (Ephesians 1:14). At that moment we are “sealed for the day of redemption” (Ephesians 4:30). And when we enter into His saving covenant, we are purchased with the blood of Jesus: “You are not your own; you were bought at a price” (1 Corinthians 6:19-20).

We are still called to continue in the faith, but God has promised we WILL continue; “He will keep you strong to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Corinthians 1:8). He is the giver and sustainer of eternal life; “I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish” (John 10:28).

There is debate about whether this covenant can ever be broken; but perhaps this debate only distracts us from the greater truth. We are called to love God and continue to love Him with all our heart. This calling is clear! Let’s remain within His arms of love, and trust that as we do, we are eternally secure.

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## GODLY COMPASSION

As we open our hearts to minister to those around us, we soon discover we live in an imperfect world full of sickness, heartache, and frustrations. Many of us (many more than we realize) are facing trials which are sometimes quite severe. When we are finally invited into someone's private world and allowed to hear of their pain, it can be difficult to know what to do or say.

As we grow in grace and knowledge of Jesus, we learn of His truths: "Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances" (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18). We understand and usually have some actual experience with God's loving plan and purpose; "in all things, God works for the good of those who love Him" (Romans 8:28). But there are times when this type of advice - even this type of truth - can be a little cold and fail to comfort or draw someone closer to God.

While it's absolutely true that God will use our pain and suffering for His glory, it may not be the first response someone needs to hear when they enter a difficult trial; "There is a time for everything...a time to be silent and a time to speak" (Ecclesiastes 3:1,7). We must learn to be more sensitive to the real need.

When Lazarus became very sick, Mary and Martha sent word to Jesus but He did not come until after Lazarus died. Mary fell at Jesus' feet and cried: "Lord if You had been here, my brother would not have died" (John 11:32). At that moment, Jesus did NOT begin preaching "Rejoice in the Lord always!" (Philippians 4:4). There would be other opportunities for sermons, other opportunities to speak about faith and trust, but this was a time for compassion.

### **John 11:33,35**

*"When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, He was deeply moved in spirit and troubled...Jesus wept."*

The Creator of the Universe wept! From the beginning of time, Jesus knew He was going to raise Lazarus from the dead; He knew many lives would soon be changed through this miracle. But "Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus" (John 11:5). Though this pain and sorrow was necessary in the context of God's sovereign plan, these were real people who were grieving and Jesus took time to show He truly cared and understood their pain.

The world is in great need of the healing power of Jesus Christ. Sin has caused separation from God and left many lives in a mess. As we minister through encouragement and the truth of God's Word, we are called to do so while "speaking the truth in love" (Ephesians 4:15) - but love does not exist outside of a relationship. And in a loving relationship we will often best demonstrate God's truth by listening and comforting with a Godly compassion.

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## ETERNAL HEALING

**I**n the message “Godly Compassion” we saw how Mary and Martha watched Lazarus become increasingly sick. They knew the healing power of Jesus and had sent for His help, but by the time Jesus arrived Lazarus had died. The sisters were filled with sorrow and cried out: “Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died” (John 11:21,32). At this, Jesus was troubled and compassionately wept with those who had gathered (John 11:35).

Jesus genuinely cared about the sorrow and pain of those who knew and loved Lazarus; but remember, Jesus had intentionally allowed Lazarus to die; “when He heard that Lazarus was sick, He stayed where He was two more days” (John 11:6). And if Jesus would have really wanted to heal Lazarus, He wouldn’t have even needed to be near. When He had healed the royal official’s son (who was in a bed twenty miles away), He did so by simply speaking a word: “You may go. Your son will live” (John 4:50).

Yes, Jesus allowed Lazarus to die. For in God’s all-knowing plan, the need to strengthen the faith of those around Lazarus was more important than healing his illness.

## **John 11:40**

*“Then Jesus said, ‘Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?’”*

God had prepared a miracle which would cause many others to believe and bring glory and honor to His name: “Father, I thank You that You have heard Me...I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that You sent Me” (John 11:41,42). Jesus then proceeded to raise Lazarus from the dead! “Lazarus, come out!” (John 11:43).

We’ve all been in bad situations which have caused us to cry out and wonder why God didn’t just make things “right.” Why didn’t He remove the enemy, restore our finances, or take away the hurt? And how many times have we become burdened by the apparent injustice in the world; “I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked...surely in vain have I kept my heart pure” (Psalm 73:3,13).

God has the ability to “fix” every situation, but His plan is so much more. His plan is for us to know Him and His glory; to trust Him and grow while being strengthened through every trial; to continue to be “conformed to the likeness of His Son” (Romans 8:29). His plan is to prepare us for an eternity in His presence.

We must trust God to refine and strengthen our faith - even if by fire! No matter what trials we face, we must trust that “in all things God works for the good of those who love Him” (Romans 8:28). And we must continue to trust He is at work in our lives (even right now) to accomplish a true and eternal healing.

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## CONSISTENT TRUST

**I**n the message “Eternal Healing” we saw that God’s plan will often allow trials for the purpose of bringing us to a greater understanding of His glory. God’s desire is for us to turn our eyes from the things we can see and begin to trust the things which are unseen; “for what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal” (2 Corinthians 4:18).

This lesson is obviously important as we face extreme hardship, but it’s even more necessary as the trials begin to fade. The temporary things of this world (even the good wholesome things) will never satisfy the deep longing of our heart. We will always hunger for more until we place the entirety of our life firmly in the unseen hand of God - the same loving hand which holds all of creation.

Trusting in what we cannot see is the very essence of our faith; “Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see” (Hebrews 11:1). We will never find true contentment and peace until we completely “trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding” (Proverbs 3:5). Our trust should be consistent and invade every area of our life.

If we say we trust that Jesus Christ, who “was with God in the beginning” (John 1:2), and

who, “being in very nature God” (Philippians 2:6), came to die so we may live; “in Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins” (Ephesians 1:7), then we must also completely trust that “God works for the good of those who love Him” (Romans 8:28). Saying we trust in Jesus for our eternity without trusting Him to guide and protect us during our daily walk is like trusting in the need for air while refusing to breathe. Both are a false trust and will ultimately lead to death.

### **Romans 8:32**

*“He who did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us all - how will He not also, along with Him, graciously give us all things?”*

God loves us so much that He gave us His absolute best; “while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8). This love assures us He will give exactly what we require to become sons and daughters who glorify His name. God will not give up on a project which cost Him the life of His Son; “He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion” (Philippians 1:6).

When we give Him our life through faith in Jesus, we must also trust He will not allow the fire to get hotter than we can stand nor the load heavier than we can bear - He will never leave us nor forsake us (Hebrews 13:5). We must trust in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of our sins and then focus on what is eternal as we give Him a lifetime of consistent trust.

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## AN ANXIOUS HEART

In the message “Consistent Trust” we were encouraged to “trust in the Lord with all your heart” (Proverbs 3:5). We saw how a consistent trust ought to invade all areas of our life. We must be able to trust God for our eternity as well as our daily walk. A good measure of our trust (or lack of trust) is in our level of anxiety.

Being anxious, or having anxiety, is defined as being mentally troubled with worry or concern. Unfortunately, we have all been battling anxiety ever since Adam ate the forbidden fruit and tried in vain to hide from God; “I heard You in the garden, and I was afraid” (Genesis 3:10). The negative effects of anxiety were understood three thousand years ago when King Solomon wrote his proverbs of wisdom; “An anxious heart weighs a man down, but a kind word cheers him up” (Proverbs 12:25).

Anxiety remained a necessary topic as Paul preached the Good News of Jesus. Almost in the same breath that he instructs us to “Rejoice in the Lord always!” (Philippians 4:4), Paul teaches on removing anxiety from our life; “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God” (Philippians 4:6).

When we find ourself being overly concerned or mentally troubled about ANYTHING, we must go to God (with thanksgiving) and give our burdens to Him. This doesn't mean we ignore our problems, but we must learn to view the things of this world against the backdrop of eternity. The concerns of this life always fade as we compare them to the eternal glory of His Kingdom.

**Matthew 6:25,34**

*“Therefore I tell you, do not worry {or be anxious} about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? But seek first His Kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”*

When we feel weighed down, pressured, or stressed - when concerns are coming in fast motion from all directions and we don't know where to begin - we must stop and take a long, deep breath! We must refocus on Jesus and His Word. We must be reminded of eternity in the presence of a loving God and diligently seek His Kingdom; “make every effort to enter that rest” (Hebrews 4:11).

As we draw closer to our Heavenly Father, our eyes become adjusted to His light and we see He has already given all we really need. As we love Him more, all fear is removed: “perfect love drives out fear” (1 John 4:18). And as we trust Him more and more, we will receive His gift of peace and no longer live with the burdening weight of an anxious heart.

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## CRUCIFIED AND RESURRECTED

**O**ur new life begins with faith in Jesus for the forgiveness of our sin. When we are “born again,” we cross from an eternal death to an eternal life; “whoever hears My word and believes Him who sent Me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life” (John 5:24). Sin caused our condemnation and required our death; but Jesus took our sin and received sin’s punishment. When we identify ourself with Christ, we also identify with His death; “Or don’t you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death?” (Romans 6:3).

True Salvation requires that we are “baptized into Christ,” that we completely identify with His life and sacrifice on the cross. He was put to death for our sins, and has crucified the old sinful nature of all who believe; “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me” (Galatians 2:20).

The old nature has been crucified - it is dead! Granted, we often attempt to bring that comfortable old nature back to life and allow it to war with the things of the Spirit, but the

old nature can no longer take control - it can no longer win!

This understanding will bring a glorious victory and freedom. The life we live in this body is not our own, we have died with Christ; "The world has been crucified to me, and I to the world" (Galatians 6:14). And if we are already dead, how can anything in this world possibly harm us or cause us to fear?

### **Romans 6:4-5**

*"We were therefore buried with Him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. If we have been united with Him like this in His death, we will certainly also be united with Him in His resurrection."*

The purpose of being crucified with Christ is so we can also be resurrected with Him and live a resurrected life. We have not been crucified so we can simply wait to be called Home and taken out of the world. The new life we have received ought to set us free - free from the pulls of this world, free from the world's definition of success and failure, free from the concern of how others evaluate our life, and free to live each day for the glory of God.

Our lives must be a witness to the power of the gospel. If the gospel message resides in our heart, it WILL cause a change in the way we live today! We will be dead to the power of sin but alive in the contented joy of Christ. Let's demonstrate the power of the gospel by living a life which is both crucified and resurrected.

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## LABORING IN VAIN

As we are “crucified with Christ” (Galatians 2:20) and live “united with Him in His resurrection” (Romans 6:5), we begin to view more and more of our life through the eyes of God. What we once saw as critically important begins to fade; and what we once neglected, we now begin to see as beloved by our Heavenly Father.

We can no longer build according to our old set of priorities. In fact, when we truly come in full submission to the cross of Jesus, we find we can no longer build anything according to our own design or in our own strength. We discover we must make God the Master Builder of every area of our life or we are wasting precious time, energy, and resources.

### **Psalms 127:1**

*“Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labor in vain. Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchmen stand guard in vain.”*

Our life goes by so fast and our eternal vision is so very limited. Many of us are frantically building our castle and have failed to see we are building with sand which will crumble with the swell of the next tide. We may be struggling to build in our marriage, chil-

dren, parents, job, school, friends, or even our ministry. But if we are expending great effort without results which are pleasing to God, we must honestly ask the question: “Who is doing the building?”

Even if our effort meets with apparent success, we must ask the same question and relinquish controls to God. Our greatest projects, if built in our own strength, will one day pass through the fire and be consumed; “the fire will test the quality of each man’s work” (1 Corinthians 3:13). The standard of quality is determined by God, not man! It will be a sad day if we find we have spent a lifetime building that which is consumed by fire; “he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames” (1 Corinthians 3:15).

In order for God to properly build, we must first submit to the refining He desires to accomplish within us. He will mold us into the likeness of His Son as we are fully devoted to loving Him, learning His Word, and applying His Truth as the absolute foundation of our life: “Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says” (James 1:22-24).

God is not just the best solution, He is the ONLY solution worth pursuing. Heavenly Father, help us to not waste another moment of this precious life you have given. Help us see where we have taken too much control and give us the strength and courage to turn over ALL to You. Dear Lord, work through us to build what will last for eternity! Beginning right now, help us to stop laboring in vain!

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## THE ROCK OF OBEDIENCE

**I**n the message “Laboring In Vain” we saw we must remove ourself from the construction process and allow God to build every area of our life. We still must put forth effort - sometimes GREAT effort - but we can no longer build according to our own plans or rely on our own abilities; “Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labor in vain” (Psalm 127:1).

We also saw one way to ensure God is building is to live according to the truth of His Word and “do what it says” (James 1:22). We cannot serve our Heavenly Father without aligning our life to His Word. At the end of a passage commonly referred to as “The Sermon on The Mount” (Matthew 5-7), Jesus stated the importance of being obedient to His Word.

### **Matthew 7:24-27**

*“Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand.*”

*The rain came down, the streams rose,  
and the winds blew and beat against that  
house, and it fell with a great crash."*

In this wonderful mountainside message, Jesus taught about Salvation; "enter through the narrow gate" (Matthew 7:13), but He also taught extensively about basic Christian living - what Paul referred to as being "in step with the Spirit" (Galatians 5:25). Jesus said that both the foolish and the wise man heard His words and set out to build a house, but only one man followed God's design - and only one house remained standing after the storm.

Salvation is never earned by "doing." But true believers will strive to be obedient to what Jesus taught; "If you hold to My teachings, you are really My disciples" (John 8:31). We are obedient because our heart has been transformed and His Spirit now compels us to follow; "We know that we have come to know Him if we obey His commands" (1 John 2:3). We may stumble and sometimes fall, we may even become frustrated at the frequency of our falls, but if we are a child of God we will continue to get back up and move toward obedience because of who we are in Christ!

Each of us have been given a choice on how to build our life - our way or God's way. We must allow our Heavenly Father to become our Master Builder. We must trust Him with ALL our heart as His plan for our life unfolds. He promises to work through us to build something eternally beautiful that will weather all storms. But His promise only holds if we have the faith to allow Him to build upon the rock of obedience.

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## A LIFETIME OF TRANSFORMATION

**I**n the message “The Rock of Obedience” we considered our call to hear His words AND to “put them into practice” (Matthew 7:24). In fact, we saw that obedience to His Word is an indicator of our eternal position in Christ; “We know that we have come to know Him if we obey His commands” (1 John 2:3).

Salvation is a work of the Spirit, a “circumcision of the heart” (Romans 2:29), for those who truly believe in Jesus Christ. This miraculous work of the Spirit will always cause a change and will always produce fruit. However, we must balance this truth with the understanding that Spiritual change is a process which is sometimes painfully slow. Each new creation in Christ is given the Holy Spirit as a guide, but we will spend the rest of our life learning who we really are in Christ and how to “keep in step with the Spirit” (Galatians 5:25).

Even Paul recognized his Spiritual maturity was not complete. He had the unique opportunity to receive truths and understanding directly from God; “this is what we speak, not with words taught by human wisdom, but in words taught by the Spirit” (1 Corinthians 2:13), but Paul still fell short of God’s glory and had to strive to reach the place Christ desired.

### **Philippians 3:10-12**

*“I want to know Christ and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in His sufferings, becoming like Him in His death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.”*

Paul knew the goal of his life was to bring glory and honor to God by living in the fullness and power of the resurrection. He knew he was to live a submitted life as one who was born “into an inheritance that can never perish” (1 Peter 1:3-4). But he also knew he had not fully attained this goal.

At the moment of salvation, Jesus “took hold” of our life. Every single day we are given a new opportunity to pick up the pieces and bring Him glory and honor in ALL we do as we “press on toward the goal” (Philippians 3:14). We only arrive at the goal when we are called Home and see Him face to face, when we are fully “transformed into His likeness” (2 Corinthians 3:18). But until that time, we are to press forward in the obedience of worship, holiness, and eternal priorities.

No matter how difficult our current circumstances, how terrible our past mistakes or how seemingly hopeless our future, the only step under consideration is our very next. We must begin today to live as a new creation in Christ who desires to step in obedience and glorify His name. Then, we must continue to walk through a lifetime of transformation.

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## FREEDOM FROM WANT

On January 6th, 1941, President Franklin D. Roosevelt gave his State of the Union speech to Congress and articulated four freedoms which he said were fundamental American values. These freedoms were, Freedom of Worship, Freedom of Speech, Freedom from Fear, and Freedom from Want.

Norman Rockwell, made a series of paintings to correspond with these four freedoms, and these paintings were circulated in the Saturday Evening Post from February to March 1943. The most famous of the four paintings was the one titled Freedom from Want.

In this famous painting a large family is gathered around a dinner table. The picture is full of happy faces and lots and lots of food. But the focus of the picture is an elderly woman setting down a cooked turkey which is big enough to feed a small village. Mr. Rockwell is a wonderful painter but I believe he gravely missed the point in his depiction of the freedom from want. He would even later say of his work that the painting better depicted overabundance - or perhaps overindulgence.

The origin of Thanksgiving in the United States goes back to the founding of the country, but the holiday is now a time when people gather together, eat too much food, watch too

much television, and some actually try to reflect on reasons to be thankful. The idea of a time of thanksgiving would be a great worldwide time of reflection - but we need to have a much better concept of thankfulness and what it really means to have freedom from want.

### **1 Thessalonians 5:16-18**

*“Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.”*

Giving thanks should never be dependent on our circumstances - never based on what we have, how full our table or bank account. This is a true freedom which only comes by understanding the gift of Salvation, the joy of eternal glory, and who we are in Christ as we live the rest of our days as a child of God. Paul expressed this thankfulness best in his letter to the Philippians: “I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well-fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through Him who gives me strength.” (Philippians 4:12-13).

Let’s learn the secret of a thankful heart by learning that thankfulness is not dependent on what we see. True and lasting thanksgiving is only obtained through faith in Jesus Christ and God’s free gift of Salvation, and then by living with an understanding of what this gift implies - this is freedom in it’s fullest sense. Contentment is not obtained through having more, but by understanding what we already have. Let’s begin today to live in peace with a true freedom from want.

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## A VESSEL OF PURITY

When Jesus was asked to identify the greatest commandment, He said it was to “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength” (Mark 12:30). God wants ALL of our love! He has no desire to share our love with any of the little “gods” of this world; “For the Lord your God is a jealous God” (Deuteronomy 4:24).

Giving God the fullness of our love requires that we live a very focused and holy life; “But just as He who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do” (1 Peter 1:15). Our love must be intently focused on the holy things of God rather than the corrupted things of this world. Any time we allow our love for God to mix with our love for the world, the worldly love initially dilutes and eventually completely overtakes any love for God.

### **James 3:11-12**

*“Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? My brothers, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.”*

Are we trying to walk on both sides of the fence? Do we maintain our “Godly” activities

along side our “ungodly” activities? Do we praise God and discuss Biblical issues during certain portions of the week and then lust after the world during the other? If so, beware! The ungodly will soon overtake and totally consume the Godly - and we won’t even be aware it’s happening. If we’re not careful, we will one day look at what consumes our attention and say, “How did I come to this place in my life? When did I leave God’s path?”

The good news is we have been given the Holy Spirit as the Great Purifier. If we make the time to carefully listen, He will “guide us into all truth” (John 16:13). If we submit to His leading, He will strain, sift, distill, and refine until all that remains is the fresh and the pure.

Purity does not come by separation from the world, it comes as our heart is wholly separated unto God. We have been planted amongst the weeds of the world and there we will remain until the day of the great harvest (Matthew 13:24-30). But while we must live and minister among the things of this world, and while we can certainly be thankful for some of God’s worldly blessings and provisions, we must never give our worship to the things of this world: “Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him” (1 John 2:15).

Jesus has made us into a new vessel and asked that we be filled with what is pure and Holy. Let’s stop mixing fresh and salty water, Godly and ungodly devotion. Let’s commit every area of our life (without compromise!) to our Heavenly Father and glorify Him in all we do by maintaining a vessel of purity.

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## DESTROY THE ITES

Moses had led the people of Israel through the desert for 40 years and was now preparing them to cross the Jordan River into the promised land of Canaan. As part of this preparation, Moses reminded the people how God had provided for all their past needs and reviewed the laws by which God expected them to live; “and if we are careful to obey all this law before the Lord our God, as He has commanded us, that will be our righteousness” (Deuteronomy 6:25).

The people of Israel would be brought into a right relationship with God as they worshipped Him and obeyed His commands. But as they entered the promised land, there were enemies to be removed.

### **Deuteronomy 7:1-2**

*“When the Lord your God brings you into the land you are entering to possess and drives out before you many nations - the Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites, seven nations larger and stronger than you - and when the Lord your God has delivered them over to you and you have defeated them, then you must destroy them totally. Make no treaty with them, and show them no mercy.”*

These enemies posed a serious physical threat, but the longer term danger was to their Spiritual survival. God wanted these “Ites” completely destroyed because their worldly gods would continually pull at the heart of His chosen people; “Be careful, or you will be enticed to turn away and worship other gods” (Deuteronomy 11:16).

This can be a difficult message with today’s soft view of sin. But there is an important lesson for each of us who desire a close relationship with God. Today, we have a new path to righteousness; “This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe” (Romans 3:22). But God still desires the entirety of our heart and expects us to turn from anything which pulls us away from an unhindered and unrestrained devotion.

As he leads us into His promised land of rest and peace, there will always be enemies which entice us to turn from God: many temptations which compete for our time and thoughts...and for our worship. These “Ites” will appear stronger than our ability to conquer. But as we follow hard after God, He will grant us victory; “the Lord your God will drive out those nations before you” (Deuteronomy 7:22).

What enemies take us away from the worship of God? What addictions, activities, desires or fears are consuming our heart and keeping us from being focused on Jesus - keeping us from a closer relationship with our Heavenly Father? Let’s be determined to possess the land and fully give our heart to God. Let’s identify the enemies which hinder our walk and, without mercy, let’s completely destroy the Ites.

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## NEWLY DEFINED LOVE

**I**n the message “A Vessel of Purity” we were told; “Do not love the world or anything in the world” (1 John 2:15); and in the message “Destroy the Idols” we saw our call to destroy, without compromise, those areas which take us away from the worship of God. While these messages are absolutely true, they must be placed in the context of the entire Word of God to be properly understood.

God’s Word is a message of love: His love for us and His call for us to love Him. We are to receive His love, return His love, and demonstrate His love by loving others. In addition, we ought to be thankful for His blessings of provision and for the beauty of His creation. We ought to be so filled with peace and contentment that we love our life...or should we?

### **Luke 14:26**

*“If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters - yes, even his own life - he cannot be My disciple.”*

These may be the most difficult words Jesus ever spoke. Clearly, Jesus is not calling us to a life of hate. That would be completely inconsistent with the rest of God’s Word; “A new

command I give you: Love one another” (John 13:34), and “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Mark 12:31). The problem is not with Jesus’ use of the word hate but with our understanding of the word love. With the same word we say we love our food, our pet, our spouse, our home and...our Jesus? Oh Lord, forgive us!

Jesus is not saying we should love our life or family any less, rather that we should love our Heavenly Father more - much more! He is saying that unless our love for God is so great that our love for the things of this world appears as hatred by comparison, then we do not yet understand the love He desires and deserves.

We are called to love God with ALL our heart, soul, mind, and strength. But this love cannot be properly defined with our limited vocabulary. As we live a life of love, NOTHING must ever come close to competing with His rightful place on the Throne. He alone is worthy of our worship and praise - He alone is worthy of our true love.

There are certainly some addictive behaviors and time consuming bad habits which greatly hinder our relationship with God: these must be removed and destroyed without mercy or compromise. But most areas of our life can be placed in proper order by elevating our love and passion for God. Let’s allow our attachment and feelings toward the blessings of this world become as dust when compared with the mountain of hunger and passion for our Heavenly Father. We may never have the proper word, but let’s live with a heart dedicated to loving God with a newly defined love.

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## ENTER THE MISSION FIELD

The apostles were instructed by the best Teacher the world has ever known and witnessed the miracles of Jesus' life as well as His death and resurrection. It had been forty days since Jesus walked victoriously out of the tomb and He was now returning to the loving arms of His Father; but first, Jesus visited with His friends one last time and gave them a charge which would last the rest of their life.

### **Acts 1:8**

*“You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”*

Jesus' death initiated the new covenant agreement between God and man; “this cup is the new covenant in My blood, which is poured out for you” (Luke 22:20). And on the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit was given to all who believed and had entered into this new covenant. Jesus' final instructions to the apostles were for them to take this message of hope, this message of the new covenant in Christ and the power of His Spirit, into the mission field.

Jesus defined the mission field as “to the ends of the earth,” meaning the extent of the known world (as far as anyone could possibly

travel), but He also said to witness “in all Judea and Samaria” (the surrounding area or countries), and “in Jerusalem” (the city where they currently lived). Jesus was saying: wherever you go - whether near or far - be My witness and boldly proclaim the good news; “He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant” (2 Corinthians 3:6).

All who truly profess Jesus as Lord and Savior have been sealed and empowered by His Spirit and are now to be witnesses of the Gospel; “We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making His appeal through us” (2 Corinthians 5:20). Our mission field will not necessarily be in a foreign land, or different language, but it WILL be filled with those who need to hear, see, taste and feel the message of Jesus - and our life ought to be a clear demonstration of that message!

We should praise God for the missionaries in foreign lands. They are accomplishing a vital service and are in need of our prayers and support. But we should also praise God for ALL who faithfully look for the hurting and lonely, who seek out those in need of love and encouragement, who minister the love of Jesus and proclaim His message through all they do - right where they are!

“I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest” (John 4:35). The field is all around us: in our church, our neighborhood, our work place...even in our own family! Let’s accept the charge today to be faithful ambassadors and proclaim the good news wherever He leads. Let’s boldly step out in faith and enter the mission field!

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## MOTIVATED BY OBEDIENCE

**I**n the message “Enter The Mission Field” we saw how God has called us to be His witnesses and “ministers of a new covenant” (2 Corinthians 3:6). Our mission field may span the globe or be focused on a few, but our ministries are all the same - we are to glorify God as we proclaim the true gospel of Christ through our words as well as the actions of our life.

Let me start by first saying, “Welcome to the ministry!” If you have dedicated your life to following Jesus, you ARE in full time ministry!! Ministry work can be extremely rewarding as we share the truth and witness real change in the life of someone God places in our mission field. However, ministry work can also be very frustrating and discouraging whenever we forget the reason for our ministry and take our eyes off the One we are serving.

### **1 Thessalonians 2:4,6**

*“We speak as men approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel. We are not trying to please men but God, who tests our hearts. We were not looking for praises from men, not from you or anyone else.”*

God has entrusted us with His gospel message, and we must minister out of an obedience

to this trust and a desire to glorify Him in all we do. Anytime we find ourself motivated by results or praises for our effort, we are setting up for failure and our heart is no longer passing His test. God will often bless us and confirm His leading with fruit in our ministry, but our focus and motivation must always remain on loving Him through our simple obedience. He has called and we must follow for a lifetime - regardless of the result of each individual step.

We must serve and trust that God will bring the harvest in His perfect timing; “for the battle is not yours, but God’s” (2 Chronicles 20:15). These are God’s battles and ultimately His harvest. Our job is to simply enter the field, plow, and continue to scatter seed. The praises of men will come and go, but the joy of knowing God is glorified by our obedience is steady and unshakable.

Our efforts may sometimes seem futile and we may feel completely unqualified, but we must continue - we have been “approved by God!” Our love and encouragement toward others may appear to have minimal effect, but a small nudge today can cause a lifetime of change. An offer of prayer can give renewed hope and a testimony of God’s faithfulness in times of trial can soften a heart to the saving gospel of Jesus.

As each of us enter the mission field, God will use us to change the lives of those He places in our path. One day when we stand in His presence, we may be allowed to see the true impact of our service, but until that time we must continue to serve and be motivated by obedience.

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## TRUST HIS VISION

**A**fter entering the promised land, the Israelites were ruled by a series of Judges. This time was characterized by God's discipline when the hearts of His children turned away, and deliverance when they repented and cried out for help. Unfortunately, this cycle was repeated many times! Deborah led the Israelites to forty years of peace, but then; "the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord, and for seven years He gave them into the hands of the Midianites" (Judges 6:1).

After seven years of oppression, "Midian so impoverished the Israelites that they cried out to the Lord for help" (Judges 6:6). The Israelites were living in such fear that when God answered their cry and called Gideon to be the next deliverer of Israel, he was "threshing wheat in a winepress to keep it from the Midianites" (Judges 6:11). Gideon would eventually lead a small army to victory and rule Israel for another forty years; but when God first called, he was fearfully sifting grain for his next loaf of bread.

### **Judges 6:14-15**

*"The Lord turned to him and said, 'Go in the strength you have and save Israel out of Midian's hand. Am I not sending you?' 'But Lord,' Gideon asked, 'how can*

*I save Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family.”*

Gideon was scared and saw himself as one with little worth, “the least in my family,” but God saw the next brave leader of a nation. Gideon saw weakness, but God saw strength. Gideon saw his past failures, but God saw the future victories of a mighty warrior. Gideon’s vision required him to fearfully work for his next loaf, but God’s vision was calling Gideon to boldly lead many others closer to His side.

God sees each of us much differently than we see ourself; “Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart” (1 Samuel 16:7). Not only does God see deeper, He sees with an expanded Spiritual spectrum which we can scarcely imagine. Our Father is intimately aware of all our failings - and He loves us anyway! He not only sees who we are, but also who we will become as our heart is fully devoted to Him and we learn to walk in step with His Spirit...He sees every opportunity we will ever have to glorify His name.

Let’s put aside the baggage of our past which clouds and distorts our view. Let’s refuse to look through the filter of our present understanding and perceived limitations; “fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen” (2 Corinthians 4:18). God has called us into His Glorious Kingdom, uniquely equipped us for His service, and given us an assignment to share His love and truth. Our Heavenly Father sees our full potential as we walk in His strength. Let’s answer the call and move forward with confidence as we trust His vision.

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## THE CRY OF OUR HEART

In the beginning, after the creation of the heavens and the earth, “God created man in His own image” (Genesis 1:27). The image of God did not refer to our physical appearance but rather the character of our spirit. The spirit of man was created in the image of God for the purpose of dwelling with Him for all eternity; “God saw all that He had made, and it was very good” (Genesis 1:31).

But when man sinned, a separation immediately formed with God; “they hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden” (Genesis 3:8). Though man was physically banished from the garden and forbidden to experience the joy of walking side by side with his Creator - and though sin and the resulting separation was inherited by all future generations - there forever remains a damaged spirit which longs to return home.

### **Psalm 84:1-2**

*“How lovely is Your dwelling place, O Lord Almighty! My soul yearns, even faints, for the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God.”*

This passage was written by one who knew God and the joy of His presence. But the author

also knew of man's inability to be satisfied with anything less.

Before we know God we attempt to stop the cry with all sorts of pacifiers, but nothing satisfies. We pursue pleasures of the flesh, challenges of the mind, and advancement in status, but the cry remains. Sooner or later (Oh Lord, may it be sooner!) we realize that Solomon was correct when he said; "I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind" (Ecclesiastes 1:14).

Many things of this world are worthwhile as they are done for the glory of God; but in the sense that they attempt to satisfy, they are all meaningless. The ONLY answer to the unsettled and restless longing deep within our soul is to return to a restored relationship with God. When we place our life in the Father's Hands through faith in Jesus, He gives us His Spirit and says, Welcome Home! "The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children" (Romans 8:16). And as we learn to walk in this restored relationship, we will finally be at peace.

There are so many things of this world which can occupy our time and consume our thoughts, but none that will truly satisfy. Our search can continue until our time on earth is gone but the emptiness will remain. Let's return to the Father today and live the rest of our days fully devoted to loving Him. Let's put an end to the chasing and wandering, and finally allow Him to satisfy the cry of our heart.

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## HE WILL BE FOUND

**I**n the message “The Cry of Our Heart” we saw how the Psalm writer longed to be close to God; “my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God” (Psalm 84:2). The writer knew his heart would only be satisfied by being in the presence of God; but unfortunately, not many of the children of Israel shared this same understanding.

The Israelites continually rebelled and failed to devote their hearts to God. They sought pleasure and security in the world, and turned to worship idols and false gods. And though God sent many messengers to call His children home, they refused to change. Finally, God allowed the armies of Babylon to destroy the temple and lead the people into seventy years of captivity. But even in this most severe discipline, God demonstrated His love and true desire for His Children to return Home.

### **Jeremiah 29:10-13**

*“I will come to you and fulfill My gracious promise to bring you back to this place. For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call upon Me and come and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. You will seek Me and*

*find Me when you seek Me with all your heart.’”*

God’s plan has always been to give us hope and a future, to prosper us and keep us from harm, but His plan can never be separated from a life devoted to Him. There is no hope - no future or security - apart from resting in His arms. And the only lasting prosperity and peace comes as we walk in step with His Spirit. Why do we not trust Him to fully guide our path? And why do we seek His plan for our life without bothering to first seek Him?!

God’s plan is for us to be restored to Him and glorify His name as we love Him with all our heart. All other plans regarding the specific circumstances of our existence flow out of His plan for a loving relationship filled with worship; “seek first His Kingdom and His righteousness and all these things will be given to you as well” (Matthew 6:33). Seek Him first!

Yes, He has promised a glorious future - not necessarily a future free of trouble, but a future filled with “the peace of God which transcends all understanding” (Philippians 4:7); a future where we can learn real prosperity by “being content in any and every situation” (Philippians 4:12). But this future can only be had by those who seek Him with all their heart.

Let’s allow God to be the all-consuming top priority of our life. Let’s diligently seek Him in times of quiet as well as in the midst of the endless multitude of daily activities. And let’s be filled with hope and encouraged by His promise that as we faithfully seek Him with all our heart, He will be found!

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## FULL MEASURE OF OUR HEART

**I**n the message “He Will Be Found” we saw that God promises to be found by those who will seek Him. But the qualifier is that He will be found by those who seek Him with ALL their heart; “you will seek Me and find Me when you seek Me with all your heart” (Jeremiah 29:13).

The consistent message through all of God’s Word is that He is calling us back to a restored relationship with Himself - a relationship which is only possible through faith in Jesus. We enter in by His loving grace, but His expectation for this relationship is that, through faith, we give Him ALL of our heart.

If we desire this restored relationship with God - if we desire to truly “find” Him - then our heart must be fully devoted to Him; there can be no rivals or competing affections which pull us away. When Jesus was asked to name the most important commandment, He replied; “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength” (Mark 12:30). All means all - no cheating or deceiving!

Our Heavenly Father deserves that we give Him our love honestly and completely; “You must have accurate and honest weights and measures. For the Lord detests anyone who

deals dishonestly” (Deuteronomy 25:15-16). It’s foolish to think we can cheat God and withhold even a small portion of our heart, for in doing so we ultimately cheat ourselves.

**Luke 6:38**

*“Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.”*

God has promised to bless those who come to Him with a true and uncompromising faith in Jesus. His blessings include the right to be called children of God, and the inheritance of eternal life. But it also extends to our days on earth as we receive the blessings of true joy, peace, and contentment.

It should not be surprising that the measure of blessing we receive from God is directly related to the measure we use to give back to Him. Our true blessings flow as we give Him our worship and obedience; as we desire to walk in His presence and praise Him with every breath. Our blessings are never “purchased” with financial gifts or good deeds.

Our dealings with God become dishonest and deceitful when we expect a full measure of His blessing of peace, His blessing of clear direction, or even His blessing of assurance and freedom from doubt, and yet cheat Him with every measure we return. Let’s be restored and truly receive the full measure of His blessing. Let’s enter into His presence and, each and every day, give Him the full measure of our heart.

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## ENTER HIS SANCTUARY

**I**n the last several messages we've considered the importance of seeking God and loving Him with ALL our heart. This is an important issue with regard to our Salvation and the eternally restored relationship to which we've been called. But it's also critical to how we view the world around us and function in our day to day activities.

The author of Psalm 73 writes with words of frustration about the things he sees in the world. He can't understand how the wicked can be so carefree and yet so successful; "For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked" (Psalm 73:3). He felt he may have even wasted his time in maintaining Godly values; "Surely in vain have I kept my heart pure; in vain have I washed my hands in innocence" (Psalm 73:13). He kept searching for answers, but found none until he returned to worship in the presence of God.

### **Psalm 73:16-17**

*"When I tried to understand all this, it was oppressive to me - till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood."*

Many issues in our life simply cannot be resolved through our human understanding and reasoning. We often try to make sense of events

in the world, or in our particular situation, only to discover there are no easy answers or apparent solutions. But no matter how confusing our life may become, we must always remember we're a child of God - a child of the Creator of the Universe! "By the word of the Lord were the heavens made, their starry host by the breath of His mouth" (Psalm 36:6).

Our Heavenly Father does not function according to a set of human rules. He is not confined by time or space, and He's certainly not guided by our set of values; "as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways" (Isaiah 55:9). We must give God all our mind as we seek to understand Him through His Word and study how He has moved throughout history; but we must also give Him all our heart as we worship Him despite what we see, think, or feel. Then we will begin to truly understand.

We must come to our Heavenly Father with a heart-felt belief that being in His presence is more important than anything else in the world; "Whom have I in Heaven but You? And earth has nothing I desire besides You" (Psalm 73:25). Only with this type of passion can we draw near and begin to see the disconnected pieces of our life fit neatly into God's perfect plan.

Let's return to the place where He's everything we desire and all we really need. Let's worship Him with all our heart and begin to understand His wonderful plan for our life. Let's once and for all open the door and enter His sanctuary!

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## LIVE IN HIS PRESENCE

**I**n the message “Enter His Sanctuary” we saw how the seemingly complex and confusing portions of our life are most often made clear as we open the door of our heart and enter His sanctuary. His ways are much higher than ours, “as the heavens are higher than the earth” (Isaiah 55:9), and His true purpose cannot be understood without a heart dedicated to Him in worship.

We are called to a life of worship; and though we use the phrase “enter His sanctuary,” I pray it comes as no surprise that the presence of God is not confined within the walls of our church buildings. We do not call Him “down” to join us as we sing our songs, and He is not any closer because of the outward expression of our worship.

### **Matthew 28:20**

*“And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”*

One of the last promises Jesus made was, though He was returning to the Father, He would always remain with us - to the very end! The presence of God is with us right now! He is as near in our most decorated centers of worship as He is when we are on the bus or alone

in our car; “never will I leave you” (Hebrews 13:5).

One of the great blessings most believers miss today is that our Heavenly Father is much closer than we realize: “If I go up to the heavens, You are there; if I make my bed in the depths, You are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there Your hand will guide me, Your right hand will hold me fast” (Psalm 139:8-10). He is VERY near, and His great desire is that we would join Him in an intimate and worshipful fellowship in whatever circumstances our day may bring.

We fellowship with our Creator by continually communing with Him, whether in deep prayer or simple conversation, throughout the day. We must present EVERY thought, word, and deed at His feet as our absolute best offering of love. When impure thoughts or our deceitful tongue pulls us away, we should immediately rebuke them, ask His forgiveness, and return to His presence. As impossible as this may seem, this is the worship God desires - and the worship He deserves. We ought to adopt this as our lifestyle today and continue until He takes us home.

His presence is available to every believer! Some jobs or home environments may pose a challenge, but He has promised to be with those who desire to walk with Him, regardless of the circumstances. Let's be determined to bring Him glory and honor, and love Him through ALL we do, say, and think. Let's be determined that for all our remaining days we will worship and live in His presence.

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## AN UNSEARCHABLE LOVE

As I look back through the Scriptural account of history, I can see how God sent His Son to be born in a manger, grow and live among us, and die for our sins upon a cross. I can clearly see how the sacrifice of Jesus allows us, through faith, to enter into God's presence. I can even see the purpose of His humble birth as an example of humility and service. But what I don't think I'll ever fully understand is why. Oh, sure, I know the reason is love; "For God so loved the world that He gave..." (John 3:16), but I seriously doubt I'll ever understand the amount of love required to sacrifice so much - the amount of love He had (and has)...for me!

Paul wrote to the Romans with the intent of setting foundational beliefs for the church. In this letter, Paul presented the greatest amount of teaching found anywhere in the Bible. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, Paul wrote on topics ranging from sin and judgement, to faith and Salvation; from the purpose of the Law and life through the Spirit, to the sovereignty of God and the future of Israel. But toward the end of the letter, Paul paused and wrote a short prayer of praise and glory.

### **Romans 11:33-36**

*"Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearch-*

*able His judgments, and His paths beyond tracing out! Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been His counselor? Who has ever given to God, that God should repay Him? For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever! Amen."*

We get the feeling that Paul reviewed the first portion of his letter and just couldn't continue without praising the Lord. Paul had wrestled through many difficult issues and learned a valuable lesson: God is God, and sometimes this simple truth defies understanding.

God has a perfect plan where every piece fits neatly together, but there are many connections my finite mind fails to comprehend. I can't always see the purpose of my trials or the lessons I'm to learn: I get frustrated with His timing (I want to know His plan, now!). But I know His love gave everything; "He humbled Himself and became obedient to death - even death on a cross!" (Philippians 2:8). I may not fully understand this love, but the little I know is enough to create a desire to live a life of devotion and faith. One day, all His mysteries will be perfectly revealed. Until then I will simply continue to worship and trust.

We may never fully understand, but I pray you are drawn a little closer today. If you have never experienced His love, I pray that you will release your heart into His care. If you're feeling unloved by the world, I pray you will look to Him and see a Father who gave His Son so He could hold you for all eternity. He is an unsearchable God who has poured out, for you, an unsearchable love.

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## TEACH THE WORLD HIS GRACE

When Jesus was asked to name the greatest commandment, He said; “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind” (Matthew 22:37). Jesus clearly said the most important thing we can do in this life is to love God with absolutely every part of our being. But He immediately added; “the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:39).

After our love for God, we are called to love others. But at the end of His ministry, on the night before He was crucified, Jesus set a new standard for our love.

### **John 13:34**

*“A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.”*

Love for others had always been important, but now Jesus called the command “new” and changed the standard from the way we love ourself to the way He loved us. Why is this significant?

Jesus came into the world with the single purpose of dying for the forgiveness of our sin so we could be restored to a right relationship with God - this is true love; “God so loved the world that He gave his one and only

Son...” (John 3:16). We didn’t do ANYTHING to deserve this love. We were completely lost in a world of sin and God looked down on us, and loved us: “God demonstrated His own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8).

This degree of love, poured out for those who are utterly undeserving, is the definition of God’s grace. Peter said we are saved by this undeserved love; “it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved” (Acts 15:11). Paul said the same in many different ways: “{We} are justified freely by His grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus” (Romans 3:24), and, “it is by grace you have been saved, through faith” (Ephesians 2:8).

The concept of grace is essential in beginning our relationship with God as well as continuing with every step of our journey along His path. But, try as we might, we can never adequately convey the meaning of God’s grace with words. We must continue to proclaim His truth through spoken and written words, but in this important area of God’s grace, we are given a “new command” to teach through our actions.

We have been given an incredible gift! We are given a gift we can never repay, but a gift we must share. The world is in great need! It’s lost and desperate to know the grace of our Lord and Savior. Let’s pour out love to those around us in the same manner it was poured out on us - undeserved and without restraint! Let’s live out Jesus’ new command and, through love, teach the world His grace.

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## PREVENT THE SPARKS

Every year, sparks from hot campfires or careless matches start fires which consume millions of trees in beautiful forests. Once begun, these fires move unrelentingly through hills and valleys - nothing is safe from the fury of the flames.

Every year, sparks from hot tempers or careless words start fires which consume millions of lives in beautiful relationships. Once begun, these fires move unrelentingly through self-esteem and trust - nothing is safe from the fury of the tongue.

### **James 3:5-6**

*“Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body.”*

Our tongue has incredible power to build up and encourage, as well as tear down and destroy. When we place our trust in Jesus, our sins are eternally forgiven; but the day will come when our careless words are revealed and we see the full extent of the damage we've done; “men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken” (Matthew 12:36).

In what must be one last sorrow-filled moment before we enter our eternal glory, we all come face to face with our sin; “we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ” (2 Corinthians 5:10). Perhaps the purpose of this moment is to permanently etch in our soul a full appreciation for His love. Even with all my careless words, He loves me and wants to spend eternity with me in fellowship. Amazing!

David prayed that God would “set a guard over my mouth and keep watch over the door of my lips” (Psalms 141:3). While this is a wise prayer, our lips must be seen as an absolute last line of defense - once our words escape they can almost never be fully recovered. We must strive to control the sparks at the true source; “out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks” (Matthew 12:34).

If our heart is filled with the ways of the world, our mouth will naturally speak the world’s wisdom which is “foolishness in God’s sight” (1 Corinthians 3:19). Rather, we must fill our heart with the ways of God and allow our mouth to overflow with His love; “I have hidden Your word in my heart that I might not sin against You” (Psalms 119:11).

Have we been the cause of some raging fires or smoldering embers? If so, we must pray for healing and believe that “with God all things are possible” (Matthew 19:26). We must fill our heart with the power of His Word and “not let any unwholesome talk come out of our mouths” (Ephesians 4:29). Let’s stop the destructive fires. Let’s begin today to fill our heart with His Word and prevent the sparks.

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## DESIRES OF OUR HEART

**W**e often talk about the gift of Salvation as a transformation of the heart. Jesus came to give us eternal life through faith in Him and His sacrifice on the cross. His death established a new covenant for all who would come to Him in faith; “This is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sin” (Matthew 26:28).

When we enter into this covenant we are transformed; “I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh” (Ezekiel 36:26). This is the same transformation referred to by Paul: “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!” (2 Corinthians 5:17). It is also referred to as the “circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit” (Romans 2:29).

As we continue our walk with God - as we continue our journey with a new and transformed heart - we begin a process of being “conformed to the likeness of His Son” (Romans 8:29). This transformation, which begins in our heart, continues for all the rest of our days. We may call this process growth or maturity, but the result is a heart which is becoming more and more like Jesus.

### **Psalm 37:4**

*“Delight yourself in the Lord and He will give you the desires of your heart.”*

This verse is sometimes misinterpreted to say that God has promised to fulfill all our current desires. There are people all over the world thinking that if they “pursue” God, they will receive an increase in their financial status - a better job, a nicer car, or a bigger home. This is a sad misapplication of scripture! When we are far from God, our heart is full of worldly desires. Apart from God, we will spend a lifetime trying to fulfill these desires only to find we are never satisfied or content.

But God says we need not spend our life chasing these unfulfilling desires. As we are diligent to draw close to God, learn of His ways, and become obedient to His commands, He gives us new desires - the desires of Jesus. As we love the Lord with all our heart, our current desires are replaced with something infinitely better. The single desire of Jesus was to glorify His Father by completing the work He was given to do (John 17:4). Jesus was content beyond our comprehension because He was truly one with His Heavenly Father!

The wonderful blessing from God is that as we delight in Him, He transforms our desires and also gives us the ability to fulfill these desires. This is the only way we will ever find true contentment and peace. Let’s learn to live each moment delighting in our Lord. Let’s allow Him to continue the transformation by giving us, and then teaching us how to satisfy, the desires of our heart.

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## SOW TO PLEASE THE SPIRIT

**I**n the spring, a farmer prepares the soil, plants the seed, and waits several days for the first signs of life. Many weeks pass before a few inches of growth occur and several months go by before it's time to harvest. Much hard work and patience go into reaping a bountiful crop.

The soil of our Spiritual field is rich, full of nutrients and moisture; and, whether we realize it or not, we are working hard and planting in our field every single day. Let me say that again: Every day as we go out into the world we are planting into our Spiritual field. Anything we plant is going to grow and produce a harvest according to what we have planted.

### **Galatians 6:7-9**

*“A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life. Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.”*

Every day we are given the opportunity to go into the field and plant new seed; “His compassions never fail, they are new every morning”

(Lamentations 3:22-23). We are also given the choice of which seed to plant. Seeds of faith and forgiveness are essential for our eternal survival. Seeds of hope and trust are necessary for a life of peace and contentment. And seeds of love, purity, worship and praise are the seeds which will make our fields beautiful - a fragrant offering to the Lord.

But there is another type of seed - the seeds of lies and deception, of worldly passions and self exaltation. Unfortunately, once these seeds are planted, they can grow faster and stronger than all competing plants. If allowed to grow, these sinful seeds will rise up to dominate the field and choke everything which draws us closer to God: "The seed that fell among thorns stands for those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by life's worries, riches and pleasures, and they do not mature" (Luke 8:14).

Today is a new day with a new opportunity to plant. We must not grow weary of planting that which draws us closer to God; "whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable - if anything is excellent or praiseworthy - think of such things" (Philippians 4:8). Today, we WILL plant - so let's plant wisely!

Let's sow seed which glorifies our Heavenly Father and honors Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior; and let's nurture our field with an unending love. Let's sow for a bountiful harvest which is free of weeds as we daily abandon the sinful nature and sow to please the Spirit.

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## TESTED BY PRAISE

The longer and closer we walk with God, the more we realize how He uses every opportunity to shape and mold us - to chip, file, and sand the rough edges - as we are gradually “conformed to the likeness of His Son” (Romans 8:29). This is His desire for everyone who trusts in Jesus for the forgiveness of sin.

We often learn through personal experience how our trials are used to teach us valuable lessons and refine us into Children of God with the character of Christ; “the testing of your faith develops perseverance” (James 1:3). Our trials teach us to persevere in the faith and to trust God with all our heart. But a more subtle refinement of our character occurs as we receive praise for who we are or for what we’ve accomplished.

### **Proverbs 27:21**

*“The crucible for silver and the furnace for gold, but man is tested by the praise he receives.”*

This isn’t referring to how we verbally respond to a compliment; rather, the reaction of our heart reveals our true belief and submission. God is the sovereign Creator and Lord of ALL! All our abilities and gifts were given by Him. He deserves ALL the praise and main-

tains the right to redirect us as He chooses. Our motivation must be our love for God and our desire to serve Him through all we do - it must never be driven by the praises of man.

The praise we receive from others is not an indication of God's approval nor a valid measure of success. We take far too much ownership of accomplishments and most often we simply forget: "For who makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did not receive?" (1 Corinthians 4:7).

Every step of our journey must be established by God and accomplished in His strength. Every day there are those who refuse to turn to God because they fear the loss of status and praise; "they would not confess their faith for fear they would be put out of the synagogue; for they loved praise from men more than praise from God" (John 12:42-43). And every day there are those who are diverted in their walk because of a gluttonous desire to feed their pride-filled ego. Unrestrained pride will always choke our relationship with Jesus.

As we are transformed, we WILL begin to accomplish His work; "we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works" (Ephesians 2:10). But as praises come for the work we accomplish, we must present them to God for His approval and guidance. He may return the praise as a Heavenly blessing, but He may also dismiss it as an unnecessary distraction and ask us to walk in a new direction. Either way, we must continue to serve with an obedient and loving heart. We must be determined to never lose our focus as a result of being refined and tested by praise.

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## ENTRUSTED WITH HIS SECRET

**W**e have been given an incredible gift. Jesus Christ came into this world two thousand years ago to be the perfect sacrifice for our sin and to bring us back into a relationship with our Heavenly Father. Jesus knew God's plan of grace before the world was ever created; "This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus" (2 Timothy 1:9-10).

We are a fortunate people living in a uniquely blessed time; "He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake" (1 Peter 1:20). Through faith in Jesus for the forgiveness of our sin, we can now "approach the throne of grace with confidence" (Hebrew 4:16), knowing we have been made clean and our relationship with God has been restored.

### **1 Corinthians 4:1-2**

*"So then, men ought to regard us as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the secret things of God. Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful."*

I'll say it again...we are a very fortunate people. Through no effort of our own, we have

been born in a time where the “secret things of God” have been revealed. We have been given the opportunity to hear the full gospel message and believe. Thank You Lord!

But God has done more than just give us this opportunity to hear and believe: He has “entrusted” us with His message of Salvation. To prove faithful to His trust we must live in a manner which upholds the gospel message for all to see. We are saved by a grace which cost God the death of His one and only Son. This grace must be cherished and honored with a life void of all compromise and hypocrisy. An understanding of His great love ought to cause us to surrender ALL and live each day to bring Him glory and honor.

Proving faithful to His trust also means we must confidently and accurately share His message of hope with all who cross our path. We must diligently study His Word and be prepared to share His grace through our words as well as our actions.

No matter how hard life may sometimes appear, we are truly blessed. We have been given a gift which can sustain us through our most difficult circumstances and provide an eternal home filled with praise and worship. When the world beats us down, we can be encouraged that the Creator of the Universe believes in us. He has revealed His Son and made us stewards of His message of grace. Let’s live lives worthy of the trust we have been given. Let’s prove faithful to the great honor of being entrusted with His secret.

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## ATTITUDE OF ENCOURAGEMENT

**E**VERYONE needs encouragement. No matter how secure and confident someone may appear, everyone needs to be reassured, built up, and comforted. We are all called to minister to one another, every day, with encouragement; “But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness” (Hebrews 3:13).

True encouragement requires us to be “others” oriented: “Consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others” (Philippians 2:3-4). We will never effectively encourage until we begin to look outside our own needs and intentionally examine the needs of others. And our encouragement of others will always be hindered if we become threatened when they begin to heal and grow.

### **1 Thessalonians 2:11-12**

*“For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into His Kingdom and glory.”*

I was excited when each of my children learned to roll over, and I cheered when they

began to crawl. When they started to walk I clapped my hands and beamed with pride, as if my kids were the first in the world to ever move about on two feet. Each small accomplishment was encouraged and my manhood was never threatened by their progress. I wasn't worried about losing my position within the family and I had no desire to be the only walker in the house; and every time my children fell, I picked them up and encouraged them with full confidence of their future success.

Our journey with the Lord actually begins long before our day of Salvation as He calls us and draws us to the cross - we would never even seek if He didn't first call and soften our heart. This part of the journey (the part that leads us to His secure arms of Salvation) may last MANY years and require encouragement from many different people. But as we place our faith in Jesus for the forgiveness of sin and continue our journey (with all the many hills and valleys), our walk is definitely much easier and enjoyable if we join with others and walk together.

Let's encourage one another with each wonderful step toward Heavenly glory. Let's be proud and excited for the accomplishments of others no matter how great or small. And let's refuse to become threatened when we witness others mature and grow - we are absolutely secure in the love of God (and we really don't want to be the only walker in His Family!). Let's turn our hearts outward and begin to minister with a compassionate, loving, and secure attitude of encouragement.

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## THE FINAL VICTORY

Today, all over the world, there are people facing situations which threaten to send everything they hold dear crashing to the ground. It may be the result of bad decisions or circumstances out of their control; but either way, they awoke in the middle of a whirlwind and cannot determine which direction to turn. There are many others who awoke tired and discouraged, and don't even know why. Today is much the same as any other, but they are questioning the usefulness of continuing.

I can make this bold prediction about today, not because I have any insight into this particular day or period of history, but because that is the nature of life. We live in an imperfect world filled with imperfect people. The result is a bunch of imperfect circumstances! Even when we begin to walk with Jesus we struggle with these imperfections which distract us and steal our joy.

Why begin a message on such a depressing note? First, we need to understand we're not alone. Many more people are struggling than we can possibly imagine. The need for encouragement is huge and will increase as the time of our Lord's return draws near. Next, we need to know how we can live a life of peace and how we can pass this peace to others.

When we place our faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, we don't receive the promise of a trouble free life - we receive the promise of an Eternal Life in the presence of God. Many of our troubles here on earth will remain. But an understanding of our eternal promise should encourage us as we shift our focus from life in terms of days and years, to life in terms of eternity; "For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all" (2 Corinthians 4:17).

Jesus saw these same struggles in His disciples. He wanted them to live a life of peace and contentment, but He also knew they would face many difficulties. After a night of teaching His disciples about their relationship with the Father through faith in His Son, Jesus gave these words of encouragement:

**John 16:33**

*"I have told you these things, so that in Me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."*

Jesus came to conquer sin and death through His sacrifice on the cross. When we come to Him in faith and receive the transforming gift of His Spirit, we ought to keep this truth at the front of ALL our thoughts: the battle has already been won! As we climb into the ring day after day - even as we grow weary, lose a few rounds and want to quit - let's always remember that through our risen Lord we have an eternal hope. Let's continue with the peace and assurance that in Christ we have been granted the final victory.

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## STEP OFF THE SHORE

**W**hen Moses died, God assigned Joshua to the position of leadership. The people of Israel needed to know God approved of Joshua and would continue to direct them as they entered the land of Canaan. God was aware of this need and chose to work through Joshua as the people prepared to cross the Jordan river; “Today I will begin to exalt you in the eyes of all Israel, so they may know that I am with you as I was with Moses” (Joshua 3:7). Once across the Jordan, there would be MANY battles to fight - battles which would only be won by learning complete trust in God.

God told Joshua to have the priests carry the ark of the covenant directly into the Jordan river, which was flowing at flood level during the harvest season. He promised that when the priests stepped into the water, He would cause the river bed to dry and the waters to be “cut off and stand up in a heap” (Joshua 3:13).

With all the Israelites waiting in great anticipation, the priests picked up the ark - their most honored possession - and took their greatest step of faith.

### **Joshua 3:15-16**

*“As soon as the priests who carried the ark reached the Jordan and their feet*

*touched the water's edge, the water from upstream stopped flowing. It piled up in a heap a great distance away."*

God always teaches us about faith and trust by directing us down a path we think is too hard to travel - into circumstances we don't understand. After all, if we could clearly see and understand, there wouldn't be a need for faith. But we often miss the opportunity to experience the true glory of God because we fail to obey and take the first step.

By working through Joshua, God gave the people confidence in their new leader. By requiring an initial action (the first step), He taught a valuable lesson on obedience and trust. The river did not gradually pull back as the priests approached. Nothing happened to the river until the priests left the safety of the shore and stepped into the water. God patiently waited for a full commitment before revealing His mighty hand.

I often hear from people who are hesitant about giving their life to God. Mostly, they are scared by what they can't see or understand, so they remain frozen where they are. They desire to have a more fulfilling life but are paralyzed by the fear of what they may lose in the process. Oh, if we could only see the life we would gain by giving Him our all!

God is waiting. He's ready to pull back the flood waters and lead us into a new land - a land filled with His peace and true contentment. But we **MUST** commit. Let's trust Him with every area of our life. Let's take a firm hold of His hand and boldly step off the shore.

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## THIS IS THE WAY, WALK IN IT

**G**od's desire is that we walk down the path He lays before us. This path begins with the gift of eternal life through faith in Jesus; "For My Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in Him shall have eternal life" (John 6:40). The path continues with living a life of holiness; "But just as He who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do" (1 Peter 1:15).

We walk further down His path as we learn contentment "in any and every situation" (Philippians 4:12), as we are filled with joy, prayer and thanksgiving (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18), and as we begin to truly rest in the peace which only He provides; "Peace I leave you; My peace I give you" (John 14:27). It's important to remember that each step down God's path is for the purpose of being "conformed to the likeness of His Son, that He may be the firstborn of many brothers" (Romans 8:29). Every step, no matter how difficult, brings us closer to the person God desires us to be.

Have we entered onto God's path through faith in Jesus Christ? Are we now continuing down the path God desires for us to walk? When confronted with choices, is it obvious which direction we should go?

### **Isaiah 30:21**

*“Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, ‘This is the way; walk in it.’”*

When we trust in Jesus for the forgiveness of our sins, we are adopted into God’s Family and begin a journey which lasts the rest of our days. At the moment of Salvation God gives us His Spirit to guide us along His path; but many times when His Spirit calls, we’re too busy to listen - or we choose not to respond.

If we have entered onto God’s path and now desire to follow where He leads, we **MUST** make time to simply slow down and listen; “In repentance and rest is your Salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength” (Isaiah 30:15). Our eternal Salvation is a transformation which occurs in an instant, but the earthly joy of our Salvation is found in our daily repentance and quiet guidance from God - His presence is our only place of true peace.

The guiding voice of His Spirit still calls every day, but the competing noise is often so great that we stray from the path and become entangled in the weeds - and there is definitely no peace or contentment in the weeds! Let’s get out of the weeds and continue on His path. Let’s set aside quiet time to listen for guidance - to hear which way to turn - to simply rest in His loving arms. And let’s be determined to boldly follow when we hear His gentle voice calling, “This is the way, walk in it!”

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## PRAISE HIM EVEN MORE

I don't recall ever being asked to explain the importance of breathing. It's pretty well accepted that breathing is a good idea and that we should do it many times every day - a lack of breathing is definitely bad for our physical health. It's not an exaggeration to say that praise is as important, should become as natural, and occur as often as our breathing. For if we choose not to live a life of praise, we will just as surely suffocate and spiritually die.

The life of praise requires only a little instruction and a great deal of application. To begin with, we must learn to ALWAYS praise!

### **Philippians 4:4**

*“Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!”*

Notice that rejoicing is so important that Paul decided to repeat himself. If we are living to love and glorify God, He has promised to work ALL things together for the good (Romans 8:28); so why do we wait for what appear to be the proper conditions for praise? If we really understood and believed that God is in control, wouldn't we praise Him regardless of our particular situation? “Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ

Jesus” (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18). There is never a wrong time to praise God and there are never circumstances which don’t deserve our thankfulness.

Job lost absolutely everything he had except his wife. He then developed sores over every part of his body and was so miserable that his wife encouraged him to “Curse God and die!” (Job 2:10). Job was in great pain and heavy sorrow, but he knew all things came from God with a purpose; “Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?” (Job 2:10). God is in the good as well as the trouble; we must learn to praise Him in ALL situations!

Our life can become difficult and painful; we may feel bored and unfulfilled, cheated and abused. But if we look at the reasons which keep us from praising, we will find “self” expectations and pride - we will find a life lived according to the desires of the flesh and not according to the fruit of the Spirit. Every portion of our life is to be offered “as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God” (Romans 12:1). As we fix our eyes on the eternal glory we have through Jesus we will find more and more reasons to praise.

Let’s never allow our earthly circumstances to direct our praise: “Let everything that has breath praise the Lord” (Psalm 150:6). If we’re still breathing, we should still be praising! He has given us eternal life - an eternity of worship in His presence...that’s a GREAT gift! Let’s look for the hand of God working around us each and every day. Let’s praise Him with all our heart - and then let’s praise Him even more!

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## A TRUE HEART OF THANKSGIVING

**I**n the message “Praise Him Even More” we considered our command as well as our need to rejoice and praise in order to sustain Spiritual life. A heart that has not been transformed by the Spirit of God cannot truly praise, and a transformed heart that does not praise will surely cease to pump Spiritual life through the body.

Silas had joined Paul on his second missionary journey. Early in the journey, the two men were seized and brought before the authorities: “These men are Jews and are throwing our city into an uproar” (Acts 16:20). For this act they were stripped, beaten, and thrown in prison with chains around their feet. However, their hearts continued to praise God and give Him thanks in spite of their conditions.

### **Acts 16:25**

*“About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them.”*

Giving thanks in the form of prayer, praise, song, celebration, or simply as an attitude of thankfulness is mentioned well over one thousand times in the Bible. It’s no surprise that having a heart filled with thanksgiving should

be an integral part of the Christian walk. We need to see this world and the entirety of our life with new eyes - eyes that see God's hand at work in every moment of every day.

If we believe in the One True God as the Creator of the Universe and accept the gift of eternal life through Jesus Christ, we should be compelled to give thanks - regardless of our circumstances. We should begin to see the evidence of God all around, and praise Him even for the air we breathe.

A heart without praise and thanksgiving is empty and does not yet understand a sovereign God or His plan. If our surroundings are continually dictating the thankfulness of our heart, perhaps we ought to ask God to reveal His loving plan in even greater clarity. Yes, God wants to see us live a life of true peace and contentment; but first and foremost, He desires for us to surrender our life to Him and bring Him glory and honor in ALL we do. Only then, and only with the power of His Spirit, will we be able to "give thanks in all circumstances" (1 Thessalonians 5:18).

We cannot produce thanksgiving by simply trying to be more thankful. We only become thankful by taking our heart back to the very origin of our new nature - back to the saving grace of Jesus. Let's return to the point where our life was made new and once again learn to rejoice; once again learn to absolutely trust; once again learn to live with a true heart of thanksgiving.

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## HE IS OUR JOY

When Jesus came to earth, He took on a human appearance and accepted many human limitations. He knew His purpose long before He was crucified: “He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that He must be killed and after three days rise again” (Mark 8:31). But He also knew the pain He must endure - and that the pain would be very real!

In the hours before His death, Jesus was beaten, whipped, spit on, laughed at, yelled at and made to wear a crown of thorns. The Creator of the Universe was required to lay bloodied and disfigured as nails were hammered through His hands and feet. His chosen people had turned against Him and demanded His death - and those He loved the most had deserted Him.

### **Hebrews 12:2**

*“Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.”*

Jesus endured more humiliation, disappointment, and pain than we can imagine. But the “joy” that allowed Him to endure the cross was the very reason He came to the world. He came to bring God’s children back into a relationship with their Heavenly Father. The sacrifice of His death allowed a bridge from death to life. His joy was knowing that God’s children would be able to come to Him and truly know Him - that they could talk with Him and worship Him...that they could sit in His presence and be comforted in His loving arms.

We are those children. We are the joy that allowed Him to “endure the cross.” How much love is wrapped up in this deep sustaining joy? Enough love to walk with us through the hottest fires, enough love to carry us when we’re weak - and enough love to NEVER let us go! “Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you” (Hebrews 13:5).

We all face various kinds of trials, but the One who “endured” continues to walk by our side today. He has given us Himself - a true joy which allows us to endure even as He endured. He has given us an eternity to worship in His throne room, an eternity to be comforted and praise His Holy Name! He has given us a love and an unequalled strength which this world cannot begin to understand! We too can face our “cross” with great hope. We WILL endure any and all trials. We will endure because He is our joy.

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## EVIDENCE OF GOD

There are many people who remain just outside the gate of eternal life. They have heard the gospel message but are still not convinced of its absolute truth. They may concede that religion is a “good thing” but they need more proof before actually committing their life. Going to church on Sunday is one thing, but walking with Jesus every single day?

How many of us are like those standing outside the gate, refusing to commit? We tell ourselves that if God would give us signs like He gave Abraham and Moses, then all doubt would be removed and we would follow in true obedience. But we wouldn't! Jesus said we must first follow before we will truly know; “If anyone chooses to do God's will, he will find out whether My teaching comes from God or whether I speak on My own” (John 7:17). God has revealed Himself. He has called us to follow - to step out in faith - and receive a wonderful confirmation of His truth.

My own life is my greatest “sign” pointing to God. I've never seen the Red Sea part nor audibly heard God's voice in a burning bush - I've never seen water changed to wine, a blind man made able to see or a lame man made able to walk - but when I look back at the “mud and mire” (Psalm 40:2) from which I've been

saved, I see an absolutely clear miracle. And as I walk with Jesus day in and day out...I KNOW!

In addition, Paul reminds us that all the wonders of creation are a sign of God's Hand.

### **Romans 1:20**

*“For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities - His eternal power and divine nature - have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.”*

There are signs of God all around. Yet sadly, our senses are too often closed. We cry out for evidence, yet we see, hear, smell, touch, and taste evidence every day - He is here with us in infinite detail.

It's not surprising that the world fails to recognize the evidence; “the sinful mind is hostile to God” (Romans 8:7). The world lives in darkness and is blind to Heavenly wonders, but we no longer belong to the world; “He has rescued us from the dominion of darkness” (Colossians 1:13). We now must walk in the Light and “see” according to what the Light reveals.

God is calling us into a life of continual and passionate devotion. Let's begin to worship Him every moment of every day as we see His glory in the flowers, trees, and stars; as we hear His beauty in the songs of a bird and the cry of a baby. We're surrounded by an abundance of Spiritual signs - confirming signs that He is real! Let's step through the gate with full commitment and continue our walk in humble submission. Let's live to glorify His name and open our senses to the true evidence of God.

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## WE ARE THE CREATED

We spend a great deal of our time and energy attempting to create various areas of our life. We strive to create the ideal work environment in order to provide the necessary resources to create the ideal social and home life. We plan the details of our free time in hopes of creating the ideal leisure; we even go so far as working hard to create the ideal “religious” experience.

### **Psalm 100:3**

*“Know that the Lord is God. It is He who made us, and we are His; we are His people, the sheep of His pasture.”*

No amount of our own effort will ever create the “ideal.” For if we are striving to create, we are chasing after the world’s elusive, ever changing, false definition of what is really ideal and fulfilling. Our only hope at finding the true ideal is in understanding we are the created, not the Creator. The absolute best in life begins with knowing whose life we really live; “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me” (Galatians 2:20). Our life belongs to Christ and it must be left with Him to create the life He desires.

Jesus is the only One who has ever truly been in the creation business; “All things were cre-

ated by Him and for Him” (Colossians 1:16). We were created by Jesus for His sovereign purpose; “We are the clay, You are the potter; we are all the work of Your hand” (Isaiah 64:8). Somehow we’ve begun to consider ourselves as the work of our own hands. We try to create a life according to the world’s system and fulfill “needs” and “rights” based on this false world view.

The truth that will set us free is that our needs are extremely small and we actually have NO rights - at least not in this world; “You are not your own; you were bought at a price” (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). We have been purchased with the blood of Jesus and given eternal life as joint heirs with Christ in God’s Kingdom. We have the “right,” the privilege, and the great honor of praising Him for all eternity. We need and deserve nothing more.

If we truly want the ideal, we will stop trying to create our life and place every area in the Hands of a loving Creator. God defines and shapes the ideal, and it is ours for the asking. The ideal job, home, marriage, ministry, fun, and friends are all ours - but only through releasing our rights, redefining our needs, and humbly understanding that we are the created.

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## CREATED TO DO HIS WILL

**I**n the message “We Are The Created” we were reminded that God is the Creator and we are the clay being molded by the loving hands of the Potter; “We are all the work of Your hand” (Isaiah 64:8). Our Father is shaping us to the likeness of His Son; but what is our purpose during this shaping process?

Our transformation begins the moment we trust in Jesus, and we soon learn that our Salvation is never earned by “doing” anything; “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith” (Ephesians 2:8). But we also learn that eternal life is for those who do God’s will - following Him is not an optional part of the Christian walk. We cannot truly accept Jesus as Savior without also beginning a journey of trust and walking in His steps. Faith means trusting Him enough to follow!

### **1 John 2:17**

*“The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever.”*

We generally like the idea of “new birth” when we think of being born into God’s Kingdom as His child. But we become uncomfortable when we hear: “You are not your own; you were bought at a price” (1 Corinthians

6:19-20). We get uneasy when we read; “You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to God” (Romans 6:22). There is no Salvation without a willful transfer of ownership - and we need to face the difficult truth that this means a transfer of control.

Giving up control is never easy. It can be extra scary to face the unknown from the passenger seat; and it can be an offense to our pride to allow someone else (even God!) to take the lead. The roots of “self” go very deep; but as we learn to completely trust, God brings us to that wonderful place of peace where we can say; “Whom have I in Heaven but You? And earth has nothing I desire besides You” (Psalm 73:25). Though sometimes difficult, there is great joy in a complete surrender to the will of our Heavenly Father.

As we give Him control over every area of our life, He will show us how to use ALL for His glory; “For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works” (Ephesians 2:10). He will give us the tools to accomplish His will, and in the process meet every need and fulfill our deepest desires.

He is the Potter and we are the clay. He is the Creator and we are definitely “the created.” But we have been created with an awesome purpose. We have been given gifts, talents, and abilities, which when given back to God are used to bring Him glory and honor. This IS our purpose! We have been created to glorify His Name as we love Him and trust Him with all our heart. Let’s bring Him glory and honor as we walk in the understanding that we have been created to do His will.

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## TOO MUCH OF US

**G**ideon lived during a time when Israel was ruled by judges. This was the period after the death of Joshua and before Saul was anointed king - a period lasting approximately 325 years. During this time, the people continually wandered away from God and were oppressed by various groups. But God always rose up a leader (a judge) who would deliver the people and lead them back to Himself - at least for a short while.

The oppression by the Midianites was so severe that many Israelites lived in caves and harvested their crops in secret. When the people cried to God for help, He chose to use Gideon; “‘But Lord,’ Gideon asked, ‘how can I save Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family’” (Judges 6:15). God wanted His Children to know that true deliverance is only through His strength and by His grace. By using Gideon to save the people, God taught a valuable lesson of trust.

### **Judges 7:2-3**

*“The Lord said to Gideon, ‘You have too many men for Me to deliver Midian into their hands. In order that Israel may not boast against Me that her own strength has saved her, announce now to the people, ‘Anyone who trembles with*

*fear may turn back and leave Mount Gilead.” So twenty-two thousand men left, while ten thousand remained.”*

God’s message of grace and power would not be obvious if the army had any hope of victory by their own strength: “But the Lord said to Gideon, ‘There are still too many men’” (Judges 7:4). Gideon’s army started with 32,000 but he was not sent into battle until the army was shrunk to only three hundred. These were impossible odds! But God always reigns supreme in the impossible: the battle was completely victorious!!

God is never interested in the “wonderful” things we can do for Him. He is pleased only by our obedience and our trust. In fact, God allows many of our great endeavors to fail simply because they are being pursued without giving Him absolute control. We are never to rest in our own strength and ability; rather, we are to continually walk by faith. Several hundred years after Gideon, the prophet Isaiah gave this same message: “Woe to those who trust in the multitude of their chariots and in the great strength of their horsemen, but do not look to the Holy One of Israel” (Isaiah 31:1).

God will lead us into victory, but we must give Him our total trust. When we walk in His victory, we will have the joy of witnessing His mighty hand and find true fulfillment in bringing Him glory and honor. His victory is never by our strength, savvy, cunning, or intelligence. It is only as we trust Him to work in and through the empty vessel of our life. True victory will only be won as we go into battle with ALL of Him and without too much of us.

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## HERE AM I - SEND ME

**I**n the beginning of Isaiah's ministry, he was allowed to see a vision of God seated on the throne in Heaven. He was allowed to witness the full majesty of God and hear His Heavenly praise; "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of His glory" (Isaiah 6:3). The vision of God was so pure and so holy that Isaiah was immediately confronted with his own sinful condition; "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips" (Isaiah 6:5).

But God comforted Isaiah by letting him know his sin had been removed; "Your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for" (Isaiah 6:7). God had a purpose for revealing Himself to Isaiah: He was looking for a messenger to deliver His Word to the people of Israel; "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?" (Isaiah 6:8).

If we were asked such a question, we might be tempted to request a few details before answering. We might like to know where we would be sent and what we would be doing. But Isaiah had just experienced the full glory of the Lord. He had seen absolute perfection, recognized his utter sinful condition, and received complete forgiveness from a loving Father.

With this understanding of the One who was asking, Isaiah had only one reply.

**Isaiah 6:8**

*“And I said, ‘Here am I. Send me!’”*

Isaiah had no way of knowing his reply would be the start of sixty years of ministry. He had no way of knowing the many hardships his answer would cause, nor the many joys he would experience through walking in the presence of God; but he knew the One who was calling...and that was enough!

As a child of God who has seen and understands His glory, there should be only one response when our Father calls. There’s no need for lengthy questions regarding the how, why, or what. When the Creator of the Universe calls, we can assume He has made a wise and perfect choice.

God never makes mistakes and will never call us without also providing the tools to accomplish everything in His plan: “And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work” (2 Corinthians 9:8). We have received His forgiveness and are seeking to abide in the glory of His presence. We must now learn to trust Him more and follow wherever He leads.

God always calls the right person for the job and always provides all we need to fulfill the calling. When God calls, let’s trust Him and boldly answer: Here am I - send me!

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## IT IS WRITTEN

**T**he Bible is a precious gift. It's God's Word written by human hands, but inspired by the Holy Spirit. These words tell of the creation of the Universe and God's first "breath of life" into man (Genesis 2:7). They tell of man's first sin, his separation from God, and the long process of being brought back into a right and loving relationship with the Father - a process made complete through faith in Jesus Christ. These are the words God chose - the lasting words which reveal His nature and eternal plan - the words of truth which provide "everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of Him who called us" (2 Peter 1:3).

We can carry His Word as an offensive weapon used to battle the enemy; "the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God" (Ephesians 6:17). But His Word is also used as a fine surgical tool; "Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joint and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart" (Hebrews 4:12). His Word can purify and refine.

But for God's Word to have its intended purpose in our life, we must accept it as absolute truth, "not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the Word of God" (1 Thessalonians 2:13).

The Bible is not just a collection of interesting stories and somewhat profound writings, it is God's Word! We are to receive His Word in faith and apply it with power and authority.

Jesus began His ministry on earth when He was thirty years old. He was baptized by John in the Jordan River and then led into the desert and tempted by the devil. Each time the devil tried to tempt Jesus away from the path which God established, Jesus resisted by directly applying the Word of God.

**Matthew 4:4**

*“Jesus answered, ‘It is written: Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”*

Three times the devil tempted - and three times Jesus answered, “It is written!” When Jesus spoke these words with complete faith and as absolute truth, there was no room for debate; “The devil left Him, and angels came and attended Him” (Matthew 4:11).

Yes, we have been given a precious gift. We have the words which are able to prepare our heart for the gift of eternal life. We have the words which can yield a life of contentment and peace - a life with purpose. But this gift is only for those who believe and obey. Let's fully accept and apply God's Word today. Let's trust with all our heart so we can face any trial or temptation with a steadfast assurance. His Word is truth and the final authority in every situation! Let's answer this world with a bold confidence by KNOWING that it is written!!

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## CAST OUT THE NET

Very early in life (almost from birth) we are trained to be successful according to the world's definition of success. We are driven by goals and accomplishments from the day we take our first steps and ride our first bike. As we grow older, we are pressured to accumulate knowledge and "things" in order to prove our success. In our Christian walk, Jesus calls us to a new definition of success - one determined not by what we accomplish, acquire or understand, but by our simple yet complete obedience.

The disciples walked and talked with Jesus, but they still faced many challenges with faith and obedience. One morning after fishing all night without a catch, Jesus called from the shore.

### **John 21:6**

*"He said, 'Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some.' When they did, they were unable to haul the net in because of the large number of fish."*

The disciples were successful that morning. But we must understand that the large number of fish did not define their success. They would have been successful even if the net remained

empty. Oh how I wish more in ministry could grasp this truth! The disciples were successful the moment they were obedient and cast the net on the right side of the boat.

One thousands years earlier, King Saul was told to “attack the Amalekites and totally destroy everything that belongs to them” (1 Samuel 15:3). But Saul allowed the Amalekite king and the best livestock to survive. He tried to hide his disobedience by telling the prophet Samuel that the animals were for a sacrifice to God: “But Samuel replied: ‘Does the Lord delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the Lord? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams’” (1 Samuel 15:22).

In any task we undertake for God, it’s easy to become discouraged by our apparent lack of success. We often feel inadequate; and those feelings increase when our goals seem to be elusive. But we must remember: the outcome of the task is minor compared to our obedience. We have almost no ability to determine how our efforts fit into God’s plan. God doesn’t need our fish! He can accomplish His plan with the rocks if He chooses; but He desires our willful obedience and trust. He desires a people who will love Him with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength.

Let’s take our eyes off the accomplishment of the “catch” and what we can produce. Rather, let’s focus on walking each step according to His leading. Let’s love Him with an uncluttered heart and concentrate all our effort on obeying His call to cast out the net.

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## NEVER LET THEM FORGET

**A**fter wandering through the desert for forty years, Joshua led the nation of Israel across the Jordan River and set out to conquer the land of Canaan. Joshua had seen God lead the nation out of slavery in Egypt. He had witnessed the parting of the Red Sea and God's provision of food while in the desert. As the Israelites were led into the promised land, Joshua and the entire nation saw God answer their prayers and give them many victories in battle.

During this time of conquest, the nation was relatively united as they worshiped and served God. This generation had first hand experience of His majesty and power, of His love and concern for His children. However, when Joshua and the current generation died, things quickly changed.

### **Judges 2:10**

*“After that whole generation had been gathered to their fathers, another generation grew up, who knew neither the Lord nor what He had done for Israel.”*

In a single generation, the people forgot! In a single generation, the people lost their respect for God, their desire to worship, and their belief that the Lord was the one true God. How could a generation who walked in fellow-

ship with God fail to transfer the message of truth? How could parents who knew God with such intimacy fail to teach their children who He was and how to love Him? How could an entire nation forget their purpose for existence was to honor God and be a light to the world?

We who have been brought into the Light of Christ must diligently share our faith with others; “Tell it to your children, and let your children tell it to their children, and their children to the next generation” (Joel 1:3). Our children and our friends will never receive the gift of eternal life on the basis of our faith; they must be told of God’s love and come to Him through a deep and personal faith in Jesus.

We all know specific individuals who desperately need to know of His saving grace. We all know fellow believers who need to be encouraged in their faith; “And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds” (Hebrews 10:24). Our churches are often gatherings for the depressed and troubled who have forgotten (or never heard) of the miraculous and loving works of God. May we never become silent about what He has done and continues to do!

We must never lose the awe of the incredible gift we have been given in Jesus. His sacrifice radically change our eternity! An understanding of this gift ought to so fill our hearts that we are compelled to share His on-going gift with those we love and those God places in our path. We who have begun our walk with Christ should continually share our walk with others. We serve an AWESOME God - let’s be a light to the world and never let them forget.

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## CONTEND FOR THE FAITH

**I**n the message “Never Let Them Forget” we were challenged to continually share God’s miraculous gift with those He places in our path. We considered this mainly from the aspect of sharing what God has done in our life and continues to do as we walk with Him. But we are also responsible to share the absolute truth about God and His plan; to do this, we must KNOW what we believe!

Jude wrote only one short letter (25 verses) of the Bible. He began the letter with a desire to encourage believers with the joy of Salvation. But as he sat down to write, he realized God was directing him to write a different message.

### **Jude 3**

*“Dear friends, although I was very eager to write to you about the salvation we share, I felt I had to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints.”*

There is great joy in our Salvation - a joy which must be shared. But we have been entrusted with the truth of the gospel message, and this truth is often under attack.

As we draw closer to God and begin to understand His perfect holiness, we are also made aware of the utter sinfulness of man and

our hopelessness without Jesus. Each of us are born with a sin nature; and if left to ourselves, we would become “filled with every kind of wickedness” (Romans 1:29). It’s not surprising how much evil abounds in the world. To a large degree, the world has rejected the Light of Christ and is living in an empty and confusing darkness.

The church is definitely not immune to the darkness of the world. We are attacked from those who are openly outside the church; but we are also under attack from those who have “secretly slipped in among you” (Jude 4a). These are people who claim to be called by God, but live an immoral life and “deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord” (Jude 4b). They seek to cause division and “follow their own ungodly desires” (Jude 18). We are told to fight this form of attack by strengthening our faith; “build yourself up in your most holy faith and pray in the Holy Spirit” (Jude 20).

Yes, we must know the truth, protect the truth, and share the truth. If we are to become a light which leads others to the saving grace of Jesus, we must not allow the gospel which has been entrusted into our care to become distorted for personal gain or diluted for greater acceptance. We can personally fight this battle on a daily basis by drawing closer to the presence of God and knowing Him better through study and prayer; and we can fight as groups of believers as we encourage one another to live without compromise. Let’s test all teaching against His Word. Let’s share the absolute truth of our Lord and Savior and be prepared to stand as we contend for the faith.

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## TRUE LOVE OF CHRIST

**I**n the last hours of His earthly ministry, Jesus spoke with His disciples and gave a command which was considered new: “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another” (John 13:34).

Should this command really have been new? Shouldn't the disciples have known they were to love one another? Or is it possible to spend three years with a Master Teacher and yet not grasp that learning must translate to action and that we teach truth by first being an example of truth? If we desire to teach love we must first be loving; to teach the concept of grace we must first be gracious, and in order to “make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19) we must begin by first being a true disciple!

As I continue to study and learn the wonderful truths of God's Word - and as I diligently try to teach these truths to others - I never want us to stop at simply being better educated: “Do not merely listen to the Word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says” (James 1:22). I'll be the first to admit that I fall short in many ways, but we must strive to make His Word real and apply it in all areas of our life.

Our Spiritual growth must never be measured by how much we know, but by how much

we are transformed - by how much the Word penetrates to the innermost part of our heart. We have all been blessed by God's love far more than we deserve. We must now better understand this love and then learn how to become His expression of love to others.

**Ephesians 3:17-19**

*“I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge.”*

The ultimate expression of love was that God gave His Son to an undeserving world so “that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). This is a love we will never fully understand.

Paul had such a deep appreciation for the love contained in God's plan of Salvation through the sacrificial gift of Jesus that he was often completely overwhelmed; “When I think of the wisdom and scope of God's plan, I fall to my knees and pray to the Father” (Ephesians 3:14 NLT). When we begin to truly grasp His love, all we can do is say, Thank You!

Let's pray for a greater understanding of His love and then return His love through a devoted life of worship. Let's make His love real by demonstrating love to those He places in our path. Let's begin to grasp, and then give back and share, the true love of Christ.

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## HIS WORK OF ART

**D**o you ever wake up and wonder if you're where God wants you? Do you ever wonder if you're really following God's plan for your life? These are normal questions and ought to be asked by every true believer in Jesus Christ. We should desire to follow His plan; and the only way to know is to ask, listen for direction, and obediently follow.

The most important part of God's plan is that we trust in Jesus for the forgiveness of sin; "He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). God wants us all to repent, turn to Jesus and receive His gift of Salvation - He wants us to step from eternal death to eternal life!

But many people receive His gift and then continue life with no real change, no new direction. This should not be! When we receive God's gift of Salvation, something wonderful occurs; "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!" (2 Corinthians 5:17). When we place our life in His hands, He wipes away the ugliness of our sin and begins to grow and mature us into the likeness of His Son (Romans 8:29). This process of maturing growth is His plan!

## **Ephesians 2:10**

*“For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”*

When we become a new creation in Christ, we become God’s workmanship. The Greek word for workmanship is “poiema” - it’s where we get the word poem. And though it might be difficult to think of our life as a poem, the idea being presented is that God is creating something beautiful, something almost poetic which touches the heart of God.

It might be easier to switch analogies and think of God as the Master Painter. When we give Him our life, we hand Him our old canvas - a canvas covered with the grotesque ugliness of sin. But by grace the canvas is wiped clean, and the Artist begins to paint a work of art with Jesus as the model. Every stroke of His brush is to make our canvas look more and more like Christ.

Are we where God wants us? Are we following His plan? To help find the answer, we should ask: Is the likeness of Christ beginning to form or is my canvas still filled with ugliness and confusion? Am I allowing Him to paint or am I trying to take the brush at every opportunity? Do I even trust Him with my canvas?

God really is the Master Painter, and He really does know what He’s doing. If we will allow Him to finish His work, the end result will be better than anything we can imagine!! Let’s give Him our canvas and allow Him to paint. Let’s follow His plan and allow our life to become His work of art.

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## PUT ON THE NEW SELF

**H**ow does (or should) a Christian live? We might say a Christian is “made” by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, and we might define a Christian as a child of God who will spend eternity in Heaven. And while these are true statements, it still seems there ought to be something about a Christian that makes them different from the rest of the unbelieving world; “if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!” (2 Corinthians 5:17).

The moment we truly believe in Jesus Christ and accept the forgiveness offered through the sacrifice of His death, we are transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit and become a “new creation.” But at the very instant of what we call our new birth, there is little recognizable difference between the old creation and the new. The transformation is done on our heart and there needs to be a process where we mature and allow this transformation to consume every area of our life.

Much of the letters written by Paul were devoted to this same subject. He spent most of his ministry preaching the good news of Salvation through faith in Jesus; but most of his writing was to Christians, instructing them on how they should live.

## **Ephesians 4:22-24**

*“You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.”*

These verses are part of a three chapter passage (Ephesians 4-6) which begins with “I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received” (Ephesians 4:1) and includes teaching about unity, love, humility, anger, purity, husbands, wives, parents, children, slaves, masters, and the full armor of God - all teaching about what is meant by the new self! Some find it hard to understand that a Christian must be taught and urged how to live, but Paul understood. In fact, it’s clear in the original language that Paul is saying to put on the new self...and to KEEP putting it on!!

This is perhaps the most important, yet also the most neglected, teaching of the church today. We seem to have lost the understanding that the Christian life is designed to be a radical transformation which lasts all the rest of our days. The call to “come as you are” is also a call to prepare for change.

The new life we’ve been given is not like the old - it’s “created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.” Let’s rise up every day and be determined to put away the old and live according to the new. Let’s show the world that our walk is different - that we walk hand in hand with Jesus - that we have and will continue to put on the new self.

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## THE PRIVILEGED GIFT OF HOLINESS

In the message “Put On The New Self” we saw how we become a “new creation” when we place our faith in Jesus Christ. When we are brought into a right relationship with God through the transforming power of the Holy Spirit, we begin a process of learning what it means to “put on the new self” (Ephesians 4:24a) and live a life of “true righteousness and holiness” (Ephesians 4:24b). But many still struggle with the idea of holiness.

Some view holiness as an unnecessary set of rules and cling to “there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1). Others simply don’t give holy living any thought. They take Jesus to church on Sunday morning but then return Him to the shelf for the rest of their “normal” week. In either case, the point of true freedom and a loving relationship with the eternal God has been sadly missed.

### **Romans 6:2-4**

*“We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? Or don’t you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? We were therefore buried with Him through baptism*

*into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life."*

Salvation involves death and new life! When we truly believe in Jesus we become united with Him in His death; "our old self was crucified with Him" (Romans 6:6), and we become united with Him in His life; "count yourself dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus" (Romans 6:11).

A child of God is no longer controlled by the sinful nature; "But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves to God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life" (Romans 6:22). The result of being set free is eternal life but the benefit is holiness. How often do we recognize holiness as a benefit - a gift to all who believe?

Holiness is a wonderful privilege (not a burden or obligation) and can only be accomplished by living a new life in Christ. When Jesus truly resides in our heart, His thoughts become our thoughts and His desires become our desires. Without Christ, a holy life is not even possible. When Jesus said "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full" (John 10:10), He was talking about the blessings in this present life which come through a life of complete commitment. Following Jesus in all things is truly living life to the fullest!

Jesus Christ is the Creator Who gave His life so we can be restored. Let's walk with Him every moment of every day. Let's begin to truly live the new life in Christ and gratefully receive the privileged gift of holiness.

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## LOOK BACK FROM ETERNITY

Ruth lived in the land of Moab just east of Canaan. She was not an Israelite but she married one of the sons of Naomi who had recently moved to Moab from Judah because of a famine. After ten years, Ruth's husband died. Naomi was going to return to her homeland and thought Ruth should remain with her people in Moab. But Ruth loved Naomi and desired to stay by her side.

### **Ruth 1:16-17**

*“Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried.”*

Life back in Canaan was difficult for Naomi and Ruth. Without anyone to care for them, Ruth had to pick left over grain from the fields simply to have enough to eat. Fortunately, Jewish law made provisions for this type of charity to the poor. As a poor foreigner in a strange land, this was a very humbling time for Ruth.

After two harvesting seasons of faithfully gathering food for herself and Naomi, Ruth married Boaz who owned the field where she worked. They soon had a son, and Naomi was allowed to help care for the boy. Their

life had suddenly, and wonderfully, improved; and though Ruth must have been relieved and pleased to have a son, imagine her amazement as she is now allowed to look back and view the results of her life from God's vantage point.

Ruth's husband, Boaz, was an Israelite from the tribe of Judah. Their son was named Obed: "He was the father of Jesse, the father of {King} David" (Ruth 4:17). From this same family line (fourteen generations later), Mary would give birth to a boy named Jesus.

Our view of God's Kingdom is VERY limited. No matter how much we desire otherwise, there are simply pieces of the puzzle we are unable to fit together. While we walk this earth and breathe this air we most likely will never see the purpose of our struggles. Yet, we must closely follow the One who leads and give ourselves wholeheartedly to each task we are given - we must trust in His plan.

A shining light will always penetrate the darkness; and though we may not see the impact we have on others, one day we will stand with our Heavenly Father and rejoice as He reveals how we were used for His glorious purpose. One day we will watch our life unfold and clearly see the use of every helping hand, every encouraging word, and even every smile we shared in the midst of our trials. Our life has great meaning and purpose - true meaning and purpose which we will joyfully witness when we are allowed to look back from eternity.

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## NO SHORTCUTS

**I**n the message “Look Back From Eternity” we saw how one day, when we stand with our Heavenly Father, we will see the awesome purpose in the path we have traveled. If we continue to trust and follow His leading, we will see how each twist and turn in His path was designed to navigate us through the jungle and keep us moving toward a closer relationship with God. “As for God, His way is perfect; the Word of the Lord is flawless” (Psalm 18:30). His way is perfect and without flaw; but, by God’s sovereign will, we are given the freedom to choose whether to follow.

Many times, we see what appears to be a shorter route, and we leave His path. These perceived shortcuts are filled with weeds that entangle us and slow our walk with Christ to a pathetic crawl; “But the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it, making it unfruitful” (Matthew 13:22). All our time spent away from God’s path clearly hinders our relationship and diminishes our ability to produce anything of lasting value for the Lord.

### **Psalm 1:1-3**

*“Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. But his delight is in the law of*

*the Lord, and on His Law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither."*

To remain on God's path and continue to bear good and lasting fruit, we must be wise regarding the counsel we seek. Many people willingly give advice on following a "successful" path and yet ridicule any path directed by God. This counsel must be avoided since the very definition of success is in error! A truly successful path IS the path directed by God!!

Staying free of the weeds requires an active pursuit of God; "on His Law he meditates day and night." If we do not consume ourselves with the ways of God, we will by default become consumed by the ways of the world. Jesus made a similar statement to His disciples: "I am the vine, you are the branches. If a man remains in Me and I in him, he will bear much fruit" (John 15:5). Remaining in the vine is a process of clinging to Christ and loving Him with ALL our heart. Our life then becomes defined and consumed by the life of the vine.

As we allow God's Word to flow through our life - as we become planted by the stream of His water - we develop deep roots. These roots become a solid anchor which will not be pulled up during the storm nor dragged along by the swift currents of temptation.

God's path is perfect and His burden is light; but remaining on His path and staying free of weeds requires commitment, perseverance, discipline, and a strong reminder that there are NO shortcuts!

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## WHEN WE HEAR HIS VOICE

**I**n the message “No Shortcuts” we saw the importance of remaining on God’s path by obediently following His leading. There will always be temptations to take other paths to “get ahead” - but God’s ways are flawless and He calls us to follow Him with every step.

Jeremiah was appointed God’s spokesman to call the people of Israel back to a relationship filled with true worship. But despite many pleas for the people to repent, their hearts remained cold and closed to God’s wonderful truth; “They go from one sin to another; they do not acknowledge Me” (Jeremiah 9:3).

After many years of living in rebellious sin, the calling ceased and Israel was taken captive by the Babylonians; “‘You have rejected Me,’ declares the Lord. ‘You keep on backsliding. So I will lay hands on you and destroy you; I can no longer show compassion’” (Jeremiah 15:6).

God dearly loves His children: “He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9). He sent His Son to die as a sacrifice for our sins and gave His Spirit to strengthen and guide us along His path. He continues to call, but constant rejection will cause our heart to harden and be subject to God’s discipline.

A hardened heart has chosen to live separated from God. It can no longer hear God's call and cannot even recognize His truth. When this occurs, our Loving Father responds with great sorrow and allows the hardened heart to follow the path it desires; "Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts" (Romans 1:24). Dear Lord, do not allow us to follow our own path!

God calls us today through His Word. He calls us through those He has sent into the world to proclaim His truth. He even calls through messages such as this. Is there a tug on your heart to place your trust in the forgiveness offered through Jesus? Is there a desire for a deeper commitment, a greater worship, a life of greater holiness and purity? These desires, pulls, and tugs are all the call of God being made through His Spirit.

### **Hebrews 3:15**

*"Today, if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion."*

When we hear the call of God's voice, we must respond. He is calling us to Salvation through faith in Jesus; calling us to know Him better through His Word and prayer; calling us to serve others with love and nurture Godly relationships; and calling us to draw near through more intimate worship. His call is a wonderful confirmation of His love, but we must follow and not turn away. Today, let's answer His call and resolve to never again allow our heart to harden when we hear His voice.

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## CONSUME THE WORD

In the message “When We Hear His Voice” we saw that despite many calls and pleas from Jeremiah, the people of Israel failed to repent of their sin and turn toward God. After many years of rejection, God finally turned them over to their own evil desires; “Even if Moses and Samuel were to stand before Me, My heart would not go out to this people” (Jeremiah 15:1).

Jeremiah was in a very lonely position. He had faithfully preached God’s message to his fellow countrymen but received only rejection in return: “{I am} a man with whom the whole land strives and contends...everyone curses me” (Jeremiah 15:10). This rejection caused him to also feel rejected by God. He had lost the focus of his calling and tried to remind God of his deep devotion.

### **Jeremiah 15:15-16**

*“Do not take me away; think of how I suffer reproach for Your sake. When Your words came, I ate them; they were my joy and my heart’s delight, for I bear Your name, O Lord God Almighty.”*

Jeremiah hungered for God’s Word and often thought of his next “meal” with the Lord. Though he was frustrated, Jeremiah loved God and desired to serve Him. God saw the devo-

tion in Jeremiah's heart and realigned his path toward faithful service; "I will restore you that you may serve Me; if you utter worthy, not worthless, words, you will be My spokesman" (Jeremiah 15:19).

What type of devotion and hunger does God see when He looks inside our heart?

Several years ago, I had the opportunity to take an extended hiking trip with my son. We hiked 120 miles in ten days and ate mostly nuts, raisins, and peanut butter. As we hiked along the beautiful trails of Northern Maine - through woods, across streams, and over mountains - I spent many hours thinking of scripture verses. But I confess I also spent many hours thinking about pepperoni pizza with extra cheese. By the end of the trail, I had a DEEP hunger for pizza; a longing that made my mouth water; a hunger which had to be filled...immediately!

We must approach God's Word with this same anticipation and hunger. We must recognize the world's diet as being filled with empty "snacks" which ruin our appetite for real Food! The Word of God is a nourishing and satisfying meal which deserves our full attention as well as our appreciation. We ought to sit down and eagerly clean our plates - not play with our food and nibble around the edges.

Many of us are Spiritually starving and yet keep His life-giving Food sitting on the shelf! Let's pray for an increased hunger - a focused hunger which is satisfied only in our Heavenly Father. Let's commit to being a well nourished Child of God and passionately consume The Word.

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## ANSWER THE CHALLENGE

Why are so many “believers” content to live a life of mediocrity in Christ - a life partially devoted to following God and partially devoted to following the ways of the world? Without question, some have only put on the face of a Christian and have never given their heart to God through a saving faith in Jesus. But others are true believers in desperate need of a Spiritual kick in the pants!

Paul’s letters comprise much of the New Testament. They were written to give instruction on the Christian faith and to encourage perseverance through times of testing. Paul often wrote of the simplicity of the gospel message; “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith - and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God” (Ephesians 2:8). But he also wrote to encourage those who truly put their faith in Jesus, to live a life of service, holiness, and unity.

When we accept Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior, we begin a new life. We are set free from the bondage of sin (Romans 6:22) and are called to follow Christ as we are conformed to His image (Romans 8:29). But Paul saw many believers sitting on the sidelines of the Christian life; “I urge you to live a

life worthy of the calling you have received” (Ephesians 4:1).

Paul gives encouragement by “urging” a life worthy of Salvation. This has nothing to do with earning our way to Heaven; rather, it’s a life lived in holy thankfulness for the gift we have received. The word Paul used for urge can also be translated as beseech, beg, implore, exhort, or challenge. He’s not giving a gentle pat on the back which says, “You’re doing well, keep running a good race.” Rather, Paul is presenting a firm challenge to draw nearer to God and give our lives more fully to Him. Paul used the same word in his letter to the Romans.

### **Romans 12:1**

*“Therefore, I urge {beg, implore, exhort, and challenge} you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God - this is your spiritual act of worship.”*

We have been set free and made new! We are a new creation and CANNOT continue to walk with one foot on God’s path and the other being allowed to tiptoe along worldly desires. These simply have no place in the life of a worshipper of the One True God!

Today, we are being challenged to trust God more; to talk with Him more and seek His presence more diligently; to not get pulled away by the lies of the world! We are being challenged to love Him with ALL our heart, soul, mind and strength (Mark 12:30). As we face this day with its multitude of struggles, let’s live a life worthy of the calling we have received and forevermore answer the challenge!

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## LEARN HOW TO FALL

When my daughter was beginning to ride her bike she discovered an all-important truth. After a particularly difficult afternoon she came inside and said; “Daddy, you know the hardest part about riding a bike? It’s learning how to fall!” At five years of age she had discovered that falling was an inevitable part of the riding experience; but to have a “successful” experience, she needed to learn how to fall without causing damage to her body.

When we follow the call of God and step into the great unknown, we are ALWAYS successful because success is defined as being obedient to His call - regardless of the physical results or accomplishments. We must never evaluate our walk with the Lord based on the success or failure criteria of the world, but on a faith which is lived out each day through trust and obedience.

When John the Baptist was in prison he sent his disciples to ask Jesus, “Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?” (Matthew 11:3). This question points to some great turmoil going on with John. John preached a message of repentance to “Prepare the way of the Lord” (Luke 3:4), and he said of Jesus; “But one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not

worthy to untie” (Luke 3:16). And when John baptized Jesus, he heard a voice from Heaven say, “This is My Son, whom I love; with Him I am well pleased” (Matthew 3:17). But now while in jail, John needed to ask: “Are You really the One?”

**Matthew 11:4-6**

*“Jesus replied, ‘Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear... Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of Me.’”*

The first part of this reply is what we expect. Jesus is saying, “Of course I’m the One! Don’t you see the evidence?” But then Jesus answers John’s real question with “Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of Me.” John was doubting because he had been sent to jail for following Christ. He had taken a discouraging fall and was questioning his chosen path. Was it possible to experience such hardship if Jesus was really the Christ?

Our walk with Jesus is never promised to be easy - it’s promised to be eternal! We are never promised success in the eyes of the world - we are promised the true success which only His peace can give...and also an eternal glory in Heaven! His plans and purposes are perfect and will most surely include aspects we cannot understand - include times when we appear to fall. These are times when we must fall without falling away. In falling we must fall closer to Jesus and learn to trust Him even more. We can have success even through apparent failure, but we must first learn how to fall.

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## STRENGTHENED BY HARDSHIP

On Paul's first missionary journey, he traveled with Barnabas to Cyprus and then up through several cities in Galatia. After preaching the gospel in Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe, they returned back through the same cities so they could strengthen those who had recently placed their faith in Jesus.

### Acts 14:21-22

*“They returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. ‘We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God,’ they said.”*

The early church was facing great persecution for simply turning to Christ; and Paul himself faced many hardships, including a recent stoning, for preaching the gospel. And though many Christians around the world face this same type of persecution for their faith, and many more face lesser hardships simply because they are a Christian, there remains a much more universal truth to this passage.

Those who have placed their complete faith in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sin have begun a journey which leads to the kingdom of God. Once we truly begin this journey, we

are a child of God and our place in God's kingdom has been reserved; "He anointed us, set His seal of ownership on us, and put His Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come" (2 Corinthians 1:21-22).

However, while on this journey, God has a great plan and purpose for our life; "For those God foreknew He also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of His Son" (Romans 8:29). Every step is for the purpose of drawing us closer and conforming us to the image of Christ. And hardship is the tool which seems to best accomplish this goal. I'm sure God would prefer to shape us through praise and blessings, but we seem to respond best to hardship.

It's hardship which reminds us of our dependence on God when we've begun to trust in our own abilities and understanding. It's hardship which brings us back to our knees in prayer after long seasons of silence. It's hardship which develops the character of a mature believer: "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything" (James 1:2-4).

As difficult as this truth may be to accept and understand, part of God's plan is for us to experience some hardship. For in our lost and fallen world where we come to God filled with pride and arrogance, hardship is the only way to humble our spirit and soften our heart. Our Father loves us enough to do whatever it takes to draw us closer to His side - even when this means being strengthened by hardship.

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## PASS THE TRUE BLESSING

**W**hen Jesus began His ministry on earth, He taught those who had an ear to hear, healed those who were sick, and fed those who were hungry. He also selected twelve Apostles and sent them “to the lost sheep of Israel” (Matthew 10:6) with instructions to preach, heal, and feed. As He was preparing them for the mission field, He gave a command to maintain a giving heart.

### **Matthew 10:8**

*“Freely you have received, freely give.”*

All we have is from the hand of God. There is nothing we can claim we have earned or deserve. If the material in this book has in any way blessed you and helped to draw you closer to God, I pray you would consider giving this book to someone else. Our Heavenly Father will continue to be glorified as we freely pass the blessing!

I included this message at the end of this book (as well as at the end of the other volumes in this series) as a way of encouraging people to share these books with others - or at least share the messages contained in these books. These messages have only limited value if they are read once and put on the shelf.

But there is a much more general principle at work, and one much more important than the sharing of books. We have received from God the greatest gift of all, the gift of His Son. God gave His Son, free of charge to all who believe, as a full and complete sacrifice for the forgiveness of our sin. We may take the rest of our lives trying to comprehend the magnitude of this gift, but He has given us a way to spend all eternity with Him in Heaven. He has given us a ticket which instantly transports us from eternal death in Hell to eternal life in Heaven. Can anything compare? Yet the gift is free.

The gift is free and absolutely not for sale. We cannot purchase eternal life with all the money in the world or all the good deeds accomplished by every soul who ever walked the earth. The only way to receive the gift of eternal life is to humbly approach the Giver and believe.

But now that we have received such a wonderful gift we must give it away. We cannot keep the gift of Salvation on the shelf and hope to dust it off when we're finally called Home. We must share our faith - share our gift - with anyone, anywhere, and at any time that will express His love and glorify His name. Our ability to give away the gift reflects an understanding of its value and the free grace through which it was given. Let's share the free gift of Jesus with others today. Today, let's freely pass the true blessing.

# A CLOSER WALK



Our walk with Jesus is a long and  
wonderful journey which begins  
long before we come to know  
Him and continues until the day  
He calls us home.

Let's take the next step of trust  
and walk a closer walk.

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