

A Book of Bible Study

**Written By
Joseph F. Harwood**

A Book of Bible Study

Copyright 2014 by Joseph F. Harwood

www.abookofbiblestudy.net

joseph.f.harwood@gmail.com

Scripture quotations taken from the New American Standard Bible[®],
Copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973,
1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation
Used by permission. (www.Lockman.org)

A Book of Bible Study

Contents

Introduction

1. God's Forgiveness and Restoration
2. Our Forgiveness of Others
3. The Imperative of Obedience
4. God Will Help His People
5. The Battle Is Not Yours, But God's
6. God's Provision for Our Lives
7. For Those Who Show Mercy
8. Christian Giving
9. Suffering in the Life of a Believer – Part 1
10. Suffering in the Life of a Believer – Part 2
11. A Share in the Sufferings of Christ – Part 1
12. A Share in the Sufferings of Christ – Part 2
13. Two Lives, Two Destinies
14. The Righteous and the Wicked
15. A Place of Honor in the Kingdom of God
16. The Testing of Our Faith
17. The Trial of Job
18. A Lesson from the Life of Joseph
19. A Lesson from the Life of Moses
20. Predestination – Part 1
21. Predestination – Part 2
22. Predestination – Part 3
23. Predestination – Part 4
24. The Eternal Security of the Believer – Part 1
25. The Eternal Security of the Believer – Part 2
26. The Eternal Security of the Believer – Part 3
27. Sharing Our Faith
28. The Sovereignty of God in the Lives of Men
29. God's Answers to Our Prayers
30. When the Race Has Been Run

Introduction

Jesus Christ is called the “Word of God”, and He is also called “Faithful and True” (John 1:1, 14, Revelation 19:11-13). The Bible itself is the word of God revealed to man, and it contains all that God intended to communicate of His plan for the salvation of men through His Son Jesus Christ, and through Him alone. The word of God as revealed to us in the Scriptures is faithful and true, and every prophecy, teaching, precept, and promise contained therein will be made to come to pass in the lives of believers, and in God’s creation as a whole.

“A Book of Bible Study” provides answers to many of the most common questions believers have as they seek to understand the Bible. Great care has been taken to provide Scripture references for every teaching that is given, and there are also many direct Scripture quotations included to enhance the understanding of each lesson.

The Apostle Paul exhorted Timothy to be diligent in correctly handling the word of truth (2 Timothy 2:15). In order to correctly handle God’s word, we must interpret the Bible considering not only the words in the verse or verses under consideration, but we must also consider the context of the passage in which the verses appear. And we must also interpret the verses considering the teachings of all the rest of the Scriptures as a whole. In addition, we must consider who is being addressed in a particular passage. When we interpret the Bible in this way, by letting “Scripture interpret Scripture” in such a way that our interpretation is not contradicted by other teachings in the Bible, then we can have confidence that we have correctly handled the word of God.

Many skeptics, and indeed many believers, will say that there are contradictions in the Bible. However, when the word of God is correctly handled or interpreted by letting the Scriptures themselves interpret the meaning of other Scriptures, we will find that passages in the Bible which once seemed to be contradicted by other passages can be demonstrated to be

in agreement with one another. Within the pages of this book the reader will see a number of these apparent contradictions resolved as we study several difficult biblical doctrines that have given rise to differences of opinion, even among genuine believers endeavoring to understand the truth of God's word with all diligence and to the best of their ability.

We will consider numerous biblical teachings, including many of God's promises of mercy, forgiveness, restoration, and help for His people. We will also consider the difficult issue of suffering in the life of a believer. We will grapple with the question of why our loving, sovereign, and omnipotent God, for whom nothing is impossible, would allow suffering to touch the lives of His people, even when we are walking in obedience to His word.

Later in the book we will consider subjects such as predestination and the eternal security of the believer, and we will come to definite conclusions about these doctrines, conclusions based squarely upon the word of God. We will also consider biblical teachings that reveal the sovereignty of God in the events that transpire in the lives of all men. And we will study events in the lives of several of God's servants as recorded in the Bible, in order to see how He worked in their lives to accomplish His will through them. As we do so, we will gain insight into some of the ways in which He may work in our lives as well, as He fulfills His plan and purpose for each of us.

1.

God's Forgiveness and Restoration

Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, died on Calvary's cross and became the atoning sacrifice for the sins of men. Jesus testified of Himself saying, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me." (John 14:6). The Apostle Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, addressed the Sanhedrin and the Jewish leaders who had arrested him. He spoke of God's salvation through Jesus Christ and through Him alone saying: "And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved." (Acts 4:12).

Jesus Christ, the spotless, blameless Lamb of God laid down His life for all of those "who are beloved of God" and "called as saints" (Romans 1:7). And then on the third day, He rose again according to the Scriptures, and He is now seated at the right hand of the throne of God (Luke 24:46-47, Hebrews 8:1).

Jesus Christ became righteousness for us, as Paul taught saying: "But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested.... even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe.... for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood..." (Romans 3:21-25).

In another passage in his letter to the Romans, Paul again taught about the forgiveness of our sins and reconciliation to God being accomplished for us through the blood of Jesus Christ. Paul wrote: "But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life." (Romans 5:8-10).

The Bible teaches that it is **only** through the blood of Jesus Christ shed on Calvary's cross that our reconciliation to God has been accomplished. There is no other way to God the Father, no other way into the kingdom of Heaven. This is the crux and the essence of our Christian faith.

In his first letter, the Apostle John also taught about the forgiveness of our sins coming through the blood of Christ. John wrote: "This is the message we have heard from Him and announce to you, that God is Light, and in Him there is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with Him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth; but if we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." (1 John 1:5-9).

Continuing in chapter 2, John wrote: "My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world." (1 John 2:1-2).

Everyone who comes to faith in Christ, whether Jew or Gentile, regardless of nation or race, obtains the forgiveness of their sins through His shed blood. And we find this same teaching again in Revelation 5:9 where we John wrote: "...You were slain, and purchased for God with Your blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation."

Set Free from Sin

Sin is disobedience to God's commands as they are set forth in the Holy Bible, which is God's word. In Romans 6, we learn that when we were called to faith in Christ, a transformation occurred in our lives. Paul taught that when we were still unbelievers, we were slaves to sin, but when we came to believe in Christ, we became slaves of God and His righteousness. In other words, the believer is not enslaved to sin and powerless to be freed from it as unbelievers are. As slaves of God, we have been set free from sin

(Romans 6:22), and by God's grace and power we have been given the means to rid ourselves of it. Paul also wrote in this passage: "For sin shall not be master over you, for you are not under law but under grace." (Romans 6:14).

Even though we are no longer slaves of sin, we can see from the Scriptures that many times we will find ourselves struggling against sin. Paul taught about the ongoing struggle against sin that every believer will experience as he revealed his own struggle in Romans 7:7-25.

James also understood the believer's struggle against temptation and sin, and he gave us this exhortation: "Submit therefore to God. **Resist** the devil and he will flee from you." (James 4:7-10, emphasis added). Teaching along these same lines, the Apostle Peter also wrote of the believer's struggle against temptation and sin when he gave us this exhortation: "Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. But **resist** him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same experiences of suffering are being accomplished by your brethren who are in the world." (1 Peter 5:8-9, emphasis added). So both James and Peter exhorted believers to continue to **resist** the temptations of the devil.

Though God does allow both believers and unbelievers to be tempted, He Himself tempts no one. James made this clear when he wrote: "Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am being tempted by God'; for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone. But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death." (James 1:13-15).

Within these verses James taught that lust, or unlawful desire, when acted upon gives birth to sin, and sin results in death when it has run its' course. The end result of sin is death: eternal death and separation from God for the unbeliever, and according to 1 John 5:16-17, sin could even result in physical death for the believer. Paul also taught that "the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 6:23).

There are many Scriptures that speak of the painful and damaging consequences of sin. But we also see from the Scriptures that God has given

every believer the power to overcome sin in his life: “For whatever is born of God overcomes the world; and this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith.” (1 John 5:4).

God’s Discipline in the Lives of His People

In another teaching from Romans, speaking of the saints of God, Paul wrote: “For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren” (Romans 8:29). It is God’s will that every believer is to be conformed to the image of His Son Jesus Christ, who led a life separated from sin. Therefore when we do sin, God sends His disciplines into our lives in order to separate us from our sins. God’s discipline is itself a sign that we belong to Him, as we learn from Hebrews 12. The writer of Hebrews quoted a passage from Proverbs 3:11-12 when he wrote:

“My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord,
Nor faint when you are reprov’d by Him,
For those whom the Lord loves He disciplines,
And He scourges every son whom He receives.” (Hebrews 12:5b-6)

Sin always brings God’s rod of correction into the lives of His people. On those occasions when we know that we are experiencing the consequences of our own sin, let us confess our sin before God, repent of it and forsake it, being fully determined to root it out of our lives.

God’s promise of forgiveness is ours as believers, but we must understand that He will not allow sin to persist in the lives of His people. He will surely separate us from our sin, and we will not like the means that He uses to do so. The writer of Hebrews instructed us again when he wrote: “All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness” (Hebrews 12:11).

While God may allow sin to continue for some time in the lives of unbelievers with no apparent consequences to themselves, He will not allow it in the lives of His people. Sin in the life of a believer always brings about God’s discipline, which serves to restore us to obedience.

God's Promises of Restoration

God's warnings about the consequences of sin are clearly stated in the Bible, and His will that believers live a life separated from sin is also clearly taught. But what if we have participated in sin, bringing the painful discipline of God's judgment into our lives? For such times, believers have not only God's promise of His forgiveness, but we also have His promises of restoration when we return to Him in obedience.

In Joel 2:18-19 we read of the Lord's promise to restore His blessings to His people after His judgment had been realized in their lives, and after their repentance. Later in this same chapter we again read of God's promise of mercy and restoration for His people who have forsaken their sin and returned to Him. God spoke through the prophet, saying:

“Then I will make up to you for the years
That the swarming locust has eaten,
The creeping locust, the stripping locust and the gnawing locust,
My great army which I sent among you.
“You will have plenty to eat and be satisfied
And praise the name of the Lord your God,
Who has dealt wondrously with you;
Then My people will never be put to shame.” (Joel 2:25-26)

After we have heeded God's call to return to Him, having forsaken our sin and having resolved to move forward living our lives in obedience to His word, let us not dwell on the failings of the past. Instead, let us have the same mindset as the Apostle Paul had in his own life: “...forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 3:13-14).

In the book of Micah we again read of God's forgiveness, mercy and restoration for His people. Micah wrote:

Who is a God like You, who pardons iniquity
And passes over the rebellious act of the remnant of His possession?

He does not retain His anger forever,
Because He delights in unchanging love.
He will again have compassion on us;
He will tread our iniquities under foot.
Yes, You will cast all their sins
Into the depths of the sea. (Micah 7:18-19)

Surely God will tread our sins underfoot. He will not allow sin to continue or have dominion in the life of one of His children. With sin in the life of one of God's people comes the rod of correction. If anyone can continue in his sin without being disciplined by God, then he is illegitimate and not a true son of God (Hebrews 12:5-8).

In Zephaniah 3:14-20, we see that God promised restoration to His people after the consequences of their sins had come upon them. In these verses Zephaniah encouraged Israel, telling them to rejoice and be glad. He said that God would take away their punishment and the harm that they feared. He also told them that God would take delight in them and once again quiet them with His love. Speaking through the prophet, God promised His people that He would deal with those who had oppressed them, He would restore their lost dignity and honor, and He would restore the fortunes they had lost because of their sins.

In the book of Zechariah, we find more of God's promises of restoration as He calls His people to return to Him. God spoke through the prophet saying:

“Return to the stronghold, O prisoners who have the hope;
This very day I am declaring that I will restore double to you.” (Zechariah 9:12).

In the book of Jeremiah there are more promises of restoration for God's people. In Jeremiah 31:3-5, God spoke to His people saying that He has drawn them to Himself with an everlasting love. He promised that He would restore them and build them up again. He said that they would again be joyful and plant vineyards, enjoying the fruit from them. God spoke through the prophet again saying:

“I have surely heard Ephraim grieving,
‘You have chastised me, and I was chastised,

Like an untrained calf;
Bring me back that I may be restored,
For You are the LORD my God.
'For after I turned back, I repented;
And after I was instructed, I smote on my thigh;
I was ashamed and also humiliated
Because I bore the reproach of my youth.'
"Is Ephraim My dear son?
Is he a delightful child?
Indeed, as often as I have spoken against him,
I certainly still remember him;
Therefore My heart yearns for him;
I will surely have mercy on him," declares the LORD. (Jeremiah 31:18-20)

God also spoke through the prophet Isaiah of His forgiveness, and He called for His sinning people to return to Him as we read in the following passages:

"I, even I, am the one who wipes out your transgressions for My own sake,
And I will not remember your sins." (Isaiah 43:25)

"Remember these things, O Jacob,
And Israel, for you are My servant;
I have formed you, you are My servant,
O Israel, you will not be forgotten by Me.
"I have wiped out your transgressions like a thick cloud
And your sins like a heavy mist.
Return to Me, for I have redeemed you." (Isaiah 44:21-22)

Speaking through the prophet Joel, God called to His sinning people to return to Him "even now", even after all the sins they had committed, and He called to them to return "with fasting, weeping and mourning". Joel said that the Lord "is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, abounding in lovingkindness", and that He relents from sending the calamity of His judgments into the lives of His people (Joel 2:12-13).

As those who have been called to faith in Jesus Christ, we have received God's mercy in that we have been forgiven our sins and reconciled to Him through the blood of His Son. Even though we may sin at times after we have been saved, we can take comfort in God's promise that no power in

all of creation will be able to separate us from His love, which is ours in Jesus Christ (Romans 8:35-39).

Despite our failings, God will continue the good work of salvation that He began in us when He called us to faith in His Son, and He will carry that work through to completion (Philippians 1:6, 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24). As recipients of His mercy and grace let us give thanks to God for His love, which endures forever (Psalm 136), and for the restoration that He provides for His people when we forsake our disobedience and return to Him.

2.

Our Forgiveness of Others

In Matthew 6:12, 14-15 and in Matthew 18:21-35, Jesus gave two teachings about forgiving others. It is clear from reading these passages that we as believers are expected and even commanded to forgive others of their offenses against us, just as we have ourselves have been forgiven our sins by our God and Father.

In considering these two passages, we should understand that forgiving others is not a work that we must do in order to obtain God's forgiveness for ourselves, rather it is evidence that we ourselves have already obtained God's forgiveness. We as genuine believers are those who have been forgiven our sins through the blood of God's Son, Jesus Christ. Regardless of our struggles or shortcomings, we will not be condemned, because God's word assures us that we have already crossed over from death to eternal life (John 5:24).

We show mercy when we extend forgiveness to those who have sinned against us. Love manifesting itself through mercy is evidence that we have crossed over from death to eternal life; it is evidence that we are among those who have received God's mercy. Love shows mercy, and mercy forgives. (Consider Matthew 5:7, Galatians 5:22-23, 1 John 4:7-8).

However, this is not to say that our forgiveness of others always comes about quickly or easily. There may be a protracted and difficult struggle with forgiving others, but we know from the Scriptures that our God will not give us any command without giving us the power to obey it; He will work in our lives to bring about our forgiveness of those who have sinned against us.

The Struggle to Forgive

As believers we will all struggle against sin of many kinds for as long as we live on this earth, and at times we may find ourselves struggling with the sin of unforgiveness. In his letter to the Romans, Paul revealed his own struggle with sin, and in doing so he taught us about the same struggle that all believers will experience. Paul wrote:

For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; ***for the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not.*** For the good that I want, I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not want. But if I am doing the very thing I do not want, I am no longer the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me.

I find then the principle that evil is present in me, the one who wants to do good. ***For I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man, but I see a different law in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin which is in my members.*** Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! (Romans 7:18-25a, emphasis added).

As believers, we have been given a heart to obey God. Therefore we also, as Paul did, will “joyfully concur” with God’s law in our inner being (verse 22), and yet we may find ourselves at times experiencing what Paul did: having the desire to do what is good, but struggling to accomplish it (verse 18). Though we may struggle with sin for a time, we will be given a way of escape, because as Paul taught again, no temptation has overtaken us except that which is common to man, and with every temptation God will provide a way of escape for us, that we might be able to bear it (1 Corinthians 10:13).

Who will set us free “from the body of this death” and its struggle with sin? Paul gave us the answer: “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (Romans 7:25a). In our struggle with the sin of unforgiveness, we as believers will ultimately be given the power to obey God and forgive those who have sinned against us. We will not be left powerless to forgive as others are.

The Apostle John wrote: “For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments; and His commandments are not burdensome. For whatever is born of God overcomes the world; and this is the victory that has overcome the world - our faith. Who is the one who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?” (1 John 5:3-5).

God’s commands are not so burdensome that we are unable to obey them. Though a struggle with sin may persist for a time, whether the struggle is with unforgiveness or some other sin, we as believers will be given the power to obey God’s commands through the power of the One living within us.

The Grievous Wrongdoings of Others

There are some offenses, some sins of others committed against us that do great damage. If we have suffered a grievous loss because of the sins of others, we could experience emotional or physical scars that may never fully heal in this lifetime. In these cases, we may feel completely justified in holding on to our anger because of the wrong that has been done to us and the great harm that we have realized because of it. We may feel that the one who caused this wrong is completely undeserving of forgiveness, and that we have every right to refuse to forgive them.

God, according to His sovereign plan for each of our lives, will sometimes allow a severe challenge to our faith. He allowed such a challenge of faith into the life of Job, to the point where he finally cried out against God in his anger and misery. As the losses that Job experienced began to weigh upon him, losses that included the death of all his children, the loss of his material wealth and the affliction of his physical health, he came to the point where he complained bitterly to his three friends. He angrily charged God with wrongdoing when he said:

“Know then that God has wronged me
And has closed His net around me.”

“Behold, I cry, ‘Violence!’ but I get no answer;
I shout for help, but there is no justice.” (Job 19:6-7)

Job knew that he had done nothing wrong to bring all this suffering and loss upon himself, and at this point he felt that he had been wronged by God, even abandoned by Him. The feeling of abandonment that Job experienced may bring to mind Jesus' loud cry from the cross: "...My God, my God, why have You forsaken Me?" (Matthew 27:46).

Job also, as one of God's people, was enduring a share in this aspect of the sufferings of Christ long before the actual events occurred in the life of Jesus during His time on earth. By suffering through no fault or wrongdoing of his own and enduring the desolate feeling that he had been abandoned by God during this time of tremendous adversity, Job was enduring in some small measure a share in the suffering that Jesus experienced as He hung on Calvary's cross, bearing the punishment that was due for the sins of others, and not for any sin of His own.

Speaking through the prophet Ezekiel, God referred to Job as being one of His most exemplary servants, along with Daniel and Noah (Ezekiel 14:12-20). These men also suffered great trials in their lives according to the will of God. When we consider the undeserved suffering in the lives of many of God's servants as recorded in the Scriptures, we might conclude that those individuals whom God has set apart as His most exemplary servants are the ones who are called upon to endure such tremendous suffering and loss.

Many times great harm comes into the lives of believers through the sin of an unbeliever. In such cases it may help with forgiving the person through whom the sin comes when we understand that an unbeliever is a slave of sin, and he can do no better than to sin. Unregenerate men are powerless to escape the sin which ensnares and enslaves them (Romans 6:16-18, 2 Timothy 2:26). On the other hand, as believers, God has chosen us for something far better. We have been chosen to receive a share in the glory of His Son Jesus Christ and eternity with Him in Heaven.

We can take comfort in knowing that we do not have to be concerned about obtaining justice for ourselves when we have suffered some great offense, because our God has promised to avenge us of any wrongdoing that we may suffer as a result of the actions of evil men. In Romans 12, Paul used quotations from Deuteronomy 32:35 and Proverbs 25:21-22 to convey his exhortation in this matter: "Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men. If possible, so far as it depends

on you, be at peace with all men. Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, ‘Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,’ says the Lord.” (Romans 12:17-19).

Paul exhorted us not to seek our own vengeance for wrongs done to us, but to “leave room for the wrath of God”. God is able to inflict far greater vengeance upon those who have wronged us than we can, and vengeance belongs to Him. He has promised us that He will repay our enemies for the evil they have done to us.

Jesus warned of the punishment coming to those of the world who sin against those who believe in Him, causing them to stumble and sin. In Matthew 18 we read: “but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it would be better for him to have a heavy millstone hung around his neck, and to be drowned in the depth of the sea. Woe to the world because of its stumbling blocks! For it is inevitable that stumbling blocks come; but woe to that man through whom the stumbling block comes!” (Matthew 18:6-7).

In reading this passage believers can be comforted and encouraged, knowing that our God will repay those who of the world have sinned against us, perhaps causing us to stumble into sin. At the same time, we might wonder why Jesus taught that “it is inevitable” that these stumbling blocks will come into our lives.

These things that can cause us to stumble must and will come into our lives because God has ordained that all of us who serve Christ must follow Him, experiencing a share in His sufferings (John 12:24-26, Romans 8:17). Jesus suffered temptation (Hebrews 2:18), and He also suffered as a result of the wrongdoing of others. God has ordained that we will all experience reflections of Jesus’ sufferings in our own lives in some measure, in order that we may also share in His eternal glory. We will consider these things in much greater depth in chapters to come.

In Conclusion

Jesus taught us in Matthew 10:29 that not even a sparrow falls to the ground apart from the will of our Father. From Jesus’ teaching here, we

learn that nothing in God's creation happens apart from His knowledge and His will, not even an event as insignificant as the death of one sparrow. Nothing touches our lives apart from the will of our sovereign God and Father, who sometimes allows suffering and loss to come into our lives through the sins of others.

When we endure unjust suffering because of the transgressions of others, whether the offense comes through an unbeliever or through another believer, such sufferings are for us a share in the sufferings of Christ. He suffered at the hands of evil men, though He had done nothing to deserve it. He also suffered because of the sins of those who would be reconciled to God through His suffering and death. Jesus' sufferings occurred according to the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God our Father (Acts 2:23-24), as do the sufferings of every one of us who is called to follow Him.

As recipients of His mercy and forgiveness, God requires that we in turn must extend our forgiveness to others. This can be a very hard thing when we have suffered a great loss through the wrongdoing of others. Though we may struggle with unforgiveness for a time, we will ultimately be given Christ's grace and strength in a measure sufficient for our need to forgive those who have sinned against us.

As long as the struggle with unforgiveness persists, let us continue to pray to our Father, asking for His help in forgiving those who have sinned against us. It is His will that we obey Him in this matter, as in all others, and therefore we can be assured that we will receive the help we ask from Him (1 John 14-15).

3.

The Imperative of Obedience

In John 15:1-8 Jesus taught as He did many times by using an analogy from things in the natural world. To teach His disciples about spiritual fruitfulness on this occasion, He compared Himself to a vine, and men to branches.

Jesus spoke of two different categories of men in this passage: those who abide or remain in Him, and those who do not. Those who abide in Christ are believers, and it is only because we “abide in the Vine” that we are “branches” that can, and will indeed, bear fruit to the glory of God (John 15:8). In contrast, unbelievers do not abide in Christ, and therefore they are unable to bear fruit. In order for anyone to bear fruit to the glory of God, they must “abide in the Vine”, which is to say that they must be in union with Christ. In other words, they must be a believer.

A few verses later in John 15, Jesus said: “If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father’s commandments and abide in His love.” (John 15:10). Here in John 15:10, and also in John 14:21-24, Jesus taught that men will demonstrate a genuine faith in Him by the fact that they walk in obedience to His commands.

The Apostle John also gave us this same teaching in 1 John 2:3-6 and 1 John 5:3-5. Believers will at times sin after they are saved, but the life of every believer will be characterized fundamentally by obedience and submission to God’s word, in contrast to those of the world whose lives will be characterized fundamentally by sin and self-seeking.

Therefore, by our obedience to God’s word we give evidence that we are genuine believers. And every genuine believer will bear fruit to the glory of God as a result of the fact that he “abides” in the Vine, in union with Christ. This fruit will be produced because by God’s grace we have been called to faith in Christ (John 6:44, 1 Peter 1:1-2, many others), and by

God's power we abide or remain in Christ (Philippians 1:6, 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24, 1 Peter 1:3-5).

The Consequences of Our Disobedience

Though God has called us to faith in His Son, and our lives will be fundamentally characterized by obedience and submission to His word, we as God's people sometimes sin by disobeying Him. As we saw in the previous chapter, Paul revealed his own struggle with sin in Romans 7, and he did so in order that we might understand the struggle against sin that every believer will experience.

When we yield to temptation and disobey God, we will bring His discipline or chastening upon ourselves, as we are admonished in Hebrews 12:4-13. Within this passage, we find this particularly strong admonition: "Therefore, strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble, and make straight paths for your feet, so that the limb which is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed." (Hebrews 12:12-13).

The implication here is that our failure to restore ourselves to obedience could result in that which is "lame" becoming disabled. In other words, as a result of our disobedience, the point could come where the opportunity for service in a particular capacity, and the eternal reward from that service, could be lost to us in some measure.

The strong admonition to restore ourselves to obedience that we see in Hebrews 12:12-13 is also demonstrated in another passage of Scripture. In Jeremiah 18 we read that the word of the Lord came to the prophet telling him to go down to the potter's house, where He would give him His message.

When Jeremiah got there, he saw the potter working at the wheel. As he was watching the potter form a vessel, the prophet observed: "But the vessel that he was making of clay was spoiled in the hand of the potter; so he remade it into another vessel, as it pleased the potter to make." (Jeremiah 18:4). The Lord then told Jeremiah that His people Israel were like clay in His hands, and that He could do with them as the potter had done, and form a spoiled vessel into another vessel for a different purpose, as He sees fit.

Therefore as believers, let us be diligent to see that our lives as God's chosen vessels are not "spoiled" or marred by sin. If this does occur, even though our salvation itself is eternally secure and assured, we may be formed by the Potter into another vessel for some other place of service, as a consequence of our own sin. As a result, we may suffer the loss of blessings and rewards that we might have otherwise realized, had we not been disobedient.

When John wrote in Revelation 7:17 that God will wipe away every tear from our eyes, one can imagine that some of those tears could be for lost blessings which came about through our own disobedience to God and His word. The matter of obedience to God should be taken very seriously by all of us as believers. Although our salvation is eternally secure and certain, we may lose both temporal and eternal rewards as a result of our disobedience.

Building Upon the Foundation of Our Faith

In 1 Corinthians the Apostle Paul taught believers about the eternal reward or loss of reward that each of us will experience, depending upon our works. Paul wrote:

According to the grace of God which was given to me, like a wise master builder I laid a foundation, and another is building on it. But each man must be careful how he builds on it. For no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if any man builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each man's work will become evident; for the day will show it because it is to be revealed with fire, and the fire itself will test the quality of each man's work. If any man's work which he has built on it remains, he will receive a reward. If any man's work is burned up, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire. (1 Corinthians 3:10-15)

We have only one time to pass through this life on earth, and as Paul taught, the works that we do during this time will be tested by fire to determine their quality. Therefore, let us diligently strive not to be among those whose works done in disobedience are burned up, because even though we ourselves will be saved, we will suffer the loss of reward. Rather let us be diligent to be among those whose works done in obedience to God

stand the test of fire, and let us rejoice knowing that the time will come when we will receive our eternal blessing and reward for our obedience.

All men are servants of God and will serve His purposes in some capacity, even those who do not acknowledge Him (Isaiah 45:1-6, Romans 9:17-18, others). With this in mind, we will consider the two categories of servants that Jesus mentioned in Luke 12:35-48.

In this passage we see that Jesus admonished everyone present at that time to watch and be ready for service. Believers will be the servants who obey the Master's command. They will be the ones whom the Master finds waiting and watching for His return, as we read in Luke 12:35-38.

Other servants do not obey the Master's command. They engage in worldly, sinful indulgences, even beating their fellow servants, demonstrating a blatant lack of any love or concern for them. Jesus spoke of these servants in Luke 12:45-46, saying that the Master would ultimately cut them to pieces and assign them a place with the unbelievers.

We as believers, by the sovereign choice and grace of God are assured salvation, and we will escape the fate of those who are "cut to pieces" and assigned "a place with the unbelievers". However, we should be very careful to heed Jesus' warning in Luke 12:47-48.

In these verses Jesus taught that the servant who knows his master's will, but does not prepare himself or does not do what his master requires, will be beaten with many stripes. (Again, consider Hebrews 12:11). Jesus also taught that the servant who is not aware of his master's will and does things deserving of punishment will be beaten with few stripes. Jesus concluded His teaching in this passage by saying that much will be required from the one who has been given much and entrusted with much.

The longer we walk with God, the more we will understand of His word and His will, and the more we know of God's word and what He requires of us, the greater responsibility we have to be obedient to what He has revealed to us. Let us therefore be diligent not to be among those servants who know our Master's will, but do not prepare ourselves or do not do what our Master wants, because there is a consequence for this, and as Jesus admonished us, we will be beaten with many stripes.

Such disobedience is not building upon the foundation of our faith in Christ with gold, silver, and precious stones, as Paul taught in 1 Corinthians 3:12-15. Rather it is building with wood, hay, and straw, which will not stand the test of fire and will result in lost blessings and rewards for the believer who builds in this way.

There are two ways in which we must be careful to obey God. The first is that we must be obedient to all that is taught in the Holy Bible, which is God's word. The second way that we must be careful to obey God comes when He reveals to us some special work or place of service that He has assigned for us. These special works or places of service will always be consistent with everything that is written in the Bible and will in no case violate any biblical principle.

When the time comes for us to serve God in some capacity that we know He has assigned for us, let us cleanse ourselves from wickedness in order to be useful in His service (2 Timothy 2:21), and let us also do whatever things are required in preparation for this particular work, as He leads us. Then, when the time comes, let us do what He has told us to do, so that we will not be among those servants who suffer His discipline and the loss of His rewards and blessings.

The Loss of God's Temporal Blessings

Not only are there warnings given to us in the Bible about the loss of eternal rewards for failing to obey God, but there are also accounts of the loss of temporal blessings when God's people put their own desires ahead of their obedience to Him. In the book of Haggai, we read of the lost material blessings experienced by the Jewish exiles who had returned from Babylon. God withheld these blessings from them because of their complacency in obeying Him in the matter of rebuilding His temple, which had been destroyed by the Babylonians decades earlier.

Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, conquered Jerusalem as foretold by the prophet Jeremiah (Jeremiah 25:1-14), because the people of Judah and Jerusalem refused to turn from their evil ways. He led around ten thousand captives back to Babylon, leaving only the poorest of the people

behind. Jehoiachin was king of Judah and reigned in Jerusalem at that time, and he also was taken captive and led to Babylon.

Nebuchadnezzar then appointed Mattaniah, Jehoiachin's uncle, to be king of Judah, and he changed his name to Zedekiah. Nine years later, Zedekiah rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar. So Nebuchadnezzar again led his army against Jerusalem, and after a two year siege he again captured the city. Once again captives were taken back to Babylon, and this time the walls of Jerusalem were broken down and the temple was destroyed (2 Kings 24, 25 and 2 Chronicles 36).

Decades later, Cyrus, king of Persia, conquered Babylon. The Lord spoke of Cyrus as His "shepherd" and "anointed", to accomplish all that He pleased for the sake of Israel, His chosen (Isaiah 44:28-45:6). God chose to use the pagan king of a pagan nation, Cyrus, king of Persia, to prevail against another pagan nation, Babylon, and in so doing He brought to an end the captivity of the Jews in Babylon at that time, fulfilling Jeremiah's prophecy of a seventy year Babylonian captivity (Jeremiah 25:11-12, 29:10).

In the first year of the reign of Cyrus over the Babylonians, he issued a proclamation allowing the return to Jerusalem of any Jewish captives who wished to return and rebuild the temple of the Lord (Ezra 1:1-4). Cyrus also restored the articles belonging to the temple that Nebuchadnezzar had carried off to Babylon when his army plundered and destroyed the temple years earlier. Much more can be read in the book of Ezra about the return of the exiles from Babylon and their efforts to rebuild the temple.

After two years of work, the foundation of the new temple had been completed, but opposition arose to their building at this point. The work was stopped for a time, until Darius became king of Persia. Darius supported the Jews in their efforts to rebuild the temple, and the work could have been resumed. However, the Jews had become somewhat disinterested and disengaged in the rebuilding work, preferring rather to tend to their own personal pursuits. It was at this time that the Lord spoke to them through the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, telling the people that He had withheld His material blessings from them because they had not obeyed Him in completing the rebuilding of the temple, as He had commanded. Beginning in Haggai 1:7 we read:

Thus says the Lord of hosts, “Consider your ways! Go up to the mountains, bring wood and rebuild the temple, that I may be pleased with it and be glorified,” says the Lord. “You look for much, but behold, it comes to little; when you bring it home, I blow it away. Why?” declares the Lord of hosts, “Because of My house which lies desolate, while each of you runs to his own house. Therefore, because of you the sky has withheld its dew and the earth has withheld its produce. I called for a drought on the land, on the mountains, on the grain, on the new wine, on the oil, on what the ground produces, on men, on cattle, and on all the labor of your hands.” (Haggai 1:7-11)

After the Lord told the people that He had withheld material blessings from them because they had not obeyed Him in completing the rebuilding of the temple, He then told them to resume the work, assuring them that He was with them (Haggai 2:3-5). As we see later in chapter 2, the Lord spoke through Haggai yet again, emphasizing to His people again that He had withheld material blessings from them because they had not obeyed Him in this matter, but then He assured them of the restoration of those lost blessings as they resumed the work that He had commanded them to do (Haggai 2:15-19).

In Conclusion

Much has been written in the Bible about sin, which is disobedience to, or transgressing the word of God. Sin ultimately results in death (Romans 6:23, James 1:13-15), and in this process of sin working death there are losses in the lives of those who sin.

The unbeliever suffers an eternity separated from God, and he receives the just punishment for his sins. Those of us who are believers in Christ are saved from that fate, but if we willfully participate in sin, to which we are no longer enslaved (Romans 6), and from which God has provided a way of escape for us (1 Corinthians 10:13), then we will suffer loss. Not only will we suffer the loss of temporal blessings which we might have realized had we not sinned, but we could also suffer the loss of eternal reward in Heaven, because works of disobedience will not stand the test of fire as Paul said, but will be burned up (1 Corinthians 3:12-15).

Therefore, as God's people let us be diligent to obey Him in all that He has made known to us through His word. Let us not be as those whose works are burned up, and who are saved only as one escaping through the fire. Rather let us be diligent to obey all that our God has commanded us to do, so that we will not suffer the loss of any blessing that He has for us, either here on earth or in Heaven.

4.

God Will Help His People

In Romans 15:4 Paul taught us that everything written in the Scriptures was written to encourage us, so that we might have hope. Every promise of God's help for His people as recorded in the Bible was written for the benefit of all of His people, for all of us who by faith in Christ have become numbered among spiritual Israel.

God's Promise Given in Isaiah 41

In the book of Isaiah, we find one of God's many promises to help and sustain His people. This passage begins:

“But you, Israel, My servant,
Jacob whom I have chosen,
Descendant of Abraham My friend,
You whom I have taken from the ends of the earth,
And called from its remotest parts
And said to you, ‘You are My servant,
I have chosen you and not rejected you.
‘Do not fear, for I am with you;
Do not anxiously look about you, for I am your God.
I will strengthen you, surely I will help you,
Surely I will uphold you with My righteous right hand.’

“For I am the Lord your God, who upholds your right hand,
Who says to you, ‘Do not fear, I will help you.’
“Do not fear, you worm Jacob, you men of Israel;
I will help you,” declares the Lord, “and your Redeemer is the Holy One of
Israel.

(Isaiah 41:8-10, 13-14)

In the Book of Acts, we read that Paul and Barnabas strengthened and encouraged the disciples to remain true to the faith, teaching them that we must go through many troubles to enter the kingdom of God (Acts 14:22). At times, as we face the trials and hardships of this life, and we consider our own strength and resources to cope with them, we may feel as powerless as the “worm” that God used to describe Jacob in Isaiah 41:14. God’s promises of help for His people like this one in Isaiah 41 are recorded for our benefit as spiritual Israel, as descendants of faithful Abraham (Romans 9:8), for the times when we face the trials that we will endure according to the sovereign plan and purpose of God for our lives.

When faced with these trials, knowing our own weaknesses and inadequacies, our first reaction is likely to be one of fear. In such times let us remember the promise of our God who says to us:

“Do not fear, for I am with you;
Do not anxiously look about you, for I am your God.
I will strengthen you, surely ***I will help you***,
Surely I will uphold you with My righteous right hand.”
(Isaiah 41:10, emphasis added).

Continuing in the following verses God tells us yet again not to fear, and again He promises us His help when He says:

“For I am the Lord your God, who upholds your right hand,
Who says to you, ‘Do not fear, ***I will help you.***’
“Do not fear, you worm Jacob, you men of Israel;
I will help you,” declares the Lord, “and your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel.” (Isaiah 41:13-14, emphasis added).

Notice that to emphasize the certainty of His promise; God said three times in these three verses from Isaiah 41 that indeed ***He will help His people.***

In the book of Revelation, John recounted his vision of the risen Christ with these words: “And I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse, and He who sat on it is called ***Faithful and True***, and in righteousness He judges and wages war. His eyes are a flame of fire, and on His head are many diadems; and He has a name written on Him which no one knows except Himself. He is clothed with a robe dipped in blood, and

His name is called *The Word of God.*” (Revelation 19:11-13, emphasis added).

The word of God as recorded in both the Old and the New Testaments of the Holy Bible is God’s revelation of Himself to His people. Every teaching, every admonition, every exhortation, and every promise recorded in the word of God is given to us through Him who is called “Faithful and True”.

Therefore when God gives His promise to help His people, we can be assured that we *will* receive His help in our time of need. God’s promise to help the “worm Jacob” is ours as believers, as spiritual Israel, and on the authority of the word of God we can be assured that He will indeed help us, strengthen us, and uphold us during our times of trouble, just as He said that He would.

Continuing further in Isaiah 41 we read:

“The afflicted and needy are seeking water, but there is none,
And their tongue is parched with thirst;
I, the Lord, will answer them Myself,
As the God of Israel I will not forsake them.
“I will open rivers on the bare heights
And springs in the midst of the valleys;
I will make the wilderness a pool of water
And the dry land fountains of water.
“I will put the cedar in the wilderness,
The acacia and the myrtle and the olive tree;
I will place the juniper in the desert
Together with the box tree and the cypress,
That they may see and recognize,
And consider and gain insight as well,
That the hand of the Lord has done this,
And the Holy One of Israel has created it.
(Isaiah 41:17-20)

Speaking through the prophet in these verses, God said that He *will* answer His people and help them, and that He will not forsake them. God said four times in this passage, “*I will*”, in order to emphasize the certainty of His promise to provide for His people in their time of need.

When we are faced with our times of trouble, we are exhorted not to be afraid, because we have God's promise that He will strengthen us and help us, and He will uphold us with His righteous right hand (Isaiah 41:10, 13-14). Within these passages of Isaiah 41, we find that we have God's promise of His help and His provision for our lives, and we can therefore be assured that as we walk through the desert "wilderness" of our own trials and difficulties, we will be sustained by the mercy, grace, and provision of God.

As impossible as it is in the natural world to open rivers on barren heights, and to cause lush trees to grow in a desert wilderness, we know that with our God nothing shall be impossible (Luke 1:37). And we have His faithful and true promise that He will indeed help us in our times of trouble.

God's Promise Given in Ezekiel 37

In Ezekiel 37, we find another of God's many promises to help His people. In this passage the prophet recounts his experience in the Valley of the Dry Bones. Ezekiel was brought by the Spirit of the Lord into a valley where there were many bones scattered over the ground. The Lord led him back and forth among the bones, and then He asked him if the dry bones could live again. Ezekiel replied to the Lord that He alone knew whether the dry bones of these slain could be brought back to life again.

Then the Lord commanded Ezekiel to prophesy His words to the dry bones, saying that He would attach tendons to them and put flesh upon them, cover them with skin, and put breath into them so that they would come to life. Ezekiel prophesied as he was commanded, and he heard a rattling sound as the bones came together, bone to bone. Then tendons and flesh appeared on the bones, and skin covered them also, but there was no breath of life in them.

At this point the Lord again told Ezekiel to prophesy, telling him to command breath to come from the four winds and breathe into them so they would live again. The prophet did as he was commanded, and breath entered the bodies, and they stood up on their feet (Ezekiel 37:3-10).

The men of this vast army had been dead for a long time, with only their bones remaining scattered over the ground. All hope they had for this life had long since perished. Only the power of our sovereign and omnipotent God could bring life back to them again, and at the command of the Lord, He who calls those who are dead to life as only He can do, that is exactly what happened.

After Ezekiel had witnessed this demonstration of God's power in restoring life to these many slain, the Lord applied what the prophet had just seen to the situation of His people Israel and the feelings of hopelessness they were experiencing while in exile, as the passage continues:

Then He said to me, "Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel; behold, they say, 'Our bones are dried up and our hope has perished. We are completely cut off.' Therefore prophesy and say to them, 'Thus says the Lord God, "Behold, I will open your graves and cause you to come up out of your graves, My people; and I will bring you into the land of Israel. Then you will know that I am the Lord, when I have opened your graves and caused you to come up out of your graves, My people. I will put My Spirit within you and you will come to life, and I will place you on your own land. Then you will know that I, the Lord, have spoken and done it," declares the Lord.'" (Ezekiel 37:11-14).

Even when our situation appears to be hopeless, and we feel that "our bones are dried up and our hope has perished" and we are "cut off" from any hope of deliverance, our God will bring life and good from the "death" that our troubles have wrought in our lives, just as Jesus taught us in John 12:24-26. And what God has spoken through His word, that will He do. Every promise that God has spoken through His word has the same certainty of fulfillment as His command to the dry bones to live again.

God said in Isaiah 41:8-10, 13-14, 17-20, and in Ezekiel 37:1-14, **not that He might** help His people, but He said repeatedly that **He will** help His people. God, who is able to raise the dead, will deliver us in our times of trouble, in His time and according to His plan for our lives.

The time is coming for us when He will "open our graves" and bring us up from the seeming hopelessness of the overwhelming burden that we are facing. Then we will know that He is the Lord; **not if, but when** He opens our graves, brings us up from them, and restores life and hope to us in

the midst of our own troubling circumstances, which may seem to us to be as hopeless and impossible as the dry bones of the long dead coming back to life again (Ezekiel 37:13).

Cast Your Cares upon the Lord

There will be things that happen in our lives that we cannot face in our own strength, because our own strength is wholly inadequate for such overwhelming circumstances. In these times we are instructed to cast all our cares upon the Lord, because He cares for us (1 Peter 5:7).

We are to set our hope of deliverance upon the Lord our God, and we are not to rely upon ourselves, or our own strengths and resources. We are to anchor our hearts on the steadfast certainty of every promise for believers as set forth in God's word. Just as God delivered Paul from trouble that was far beyond his ability to endure (2 Corinthians 1:8-11), so we also are to look to God for His help and His deliverance from the overwhelming troubles that we are facing.

When we read accounts of God's deliverance of His people as recorded in the Scriptures, let us once again recall what Paul taught in the book of Romans: "For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, so that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope." (Romans 15:4). All these accounts of God's deliverance in the Scriptures are recorded for the benefit and encouragement of all of us as God's people.

Our Sovereign God's deliverance for our situation, as hopeless as it appears and as far beyond our ability to endure as it may be, is surely coming for us. And while we are in the midst of these troubles, we have His promises given to us through His word, where He has assured us that ***He will*** help us, strengthen us, and sustain us.

Take Courage!

In Matthew 14 we read of the time when Peter left the safety of the boat to come to Jesus on the water. After Jesus had fed the five thousand, He

sent the disciples ahead of Him by boat to cross over to the other side. Jesus then dismissed the crowds, and He was still there on land when evening came.

By this time, the disciples were already some distance away from land. Jesus later came to them walking on the water during the fourth watch of the night, or sometime between three and six in the morning. When the disciples saw Him approaching the boat, they were afraid, thinking that they were seeing a ghost. At this point Jesus called out to them saying: "...Take courage, it is I; do not be afraid." (Matthew 14:27).

Peter then replied to Jesus, saying that if it really was Him, then command him to come to Him on the water. Jesus then told Peter to come to Him, and Peter got out of the boat and walked toward Jesus on the water, but when he saw the wind and the waves around him, he became afraid and began to sink, and he cried out to Jesus to save him. Jesus then immediately reached out His hand and caught Peter before he went under the waves and perished, and He said to him: "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" (Matthew 14:31).

When they got back into the boat, the winds and waves subsided. Having witnessed these events, those who were in the boat worshipped Jesus and acknowledged that indeed He was the Son of God.

During the storms of our lives when the winds of adversity buffet us and we become afraid, Jesus calls to us saying: "Take courage, it is I; do not be afraid." Therefore let us take courage, and let us not doubt when God's word tells us that everything He allows to touch our lives is working together for our eternal good and glory (Romans 8:28).

Whether our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ reaches out His hand to sustain us through our present troubles in life, or whether He reaches out His hand to take us home to glory, deliverance for all who believe on His name is assured. David encouraged us when he wrote:

To You they cried out and were delivered;
In You they trusted and were not disappointed. (Psalm 22:5)

5.

The Battle Is Not Yours, But God's

In 2 Chronicles we read the account of a miraculous deliverance and victory for the people of Judah and Jerusalem over a vast army coming to make war against them. Jehoshaphat was king of Judah at this time. When Jehoshaphat was told of this army advancing toward them, he proclaimed a fast for all of Judah, and the people came together to seek God's help in their time of desperate need (2 Chronicles 20:2-4).

When they had assembled at the temple of the Lord, Jehoshaphat stood up in the assembly and interceded for them with a prayer that emphasized God, and His power and might. By contrast, the prayer also emphasized the weakness and inability of His people to face the threat that was advancing toward them. Jehoshaphat's prayer is recorded in 2 Chronicles 20:6-12, and his prayer ends with the words: "... ***For we are powerless before this great multitude who are coming against us; nor do we know what to do, but our eyes are on You.***" (2 Chronicles 20:12).

As God's people there will be times in our lives when we will be confronted with overwhelming circumstances (Acts 14:22, many others). In these times, we also will be confronted with our own "great multitude" of troubles that are coming against us. We will look around at our own resources and abilities to see that we cannot face the situation on our own. We will realize that our only hope is the same as the people of Judah and Jerusalem saw at this time of dire need in their lives, which is to look to God, our Strength, to take our burden to our sovereign and omnipotent God in prayer, and to wait for His answer and His deliverance from the overwhelming troubles that have come into our lives.

Continuing in this passage of 2 Chronicles, after Jehoshaphat had brought their urgent need for help to the Lord in prayer, he and those in the assembly waited for God's answer. Then we read that the Spirit of the Lord came upon Jahaziel, who was a Levite and a descendant of Asaph. He spoke to the assembly of the people saying:

“Listen, all Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem and King Jehoshaphat: thus says the Lord to you, ‘Do not fear or be dismayed because of this great multitude, for the battle is not yours but God’s. Tomorrow go down against them. Behold, they will come up by the ascent of Ziz, and you will find them at the end of the valley in front of the wilderness of Jeruel. You need not fight in this battle; station yourselves, stand and see the salvation of the Lord on your behalf, O Judah and Jerusalem.’ Do not fear or be dismayed; tomorrow go out to face them, for the Lord is with you.” (2 Chronicles 20:15-17).

After receiving an answer from the Lord with encouragement and instructions on what to do, Jehoshaphat bowed before the Lord with his face to the ground in worship and gratitude, as did all the people in the assembly. Some of the Levites also stood up and praised the Lord with loud voices. The account of events then continues as we read beginning in verse 20:

They rose early in the morning and went out to the wilderness of Tekoa; and when they went out, Jehoshaphat stood and said, “Listen to me, O Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem, put your trust in the Lord your God and you will be established. Put your trust in His prophets and succeed.” When he had consulted with the people, he appointed those who sang to the Lord and those who praised Him in holy attire, as they went out before the army and said, “Give thanks to the Lord, for His lovingkindness is everlasting.” When they began singing and praising, the Lord set ambushes against the sons of Ammon, Moab and Mount Seir, who had come against Judah; so they were routed. For the sons of Ammon and Moab rose up against the inhabitants of Mount Seir destroying them completely; and when they had finished with the inhabitants of Seir, they helped to destroy one another. (2 Chronicles 20:20-23)

Our Times of Trouble

This passage is a great encouragement to believers for the times when we are faced with circumstances that we are unable to confront in our own strength and with our own resources. Like Jehoshaphat, we also will cry out to the Lord in prayer with words something like his: “We are powerless

before this great multitude who are coming against us; nor do we know what to do, but our eyes are on You”.

The lesson in this passage is not that God will miraculously remove every burden, obstacle, or adverse circumstance that we face in life after we have brought our prayer for deliverance to Him. There will be times when we experience various sufferings as part of God’s sovereign plan and purpose for our lives, as He works to bring about in us a share in the sufferings of His Son Jesus Christ (John 12:24-26, Romans 8:17, 1 Peter 4:12-13, 19, others). There will be times in our lives when adverse circumstances come upon us, and it can be said of us:

All this has come upon us, but we have not forgotten You,
And we have not dealt falsely with Your covenant.
Our heart has not turned back,
And our steps have not deviated from Your way,
Yet You have crushed us in a place of jackals
And covered us with the shadow of death.
If we had forgotten the name of our God
Or extended our hands to a strange god,
Would not God find this out?
For He knows the secrets of the heart.
But for Your sake we are killed all day long;
We are considered as sheep to be slaughtered. (Psalm 44:17-22)

And again, there will be times in our lives when it can be said of us:

For You have tried us, O God;
You have refined us as silver is refined.
You brought us into the net;
You laid an oppressive burden upon our loins.
You made men ride over our heads;
We went through fire and through water,
Yet You brought us out into a place of abundance. (Psalm 66:10-12)

When considering the circumstances of our own lives, we may feel like we are trapped in a “net” of sorrows brought about by difficult and painful burdens, which God Himself has assigned for us (Psalm 66:11). However, the end intended by our sovereign and loving God is that one day,

in His time and according to His plan and purpose for our lives, we will be brought out “into a place of abundance”.

Our Instruction from God’s Word

The instruction given to us in this passage as God’s people is that when we are facing times of overwhelming adversity in our lives, we are to do the same as the people of Judah and Jerusalem did at this time of dire need in their lives. We are to look to the Lord our God; we are to bring our prayer before Him and wait for His deliverance. Once again, we find instruction and powerful encouragement in God’s answer to Jehoshaphat’s prayer:

“Listen, all Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem and King Jehoshaphat: thus says the LORD to you, ***‘Do not fear or be dismayed because of this great multitude, for the battle is not yours but God’s.*** Tomorrow go down against them. Behold, they will come up by the ascent of Ziz, and you will find them at the end of the valley in front of the wilderness of Jeruel. ***You need not fight in this battle; station yourselves, stand and see the salvation of the Lord on your behalf, O Judah and Jerusalem.’ Do not fear or be dismayed; tomorrow go out to face them, for the Lord is with you.***”
(2 Chronicles 20:15-17, emphasis added).

God’s word instructs us that we are not to be afraid or discouraged when we are facing overwhelming troubles in our lives. We need not be afraid, because as believers in Christ, as spiritual Israel, we have this promise: ***The battles that we have not the resources or strength to fight on our own will be fought for us by God Himself.***

Our instruction on what to do when we find ourselves facing these times of overwhelming trouble is to first “station ourselves”, or position ourselves, just as the Lord instructed Judah and Jerusalem. When they marched out early the next morning to meet this vast army, ***they did as they were told to do*** in the word of the Lord (verses 14-17), which is to say that ***they obeyed the word of the Lord.*** Therefore, to “station ourselves” means that we are to position ourselves in obedience to the word of God as revealed to us in the Scriptures.

After we take up our position in obedience to God's word, we are instructed to "stand and see the salvation of the Lord on our behalf". To "stand" means that we are to stand firm or continue in our position of obedience to the word of God, and not move away from that position. We should never consider an escape from our circumstances that is in disobedience to the word of God. ***The lesson from this account in 2 Chronicles is that when we are facing overwhelming burdens and troubles in this life, we are to look to God for our deliverance, and we are to stand firm in obedience to His word as we wait for Him to do for us what we are powerless to do for ourselves.***

When we find ourselves under great pressure that is far beyond our ability to endure, as happened in the life of the Apostle Paul, let us take comfort and understand that these things happen in our lives "so that we would not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead". Let us also know that God will sustain us and ultimately deliver us (2 Corinthians 1:8-11).

David wrote with confidence in the Psalms:

Cast your burden upon the Lord and He will sustain you;
He will never allow the righteous to be shaken. (Psalm 55:22)

When we have no power to face the "great multitude" of troubles that are coming against us, and we do not know what to do, then let us do as we are instructed in God's word: let us position ourselves in obedience as we look to Him for His deliverance and His provision for our lives. We can take courage knowing that in times like these, the battle is not ours, but God's.

6.

God's Provision for Our Lives

Many of us will find that there will be times in our lives when we face circumstances that cause us to be concerned about how we will provide for ourselves and those who depend on us. Maybe a job loss, an injury or illness, or maybe our own lack of credentials or skills may cause us to worry about how we will make it in the days that lie ahead. We may anxiously question whether we will be able to obtain the things that we need to sustain ourselves and our loved ones.

Jesus knew that we would face times like these, and in the Sermon on the Mount He spoke specifically to our concerns about such things. He prefaced His teaching by saying in Matthew 6:24 that we cannot serve two masters; we cannot serve both God and money. He then continued in the verses that follow with His teaching about worry and about God's promise to provide for the needs of His people.

Jesus taught us not to worry about our tomorrows and about how we will provide for ourselves in the days ahead. He assured us that God will provide for our needs, pointing to the fact that He provides even for the birds of the air, which "do not sow, nor reap nor gather into barns" (Matthew 6:26). These creatures do not cultivate crops and store them for their future needs, but they gather daily what God provides for them.

Jesus also used the lilies of the field as another example, saying that they "do not toil nor do they spin" (Matthew 6:28), and yet God clothes them in splendor. Jesus taught that if God takes care to provide sustenance for even the birds of the air and the grass of the field, then He will surely provide for us as His people.

Jesus then taught us not to anxiously preoccupy ourselves with chasing after material things as unbelievers do, making the pursuit of the money necessary to obtain these things the priority of our lives. He assured

us that God our Father knows our needs and promises to provide for us if we will seek His kingdom and His righteousness as our priority in life.

This means that above all else, we are to walk in obedience to God's word as revealed to us in the Bible, and we are to put the pursuit of worldly endeavors and our own desires behind our pursuit of the things of God. If we will seek as the preeminent goal of our lives to obey God in all that we know He requires of us, then we can rest in His promise that He will provide for our material needs (Matthew 6:33-34).

The circumstances and conditions of our lives will reveal God's plan for our lives. Sometimes these circumstances are only temporary. Other times certain circumstances and conditions will be something that we will live with for the rest of our lives.

If an ability or talent or credential that the world deems valuable is out of reach for us, it is because our sovereign God, according to His plan and purpose for our life, has determined that it will be out of reach for us. We should then look to Him to provide for our needs and not to our own strengths and abilities.

The world esteems highly material wealth, prominence, power, prestige, and position. We as believers are told not to love the world or the things that are in world, and we are not to preoccupy ourselves with these things (1 John 2:15-17).

Instead, we are to seek the things of God as the priority of our lives. We are to make obedience to God's word in every situation and circumstance our primary focus in life. When we have done this, let us accept God's provision for our lives as He sees fit to give it, and let us rest in His promise that He will indeed provide it.

The Apostle Paul taught us much about the Christian life when he said: "For we walk by faith, not by sight." (2 Corinthians 5:7). We as believers have been called to walk and live our lives by faith in the trustworthiness of God and all that He has promised us through His word. Most of us will find that living our lives by the sight of material wealth stored up for ourselves, or by our own strength and abilities, is something that will be out of reach for us. Our sovereign and loving God directs our paths, and He will demonstrate His faithfulness as He sustains us and carries

us through the hardships of our lives. Through these experiences, the promises in His word will be shown to be completely true and trustworthy.

God's Provision for a Poor Widow and Her Son

In 1 Kings 17, Elijah had prophesied to the wicked King Ahab who promoted Baal worship in Israel, saying that there would be no rain or dew in the next few years except at his word. Baal was supposedly the god of fertility and lord of the rain clouds, and The Lord God would demonstrate the impotence of Baal to the people of Israel by withholding rain from the land through His word spoken by the prophet.

After his prophecy to Ahab, the word of the Lord came to Elijah telling him to leave and go hide by the Kerith Ravine. There he could drink from the ravine, and the Lord told him that He had commanded ravens to provide food for him also. Elijah did as he was told, and the ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning and in the evening. After a while though, the ravine dried up because there had been no rain in the land.

God's provision for our lives by way of a particular source is many times only temporary. There will be provision for us in a certain place for a time, and then at some point, "the ravine dries up" so to speak, and we must move on to find provision elsewhere.

God had provided for Elijah by the ravine for a time, when it was still flowing, and the ravens still brought him food. When his provision by the ravine ran out, the Lord then made other provisions for Elijah. This time He commanded a widow to provide for him, and a very poor widow at that.

At this point the Lord told Elijah to go to Zarephath, as we see from 1 Kings 17:8-16. When Elijah came into the town, he saw a widow gathering sticks. He called to her and asked her for a drink of water and a piece of bread. She replied to the prophet saying that she did not have any bread, only a small amount of flour in a jar and a little oil left in a jug. She was gathering the sticks to make one last meal for herself and her son, after which she expected that they would both die of hunger.

Elijah replied to her, telling her not to be afraid, but to go home and first prepare a cake of bread and bring it to him from the flour and oil that she had left, and then to prepare something for herself and her son. Elijah then spoke to her with these words: “For thus says the Lord God of Israel, ‘The bowl of flour shall not be exhausted, nor shall the jar of oil be empty, until the day that the Lord sends rain on the face of the earth.’” (1 Kings 17:14).

Hearing the word of the Lord given by the prophet, the poor widow obeyed that word, even though it seemed completely contrary to human reasoning. After all, the cake that she gave to Elijah could have been used to sustain her and her son for one more day.

Nevertheless, the widow obeyed the word of the Lord, and she did receive a miraculous provision to sustain both her and her son, just as Elijah said she would. Instead of having just one more portion of flour and oil to sustain her and her son for one more day, she received God’ provision so that the bowl of flour was not used up and the jar of oil did not run dry until the Lord once again gave His rain, and the provision of food was no longer scarce in the land.

The widow obeyed the word of God, and as a result of her obedience God provided for her needs, just as He promised that He would. In the same way, Jesus told us to seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and then all the things that we need to sustain our lives will be given to us as well (Matthew 6:33).

In both Matthew 6:25-34 and 1 Kings 17:8-16 the lesson is the same: we are to obey God’s word first and foremost, and when we do so, He will command that provision be made for our lives. In some cases, this provision may come in ways that we could not possibly manage by ourselves.

God is Faithful

Once again let us recall the account of Jesus walking on the water during the night to catch up with His disciples who had left hours earlier in a boat. After he was sure that it was Jesus coming toward them and not a ghost, Peter got out of the boat and began walking toward Jesus on the

water, but when he saw the turbulence of the wind and the waves around him, he became afraid and began to sink. He cried out to Jesus to save him, and Jesus stretched forth His hand to save Peter before he went under the waves and perished. Jesus then said to him: “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” (Matthew 14:31).

Every account of events in the lives of God’s people that is recorded in the Bible is recorded for our benefit and instruction. This experience of Peter’s is both symbolic and characteristic of experiences that we as believers will have during the course of our own lives.

With the winds of our own turbulent circumstances buffeting us, we too will become afraid, even though we have our Savior and His word in sight of us. In such times we may feel ourselves sinking in fear of the difficulties that confront us. Just when we think that we will drown in the midst of our troubles, we cry out to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, “Lord, save me!”, and He reaches out His hand to rescue us and sustain us, proving the trustworthiness of the promises given to us in the Scriptures. The day will also come when the hand of the Lord will deliver us into His eternal kingdom, where we will be forever free of anything that threatens or causes grief.

Jesus Christ, the living Word of God, is the One who is called “Faithful and True” (John 1:1, 14, Revelation 19:11-13). Every promise that God has given to us through His word is completely trustworthy, faithful, and true, and may be relied upon fully.

God Will Carry Us to the End of Our Journey

One of the phases of life when we may become the most anxious about how we will obtain the things that we need to sustain ourselves is when we are getting older, and we realize that we no longer have the strength and stamina we once did. God’s promises apply no less at times when we need them more, and we have been given His promise that the grace of Christ will be given to us in a measure that is sufficient for our every weakness and need, as Paul learned through his own experience (2 Corinthians 12:9-10).

As we age, our weaknesses, afflictions, and difficulties will increase in many ways. It is in times like these when God's grace and power doing for us what we cannot do for ourselves will be clearly manifested as something that He did for us, and not something that we attained through our own strength.

The Scripture reveals that the Lord takes delight not in those who are strong and capable, but in those who put their hope in His unfailing love (Psalm 147:10-11), relying on every promise that He has given to us through His word. Every promise of God given to His people is to be trusted and relied upon; none of them will fail. He will never leave us nor forsake us (Hebrews 13:5-6).

God promised specifically to sustain His people in their old age when He spoke through the prophet Isaiah saying:

“Listen to Me, O house of Jacob,
And all the remnant of the house of Israel,
You who have been borne by Me from birth
And have been carried from the womb;
Even to your old age I will be the same,
And even to your graying years I will bear you!
I have done it, and I will carry you;
And I will bear you and I will deliver you. (Isaiah 46:3-4)

Though we may think that we sustained ourselves in our own strength when we were younger and more physically capable, we have in fact been upheld by the power of God since the time we were conceived and carried by Him since we were born, and He has promised to sustain us and carry us to the end of our journey. When we feel ourselves sinking in fear of the troubles that surround us, let us not doubt, but let us know that our Lord will reach out His hand to sustain us and rescue us, just as He did for Peter. As God's people we have been given many promises through His word, and among these are His promises of His help and His provision for our lives.

7.

For Those Who Show Mercy

Jesus' teaching known as "The Beatitudes" is recorded in Matthew 5:3-12. Within this passage, He identified attributes or experiences that will be manifested in the lives of those who are indeed the children of God. Each of these experiences is a reflection of the suffering and sacrifice that Jesus Himself endured, and each of these brings the promise of God's blessing.

Jesus began by teaching that we as God's children will know and experience what it is like to be poor in spirit, even though the kingdom of Heaven is ours. We will know what it is like to mourn and to be partakers with the Him, the Man of Sorrows (John 16:20-22, Isaiah 53:3), and yet we are assured that the time will come for us when we will be comforted.

We will also be brought to a position of meekness or humility as God works in our lives to conform us to the image of His Son (Romans 8:29, Hebrews 2:10-11), and yet the time will come when we will inherit the earth.

We will hunger and thirst for righteousness when surrounded by unrighteousness in a wicked world (Psalm 42:2, 63:1, 143:6). However, we are assured that the time will come for us when we will be filled, and we will hunger and thirst no more (Revelation 7:16-17).

We will also find ourselves called upon to sacrifice something of what we have and could have kept for ourselves, in order to be merciful to someone in need. Love manifesting itself through acts of mercy is one evidence that we ourselves have received God's mercy, having been called to faith in His Son.

Jesus also taught that we will know something of what it is like to be pure in heart. As those who have been called to faith in His Son, God has given us a heart to obey Him and keep His commandments (John 14:23-24), which is another evidence of a genuine faith that will be manifested in the lives of God's people.

As Jesus continued, He taught that we will know and experience something of what it is like to be peacemakers among those who are self-willed. As believers, God has ordained that the life of the Prince of Peace will be manifested through our lives lived here on the earth (Isaiah 9:6-7, 2 Corinthians 4:7-12).

Jesus concluded His teaching in this passage by saying that we as His people will also know in some measure what it is like to be persecuted. We will be excluded, insulted, and falsely accused because of who we are, believers in Christ (1 Timothy 3:12).

Among these beatitudes, we find the beatitude of showing mercy toward others. The love of Christ will be manifested in the life of every believer, and this love will motivate us, and even compel us, to show mercy to others (Matthew 25:31-46, John 13:34-35, 1 John 3:11-20). Our faith in Christ will be shown to be a genuine faith by love manifesting itself through acts of mercy. Jesus taught that in return for the mercy that we show to others in their time of need, we will receive the mercy of God in our own times of trouble, and eternal reward and blessing in Heaven.

A Lesson from Psalm 41

In Psalm 41, David told of the mercy of God that is extended to those who have shown mercy to others. In the context of this psalm, we see that David was very ill, and he acknowledged that his present illness was a consequence of his own sin. Certainly not all illness and affliction is a consequence of one's own personal sins, as is clearly taught in the Book of Job (Job 1:1, 2:8, 2:3). However in the context of this psalm, David acknowledged his illness to be a result of his sin. Beginning in verse 1, we read:

How blessed is he who considers the helpless;
The LORD will deliver him in a day of trouble.
The LORD will protect him and keep him alive,
And he shall be called blessed upon the earth;
And do not give him over to the desire of his enemies.
The LORD will sustain him upon his sickbed;
In his illness, You restore him to health.

As for me, I said, “O LORD, be gracious to me;
Heal my soul, for I have sinned against You.” (Psalm 41:1-4)

The promises of God’s blessing that we find in these verses are given to those who show mercy to the weak. David taught that in return for the mercy that we extend to those who are helpless and in distress, the Lord will extend His mercy to us and deliver us in our own times of trouble.

Even as David acknowledged in verse 4 that his current affliction was a result of his own sin, he knew that God would remember the mercy and kindness he had shown to others in their weakness, vulnerability, and need. God will remember our acts of mercy toward others, and He will in turn show His mercy to us in our time of need, even in the midst of His disciplines, which always come upon us as a consequence of our sin.

A Lesson from Isaiah 58

In the book of Isaiah, we find another promise of God’s mercy given to His people in return for the mercy they have shown to others. Speaking through the prophet, the Lord rebuked the house of Jacob for their superficial type of fasting. They went without food, but they continued in other sinful practices such as exploiting their workers, quarreling, and even striking one another with their fists.

After His rebuke, the Lord said that true fasting that pleases Him is to extend mercy and acts of kindness to others. In this passage, God promises His people that in return for the mercy that we show toward others in need, we will receive His mercy, provision, and help in our time of need. Beginning in verse 6, we read:

“Is this not the fast which I choose,
To loosen the bonds of wickedness,
To undo the bands of the yoke,
And to let the oppressed go free
And break every yoke?
“Is it not to divide your bread with the hungry
And bring the homeless poor into the house;
When you see the naked, to cover him;
And not to hide yourself from your own flesh?”

“Then your light will break out like the dawn,
And your recovery will speedily spring forth;
And your righteousness will go before you;
The glory of the Lord will be your rear guard.
“Then you will call, and the Lord will answer;
You will cry, and He will say, ‘Here I am.’
If you remove the yoke from your midst,
The pointing of the finger and speaking wickedness,
And if you give yourself to the hungry
And satisfy the desire of the afflicted,
Then your light will rise in darkness
And your gloom will become like midday.
“And the Lord will continually guide you,
And satisfy your desire in scorched places,
And give strength to your bones;
And you will be like a watered garden,
And like a spring of water whose waters do not fail.
“Those from among you will rebuild the ancient ruins;
You will raise up the age-old foundations;
And you will be called the repairer of the breach,
The restorer of the streets in which to dwell. (Isaiah 58:6-12)

There are conditional promises in the word of God. These conditional promises require acts of obedience on our part as God’s people in order for us to receive the blessings promised. In Psalm 41 and Isaiah 58, we see God promising His blessings and mercies for our lives, and He gives us these promises on the condition that we show mercy to others.

Notice in Isaiah 58 that God calls upon us, to the extent that it is in our power to do so, to “let the oppressed go free” and to “break every yoke”, as we read in verse 6. In verse 7, He calls upon us to give of our own material resources in order to provide necessities to those who are in need. With this kind of fasting, we deny ourselves what we could have kept for our own benefit in order to show mercy to others. This is true fasting that pleases God, fasting that does not merely deny ourselves food for a time.

In the following verses we see that for those of us who show mercy to others, God promises that light will break forth for us in our own times of darkness. We also see the promise that our “recovery will speedily spring forth”, which speaks of God’s restoration in our lives. We also find God’s

promise of His protection, with the glory of the Lord as our rear guard. We also see that for those of us who show mercy to others, God promises that when we call to Him for help in our times of trouble, He will answer us.

Continuing in verse 10, the Lord gave the conditional promise to His people, that if we extend our souls to the hungry, and if we “satisfy the desire of the afflicted”, then in return our “light will rise” in the midst of our own darkness. He promised that He will guide us always, and He will satisfy our needs, even if we should find ourselves in a scorched and barren place in our own lives. He also promised that He will strengthen us. All of these promises of the Lord’s help and sustenance are given to us in return for the mercies that we have shown to others.

In verse 11, the Lord said that those who have shown these mercies will be like a “watered garden” and “like a spring of waters, whose waters do not fail”. This imagery describes the blessings that come to those who have extended mercy, spending themselves and their resources on behalf of the hungry, to satisfy the needs of those who are oppressed. This verse brings to mind the words of the Apostle Paul in his second letter to the Corinthians where he wrote: “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich.” (2 Corinthians 8:9).

The Teaching of James

James wrote to believers saying: “Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.” (James 1:27). To look after widows and orphans in their distress is to be merciful to those who are in a position of weakness, need, and vulnerability, doing what we can to meet their need, and thereby showing mercy to them by spending ourselves and our resources for their benefit. At the same time, we are to walk in obedience to all of God’s word, keeping ourselves from being polluted by the world.

James also exhorted us: “So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty. For judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment.” (James 2:12-13). As

believers the love and the life of Christ will be manifested in our lives lived here on earth (2 Corinthians 4:10-11), and one of the ways in which Christ's life will be manifested through our lives is through the sacrifice that we make when we show mercy to others.

Let all of us who are recipients of God's grace strive to show mercy to others whenever we can, so that we will receive eternal reward in Heaven, as well as God's conditional promises of His mercies for our own lives here on earth. These promises of His blessing and mercy shown toward us in our times of trouble are contingent upon our showing mercy to others.

God's Blessings Promised to the Generous

One of the ways in which we show mercy to others is through our generosity in giving to them something of what God has given to us, in order to ease their burden during their time of need. We have already seen several passages in both the Old and New Testaments that speak of the blessings promised to the righteous who give generously of the resources that God has given to them for the benefit of the poor and needy. In Psalm 112 we find yet another of these passages. Beginning in verse 4 we read:

Light arises in the darkness for the upright;
He is gracious and compassionate and righteous.
It is well with the man who is gracious and lends;
He will maintain his cause in judgment.
For he will never be shaken;
The righteous will be remembered forever.

He will not fear evil tidings;
His heart is steadfast, trusting in the LORD.
His heart is upheld, he will not fear,
Until he looks with satisfaction on his adversaries.
He has given freely to the poor,
His righteousness endures forever;
His horn will be exalted in honor. (Psalm 112:4-9)

The word "horn" in verse 9 is symbolic of dignity, so a paraphrasing of the last part of verse 9 could accurately be rendered as "his dignity will be exalted in honor." The psalmist told of the blessings that God will give to the

righteous who are gracious and compassionate, who are generous and lend freely, and who have “given freely to the poor”.

The righteous man in Old Testament times looked for the coming of the Messiah as foretold by the prophets. He strove to obey God according to the directives and teachings given in the Law of Moses and the writings of the prophets.

Today the righteous man is the believer in Christ. This promise of God’s blessing given to His people here in the Old Testament, in return for their mercy shown to those in need, is a promise that is also ours today as believers, as spiritual Israel. Ours as well is the wealth of blessings and promises that God has provided for His people through the writings of the New Testament authors.

As God’s righteous people who have been brought to faith in Christ, we will be generous in many ways as the love of God manifests itself through our actions, bearing witness to our genuine faith (James 2:14-26). Our hearts will be steadfast, secure, and ultimately without fear because we trust in God and in the truth and faithfulness of His word (Isaiah 26:3).

God gave us this promise through the psalmist’s words: “Light arises in the darkness for the upright” (Psalm 112:4). This is God’s promise for the righteous, who are gracious and compassionate, lending their resources to help meet the needs of those who are in distress.

Though darkness and trouble persist for a time in the lives of the righteous, light will dawn in the midst of our darkness, and good will come to those who are generous. Therefore, let us remember to show mercy to others by giving to them something of what God has given to us in order to ease their burden, so that we may receive God’s promise of mercy and the dawning of light in the midst of our own times of darkness.

The righteous man shows mercy when he gives, and as Jesus said: “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.” (Matthew 5:7). When we show mercy by our generosity to others, we in return are promised God’s mercy when we find ourselves facing our own times of trouble. This is God’s promise for those who show mercy.

8.

Christian Giving

Both the Old and New Testaments have numerous instructions for God's people about giving some of what God has given to us for the benefit of others. In Luke 6 Jesus said: "Give, and it will be given to you. They will pour into your lap a good measure—pressed down, shaken together, and running over. For by your standard of measure it will be measured to you in return." (Luke 6:38).

Jesus exhorted us to give, and to give with a generous measure. and He said that with the same measure we use to give to others, we will receive back in return. This is the promise of the Son of God, whose entire life was an example of giving of Himself for the benefit of others.

Jesus also taught us that our giving should be done in secret, and not publicly that we might receive praise and recognition for our generosity. In Matthew 6 we read:

"Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven.

"So when you give to the poor, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be honored by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. But when you give to the poor, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving will be in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you." (Matthew 6:1-4)

Jesus exhorted us to give quietly, not announcing it to receive the praise of men, but in secret to please God our Father. God will see to it that we are rewarded when we obey Him by giving in this way.

There is something else that we should consider in our giving. Just as Jesus promised that with the same measure we use to give to others we will receive back in return for ourselves, He also taught that the reward for our

giving will not always be realized during our lives here on earth. He gave us this teaching in the Gospel of Luke:

And He also went on to say to the one who had invited Him, “When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, otherwise they may also invite you in return and that will be your repayment. But when you give a reception, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, since they do not have the means to repay you; for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.” (Luke 14:12-14).

When we give to the poor and the afflicted, they will likely never be able to repay us. Jesus taught us in this passage that we should not give with the expectation that we will always receive material recompense during our lifetime here on earth. There are times when our acts of kindness and sacrifice are building up for us treasure in Heaven (Matthew 6:19-20). There are times when our giving will not be paid back in this life, but as Jesus has promised, we will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.

The Teaching of the Apostle Paul

Paul taught at length about giving in 2 Corinthians. In the entirety of the eighth and ninth chapters, he spoke of the Corinthians giving to fellow believers in Jerusalem, and he taught on Christian giving in general.

To preface what Paul taught in 2 Corinthians 8-9, we should first look at 1 Corinthians 16, where he first exhorted the Corinthian believers to give for the benefit of the saints living in Jerusalem who were in need at that time. Paul instructed them saying that they should set aside every week a sum of money that would be reflected by their income, so that he would not have to take up collections when he arrived (1 Corinthians 16:1-2).

Paul encouraged the Corinthians to help with the needs of their Christian brothers in Jerusalem, and he instructed them to do so in keeping with their income, or as he said later in his second letter to the Corinthians, according to their means (2 Corinthians 8:11). He taught that those who had more income and more of a surplus would be able to contribute more, and they should do so.

Paul began 2 Corinthians 8 by telling the Corinthians of the generosity of the Macedonian churches in giving to meet the needs of the believers in Jerusalem. He said that even out of the trial of their own poverty, they gave joyfully as much as they were able, and even more than they were able (2 Corinthians 8:2-3). Paul then encouraged the Corinthians to “abound” in the gracious work of giving when he wrote: “But just as you abound in everything, in faith and utterance and knowledge and in all earnestness and in the love we inspired in you, see that you abound in this gracious work also.” (2 Corinthians 8:7).

The Corinthians had apparently given before for the benefit of the saints in Jerusalem (2 Corinthians 8:10) and had promised to do so again (2 Corinthians 9:5). Paul continued in chapter 8 to instruct them that they should give according to their ability, and then he wrote: “For if the readiness is present, it is acceptable according to what a person has, not according to what he does not have.” (2 Corinthians 8:12).

Paul then demonstrated a scriptural basis for his efforts to collect money for believers in Jerusalem with a quotation from Exodus 16:18, when he taught: “For this is not for the ease of others and for your affliction, but by way of equality— at this present time your abundance being a supply for their need, so that their abundance also may become a supply for your need, that there may be equality; as it is written, ‘He who gathered much did not have too much, and he who gathered little had no lack.’” (2 Corinthians 8:13-15).

Paul continued in 2 Corinthians 9 teaching about Christian giving in general. Paul’s teaching here builds upon Jesus’ teaching in Luke 6:38, when He instructed us that with the same measure we use to give to others, it will also be measured back to us in return. Paul gave us this instruction:

Now this I say, he who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each one must do just as he has purposed in his heart, not grudgingly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that always having all sufficiency in everything, you may have an abundance for every good deed; as it is written, “He scattered abroad, he gave to the poor. His righteousness endures forever.” (2 Corinthians 9:6-9).

Just as Jesus taught many times using analogies, so also Paul used an analogy in his teaching about giving. The analogy he used was that of a farmer sowing seed with the expectation of later reaping a harvest. If the farmer sows seed sparingly, he will reap only sparingly, realizing a meager harvest. But if he sows seed bountifully, he will reap a bountiful harvest, and so it is the same with our giving.

Notice also Paul's instruction in verse 7 of this passage about how we as believers should give: "Each one must do just as he has purposed in his heart, not grudgingly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver." We are not to give reluctantly, or with the feeling or belief that we are under some sort of compulsion to give beyond our means, or that we are obliged to give some certain amount. Paul taught that we are free to give as we have decided in our own hearts, all the while understanding that if we give bountifully, then we will receive back bountifully, but if we give sparingly using a only a small measure, then we will receive back in return only sparingly, in the same small measure.

In addition to sharing with fellow believers in need, Paul also instructed us that we are to give to those among us who preach and teach the word of God. In 1 Corinthians Paul wrote: "... the Lord directed those who proclaim the gospel to get their living from the gospel." (1 Corinthians 9:14). Again, in his letter to the Galatians Paul instructed us saying: "The one who is taught the word is to share all good things with the one who teaches him." (Galatians 6:6).

Paul also wrote to Timothy telling him that those who preach and teach the word of God deserve to be paid, and in doing so he used quotes from both Deuteronomy 25:4, and Luke 10:7. Paul taught us saying: "The elders who rule well are to be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, "You shall not muzzle the ox while he is threshing", and "The laborer is worthy of his wages." (1 Timothy 5:17-18).

The Origins of the Tithe

No discussion about Christian giving would be complete without addressing the subject of tithing, which is encouraged in many of our

Christian congregations today. Tithing was first instituted in the book of Leviticus as a requirement for Israel. The word “tithe” means “tenth”, and it refers to giving back to the Lord a tenth, or ten percent, of all that He had provided for the children of Israel. This was one of many commands that the Lord gave to Moses on Mount Sinai for the Israelites. This passage reads:

“Thus all the tithe of the land, of the seed of the land or of the fruit of the tree, is the Lord’s; it is holy to the Lord. If, therefore, a man wishes to redeem part of his tithe, he shall add to it one-fifth of it. For every tenth part of herd or flock, whatever passes under the rod, the tenth one shall be holy to the Lord.” (Leviticus 27:30-32).

Later in Numbers 18:24-26, God directed that the tithes collected from the Israelites were to be distributed to the Levites. All the other tribes of Israel had been given lands as an inheritance from the Lord, but the Levites received no inheritance of land. Instead, their inheritance was the Lord Himself, as they had been chosen for the work of ministering before the Lord. The tithe was God’s way of providing for the Levites. The Levites were in turn required to give a tithe of all they received to the High Priest Aaron.

So it is clear that the Lord had commanded the Israelites to tithe all of the increase that He had given to them for the purpose of providing for the Levites who had received no inheritance of lands, but who had been chosen by the Lord to do the work at the Tent of Meeting. This work included the offering of the various sacrifices required by the Law. Therefore, the Israelites were required to obey this command to tithe their increase, as they were required to obey all the laws that the Lord handed down for them through Moses.

The question that every Christian today should consider is this: are we as believers also required to tithe, or to give a tenth of the increase that the Lord has given to us? As with any question that we have concerning our obedience to God, we look to the Scriptures for our answers.

The Transition from Law to Grace

Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount:

“Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished.” (Matthew 5:17-18)

Regarding the transition from the Old Covenant of the Mosaic laws to the New Covenant of grace; Jesus made it clear that He had not come to abolish the Law of Moses or the writings of the Prophets, but to fulfill them. Further, He said that none of these writings would pass from the Law until everything was accomplished or fulfilled.

What is clear from several passages in the New Testament is that there are many Old Testament laws that we are no longer required to obey. The most obvious of these is the offering of animal sacrifices for the remission of sins as prescribed in the Law of Moses (See Leviticus 1-7).

For a believer in Christ to be told that he was required to offer animal sacrifices to make atonement for the sins he had committed would be the apex of blasphemy. Such a requirement would imply that there was something lacking in the sacrifice that Jesus Christ made of Himself at Calvary, dying on the cross and shedding His blood for the remission of our sins, so that we as His people would be reconciled to God.

It is also obvious that we are no longer required to observe Sabbath days, the various festivals and celebrations, or the dietary restrictions prescribed in the Mosaic Law. Paul wrote about these things in his letter to the Colossians:

When you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions, having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us, which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross. When He had disarmed the rulers and authorities, He made a public display of them, having triumphed over them through Him.

Therefore no one is to act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day— things which are a mere shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ. (Colossians 2:13-17)

Paul taught in this passage that all the Old Testament ceremonial laws were only a foreshadowing of things that were to come, and the time of their fulfillment had already taken place with the coming of Christ. Therefore, believers are no longer required to observe these Old Testament laws regarding the observance of feasts, festivals, Sabbaths, or dietary laws. This in no way means that we disregard the Old Testament where the Law of Moses is given, because as Paul taught: "...through the Law comes the knowledge of sin." (Romans 3:20). It is through the Law that we receive instruction and an understanding of what is sin in the sight of God.

Obedience to God's word was required for the Old Testament saints, and it is without question required for us as believers (John 14:15, 21, 23-24, 15:10, many others). At this point, we must ask ourselves how we know which Old Testament laws we are still required to obey.

The answer to this question is that wherever there is a new directive given in the New Testament on a particular subject, that new teaching supersedes what was written earlier in the Mosaic Law, and the new teaching is the one that we are to obey as believers in Christ. ***Any new teachings and directives given in the New Testament on any given subject reveal that for the parallel old directive given in the Mosaic Law, the time of that old directive has come to its fulfillment, and it has passed from the Law, which means that we as believers are no longer required to obey it.***

In Matthew 5:17-18, Jesus said that He did not come to destroy the Law, but to fulfill it. He fully obeyed its requirements, and He fulfilled all the prophecies made about the coming Messiah, proving that He was indeed the Christ. According to His Father's will, Jesus Christ shed His blood on Calvary's cross so that we would not have to fully and without exception or transgression obey the Law in order to obtain salvation.

It is clear from the various New Testament Scripture passages that we have considered that some commands given in the Mosaic Law have indeed reached their time of fulfillment with the coming of Christ. In place of these old directives, we have been given various new directives and teachings in

the New Testament. All these new directives are given to us as a result of what Jesus accomplished for us at Calvary.

We are still, however, required to obey many of the Old Testament laws. The Ten Commandments are still required for us. We do not obtain salvation by obeying these laws, but we are called upon to obey them, as well as any Old Testament directives and precepts that are consistent with New Testament teaching. However, some of these Old Testament requirements have, as evidenced by the Scriptures that we have considered, reached their time of fulfillment and have passed from the Law; they are no longer a requirement for believers.

Are Believers Commanded to Tithe?

The question now remains for us concerning Christian giving: Is tithing as commanded in the Old Testament Law still required for the believer today? ***The answer is that tithing is no longer required for us as New Testament believers. As we have seen from the various New Testament Scripture references that we have examined, there are in fact new directives on giving for God's people that have been given to us by Jesus Himself and by the Apostle Paul.***

The new directive is that indeed we are to give. Jesus exhorted us to give, and He said that with the same measure we use to give, it will be measured back to us. Paul taught the same lesson when he compared our giving with a farmer's sowing of seed. He said that if we sow or give sparingly, then we will reap or receive back only sparingly. But if on the other hand we sow or give bountifully, then we will receive back for ourselves bountifully.

Paul also taught that we should not give grudgingly, or under compulsion, because God wants us to give willingly and cheerfully; we are not to give believing that we are compelled or obliged to give some certain amount. This instruction is made clear in 2 Corinthians 9 where Paul wrote: "Each one must do just as he has purposed in his heart, not grudgingly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver." (2 Corinthians 9:7).

If we were still required to give a tithe, then we would indeed be “under compulsion” to give that tithe, or ten percent, in order to be obedient to God, but such is not the case. As we see clearly from Paul’s teaching in 2 Corinthians 9:7, we are *not* to give reluctantly, or under compulsion to give a certain amount, but we are instructed to give as we decide in our own hearts.

Some would disagree with the teaching that we as believers are no longer required to tithe, and they would say that Jesus did indeed teach that we are to tithe. As justification they would reference a verse from the Gospel of Luke which reads: “But woe to you Pharisees! For you pay tithe of mint and rue and every kind of garden herb, and yet disregard justice and the love of God; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others.” (Luke 11:42). These would emphasize especially the last sentence in the verse where Jesus told the Pharisees that they should have practiced the latter (justice and the love of God) without leaving the former (tithing) undone.

As with interpreting any Scripture, we must consider who is being addressed in the passage under consideration, and we must also consider the context of the passage from which the Scripture is taken. In Luke 11:42, *Jesus is addressing Pharisees* attempting to be justified by observing certain points of the law, while at the same time their lives were filled with hypocrisy and wickedness, and they neglected more important points of the law, such as justice and the love of God.

To be justified in the sight of God under the Old Testament Law, one would be required to obey every point of the Law, including the command in the Law regarding tithing. This is why Jesus said to these Pharisees that they should have practiced the latter (justice and the love of God, which they were neglecting), without leaving the former (tithing) undone.

It is important for us to understand that *Jesus is not addressing His disciples in this passage*. In fact, in the context of this entire passage of Luke 11:37-54, Jesus addressed the Pharisees and experts in the Law of His day. He sternly rebuked them for their hypocrisy on several points, including their belief that they will be justified before God by their strict observance of commands given in the Law such as tithing, while at the same time they “neglect justice and the love of God”. In the big picture however, it is clear from New Testament teaching that no one will be justified by observing the

law (Romans 3:20). As we can see from the context of this passage, Luke 11:42 is not a command directed to New Testament believers that we are to tithe. Rather, it is one point in a rebuke that Jesus directed to hypocritical Pharisees.

Nowhere in the New Testament are we as believers commanded to tithe. On the contrary, we are told that we are not to give “under compulsion”, with the belief that we are compelled or obliged to give some certain amount, as we have seen from 2 Corinthians 9:7. Instead, we are told to give as we have decided in our own hearts that we should give.

In the New Testament, we as God’s people have been given new directives regarding our giving. And we have also been given new promises of God’s blessing in return for our giving.

There is nothing wrong with our local church asking us to tithe our income, and we are certainly free to do so if we want. However, with the New Testament directives that we have regarding our giving, let us resolve to let no one impose upon us a legalistic requirement that we must give a tithe, or a tenth, of what God has given to us as in order to be obedient to Him.

Instead, let us do as Paul instructed us, and let us give as we decide in our own hearts, with the understanding that if we give bountifully then we will receive back bountifully. But if we give sparingly, then we will receive back for ourselves only sparingly. As believers in Christ, this is our instruction for giving as taught by Jesus in Luke 6:38, and by Paul in 2 Corinthians 9:6-9.

Other Ways of Giving

At this point something else should be said about Christian giving. The giving of our financial or material resources is not the only way in which we can give. We can and should give in other ways as well.

James taught us about the perspective of the rich brother and the poor brother (James 1:9-10. See also James 2:5), and so we know by the Scriptures and by our own experience that there are those of us in the body

of Christ who will have little in the way of material wealth. Such a condition may last for months, or years, or a lifetime. An intense awareness of our own need, whether financial or some other need, is certainly something that will drive us to God in prayer for His help in our condition of distress, vulnerability, and sorrow brought about by these needs. Such things do have a way of keeping us close to God.

If we find ourselves in the situation where we have little in the way of material wealth, then there may be other things that God has given to us that we might share with those in need. For example, we may be able to give of our time in some service to a fellow believer. There may be believers that we know who could benefit from our doing something for them that they are not able to do for themselves. There are also those for whom we can pray, bringing requests for them and their needs before our God and Father.

There are also people from whom most others will turn away, maybe because they are not attractive or witty or interesting or charming, or possibly because of some affliction in their lives. To these we can give a little of our time and attention to converse with them and listen to what they may have to say. Giving something of our time and attention in acts of kindness to edify someone whom others may ignore or reject, is another way in which we can give.

We must be very careful with this type of ministry to others where unbelievers are involved. Jesus warned us not to give what is sacred to dogs, and He told us not to cast our pearls before swine, saying that they may turn on us and tear us to pieces (Matthew 7:6). Jesus also warned us to watch out for false prophets, or those whose profession of being a Christian is false. He said that they will come to us “in sheep’s clothing”, claiming to be Christians, but inwardly they are “ferocious wolves”. He said that we will recognize them by their fruits (Matthew 7:15-23).

However, where a brother or sister in Christ is involved, we are commanded to love them, and a genuine love will be evidenced by how we respond to their need with the resources that we have available to us. If we struggle financially ourselves, we may have nothing else to give but our kind attention and a little of our time, and this we should indeed give.

When we consider a Christian brother or sister from whom many others would turn away and reject, let us also consider our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who went through this same kind of suffering Himself:

For He grew up before Him like a tender shoot,
And like a root out of parched ground;
He has no stately form or majesty
That we should look upon Him,
Nor appearance that we should be attracted to Him.
He was despised and forsaken of men,
A man of sorrows and acquainted with grief;
And like one from whom men hide their face
He was despised, and we did not esteem Him. (Isaiah 53:2-3)

When we as believers possess little more to give than our time and kind attention to another member of the body of Christ who is “like one from whom men hide their face”, let us remember Jesus’ words to His people: “...Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me.” (Matthew 25:40).

9.

Suffering in the Life of a Believer – Part 1

One of the most difficult things for believers to understand and to come to terms with is why our sovereign and all-powerful God would allow suffering to affect our lives, when surely He could prevent it from happening. When things are going well for us, we may not have much interest in what the Bible has to say about suffering affecting our lives. However when suffering does come upon us, we will bring our troubles to our God and Father in prayer, asking Him why He has allowed these hard and painful things to touch our lives, bringing sorrow and grief. There are insights given to us in the Bible as to why such things are allowed to happen.

In the light of many Old Testament passages, we can see that God promises His blessings for obedience to His commands and punishment for disobedience. Also in the light of numerous New Testament passages, believers are warned that disobedience to God's commands will bring His discipline into our lives, which as the writer of Hebrews said, is sorrowful (Hebrews 12:11). With these things in mind, it is easy for us to understand that disobedience to God's commands will bring suffering upon us.

However as we will see from our study of the Scriptures, the matter of suffering touching the lives of believers is more complex than the simple notion that sufferings and trouble come only into the lives of those who have sinned. There are times when God allows various sufferings and hardships to affect our lives, and we will not be able to see any connection between these difficulties and some sin in our lives. And in fact, there may be no connection at all.

The Origin of All Suffering

In Genesis 3, we learn that suffering in all its' forms entered the world at the time of the fall of man in the Garden of Eden. There was no suffering in the world until the time that Adam and Eve yielded to Satan's temptation

to eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, which God had told them not to eat. He had provided many other trees in the garden from which they could eat, but He told them they must not eat the fruit of this one tree, or they would surely die.

At the point in time when Adam and Eve yielded to the devil's temptation and ate the fruit which God had forbidden them to eat, sin came into the world. With sin came suffering and death, which are the consequences of sin.

Every man born into the world from the time Adam and Eve sinned is born as a slave of sin and in need of a Savior. In Romans 5:12-19, the Apostle Paul taught about the fall of man. He explained that just as sin came into the world through one man, Adam, and one sin of Adam's brought death and condemnation to every man, so also through one Man, Jesus Christ, and His one act of righteousness, God's grace would overflow to many, resulting in justification that brings life.

Satan, or the serpent, would strike the heel of Jesus, but Jesus would crush the head of Satan. This prophecy was made about Jesus in Genesis 3:15, and it was fulfilled in His victory over Satan at Calvary, "and by His scourging we are healed" (Isaiah 53:5). Everything that Jesus suffered, He suffered as a result of the activity of Satan. And at the same time, everything He suffered came about according to the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God the Father (Acts 2:23).

Likewise, all the sufferings that touch our lives as God's people are the result of the activity of Satan. He acts directly by causing such things as various physical infirmities, and he also acts indirectly through his temptation of men. If he acts through an unbeliever, then he is acting through those who belong to him, who are his children (John 8:42-47). They are slaves of sin, and they can do nothing else but sin. He also tempts God's children to sin.

Jesus described Satan as a thief, who comes only to steal, to kill, and to destroy. This is the bad news. However, for believers there is Good News: Jesus came to destroy the works of the devil (1 John 3:8), and He did so in order that His blessed people may have life, and have it abundantly (John 10:10). This good news was accomplished for us through the sufferings He endured, according to His Father's will for His life.

Jesus Characterized the Lives of His Blessed People

In Luke 6 there is a passage that many of us will consider to be baffling. At the time that Jesus gave this teaching, a large group of His disciples and many others had gathered to hear Him and to be healed of their diseases. As we study this passage, we can begin to see that the ways of God are contrary to the ways of the world and the understanding of men.

Beginning in Luke 6:20 we read:

And turning His gaze toward His disciples, He began to say, “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who hunger now, for you shall be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh. Blessed are you when men hate you, and ostracize you, and insult you, and scorn your name as evil, for the sake of the Son of Man. Be glad in that day and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven. For in the same way their fathers used to treat the prophets.

“But woe to you who are rich, for you are receiving your comfort in full. Woe to you who are well-fed now, for you shall be hungry. Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep. Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for their fathers used to treat the false prophets in the same way.” (Luke 6:20-26)

Many of us might reason that things appear to be backwards in this passage. Contrary to what Jesus taught, most of us will see no blessing at all in being poor, hungry, or in mourning. At the same time, we would consider that those who are blessed would obviously be those who are rich and well fed, and who enjoy their comforts and consolations in this life. However in Jesus’ teaching here, we see that such is not the case. God’s thoughts and His ways are not like the thoughts, ways, and understanding of men, as we learn in the book of Isaiah where God spoke through the prophet saying:

“For My thoughts are not your thoughts,
Nor are your ways My ways,” declares the LORD.
“For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
So are My ways higher than your ways
And My thoughts than your thoughts.” (Isaiah 55:8-9)

God has different thoughts about the blessing of His people, and He has different ways in which He will bring these blessings to pass. We will soon see revealed through several passages of Scripture the ways that God has chosen to bring about the eternal blessing of His people together with His Son.

A Principle at Work in the Life of Every Believer

When the time of His crucifixion was drawing near, Jesus spoke to His disciples saying:

“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it to life eternal. If anyone serves Me, he must follow Me; and where I am, there My servant will be also; if anyone serves Me, the Father will honor him.” (John 12:24-26)

Jesus was at the point of fulfilling His Father’s will and purpose for His life by dying on Calvary’s cross to become the atoning sacrifice for the sins of all whom the Father has given to Him (John 6:37). It was at this time that He gave us one of the most profound revelations in the entire Bible.

Using a single grain of wheat as a metaphor to symbolize His life and the lives of all who will follow Him, Jesus revealed the universal principle of spiritual fruit bearing that has been ordained by His Father. He taught His disciples that unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it will remain only a single grain of wheat, bearing no fruit at all. But if it dies, it will bear much fruit.

Jesus first applied this analogy of the fruitful grain of wheat to His life, in order to symbolize the fruit that would be born through the suffering that He would endure according to His Father’s plan and purpose for His life, whereby many would be brought to glory. Then He said to His disciples: “If anyone serves Me, ***he must follow Me; and where I am, there My servant will be also...***” (John 12:26, emphasis added). With these words, Jesus revealed to His disciples that the same principle of spiritual fruit

bearing that was at work in His life would also be at work in their lives as well.

We have by God's grace been called to faith in His Son Jesus Christ, and with that calling we have been given the privilege of serving Him. God has ordained that everyone who serves His Son must follow Him. ***Just as Jesus submitted Himself to His Father's will for His life, even to the point of death on a cross, we will follow Him in that we also will be called upon to submit to the plan and purpose of God for our lives, "dying" to our own will and what we would choose for ourselves, in order that God's will and purpose for our lives will be accomplished.*** It will be through this "death" that we will bear spiritual fruit to the glory of God, according to the principle that Jesus taught in John 12:24.

Nowhere is this death to one's own will and complete submission to the will of God more supremely demonstrated than in the life of Jesus Christ Himself. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prayed to His Father that the cup He was about to drink might pass from Him. This cup was the crucifixion that He was about to endure in order to obtain salvation for His people.

Jesus knew what lied ahead for Him (John 12:23). He knew that all things are possible with God, and He prayed that the cup of suffering and death He faced might be taken away from Him. However, as He always did, He submitted Himself to His Father's will for His life (Matthew 26:39, 42).

After praying three times for His Father to remove the cup of suffering that He was about to drink, Jesus received His answer. His Father would not remove His cup of suffering. It was His Father's will that He suffer and die on Calvary's cross in order to bring many sons to glory (Matthew 26:45-46, Hebrews 2:10).

At this point in our study, some of us will note that we have already established that all suffering comes about through the activity of the devil. But as we have seen revealed in John 12:24-26, spiritual fruit which glorifies God is itself born through suffering that comes about according to His sovereign will, plan, and purpose. (Consider also 1 Peter 4:12-19). In this apparent contradiction we begin to learn that all things, even the activity of the devil, will be made to serve God and to work together for the good and ultimate glory of His people (Romans 8:28).

As we study John 12:24-26, we should not overlook what Jesus said in verse 25: “He who loves his life loses it, and he who *hates his life in this world* will keep it to life eternal.” (Emphasis added). As we read this verse, we may notice similarities in John 12:25 and Jesus’ teaching in Luke 6:20-26. Such teachings are hard for all of us to understand. We might wonder why Jesus said these words, and what they could mean for us as His people.

As we consider the meaning of John 12:25, let us look again at John 12:24 where Jesus taught us that no fruit will be born apart from the “death” of the grain of wheat. That grain of wheat symbolizes our lives and all that we want for ourselves in this life. Dying to our own will and what we want for ourselves is suffering; it is to take up our cross and follow Jesus.

The things that we want may be completely honorable, with no sin in them at all. However God may will other things for our lives, things that run contrary to what we want for ourselves, but will result in fruit born to His glory, and He will bring these things to pass in our lives, as He has ordained them for each of us.

With John 12:24 in mind, we could understand Jesus’ words in John 12:25 as saying that the sufferings that bear fruit in the Christian life could at times make a believer even “hate” or despair of his life in this world. The Apostle Paul shared one such experience that he had in his own life, even as he was obeying God in doing the work that He had assigned for him. Paul wrote: “For we do not want you to be unaware, brethren, of our affliction which came to us in Asia, that we were burdened excessively, beyond our strength, *so that we despaired even of life*; indeed, we had the sentence of death within ourselves so that we would not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead...” (2 Corinthians 1:8-11, emphasis added).

This experience of Paul’s was for him a share in the suffering, death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. Through this experience and others, Paul “followed” Jesus in the way and in the measure that God had ordained for his life, and through his suffering he bore the fruit that would come as God’s people take comfort and are edified by his words as he recounted his experience. (Consider also 2 Corinthians 1:3-4).

As we further consider Jesus’ words in John 12:25, we can see that the original Greek word that is translated as “hates” in this verse could also be

translated as “loves less”. With this latter translation in mind, we could also rightly interpret this verse as teaching that as followers of Christ, we will be called upon to “love less” our own life and our own desires, hopes, and plans for our lives, when compared to our love for and submission to the will of God, and whatever His will for our lives may involve.

This kind of submission to God’s will is something that He works to bring about in our lives as His people, and it is something that only He can bring about. This is the kind of submission to the will of God that Jesus demonstrated when He prayed to His Father three times that the cup of suffering He was about to drink at Calvary would be taken from Him, but ultimately He yielded Himself and His life to His Father’s will when He prayed: “Yet not as I will, but as you will.” (Matthew 26:39).

As we consider John 12:24-26, all believers are filled with thankfulness for the suffering and sacrifice that Jesus Christ endured on our behalf, according to His Father’s will for His life. At the same time, one of the hardest teachings in the Bible for us to accept is given to us in these verses, where Jesus revealed that all of us who serve Him must follow Him in His death, dying to what we would choose for ourselves in this life, in order that God’s will for our lives will be done, just as it was in His.

Practically speaking in terms that we can more easily understand, as we walk in obedience to God, and the circumstances and conditions of our lives unfold, we will at times experience the “death”, or the loss, of things that we wanted to have, or keep, or experience for ourselves, as God has ordained them for each of us individually. As these things happen, we will suffer because of them, and God our Father calls upon each of us to accept these things as His sovereign will for our lives, just as Jesus did when He prayed: “Nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will”.

These “deaths” will come about in our lives in the ways and in the measure that God determines for each of us. It will be through these “deaths” that we will follow Jesus, experiencing in some measure a share in His sufferings as we also are called upon to submit to our Father’s will and plan for our lives.

Just as Jesus bore fruit through the suffering and sacrifice that God had ordained for His life, so also in our lives, spiritual fruit will be born through the suffering and sacrifice that God has ordained for each of us. As

believers we will all be called upon to follow God's Son in His death, which is a death to own will and what we would choose for ourselves, and the acceptance of that which God chooses for us.

This is one of the most difficult teachings in the Bible for many to accept, and it is a teaching that many will very much want to deny and explain away. Maybe we could explain it away, if only this same teaching did not appear in numerous places elsewhere in the Bible.

All true wisdom is to be found in the teachings of the Holy Bible, and there is no greater wisdom or depth of insight than that which is given to us through the teachings of Jesus Christ Himself. Jesus' teaching in John 12:24-26 revealed the principle of spiritual fruit bearing that was at work in His life, and this same principle has always been, and will always be, at work in the lives of every one of God's people until the time of Jesus' second coming.

In later chapters we will see this principle at work in the lives of God's servants, even from the book of Genesis. Though we may not be able to see or understand how anything good at all could possibly come from the sufferings and losses that our sovereign God has allowed to touch our lives, the Scriptures reveal to us that through our sufferings we will indeed bear fruit, and we will one day realize a share in the eternal glory of His Beloved Son.

Suffering in the Life of a Believer – Part 2

Previously, we saw that in John 12:24 Jesus taught His disciples about spiritual fruit bearing using a grain of wheat as a metaphor. He said that unless a grain of wheat falls to the earth and “dies”, it will remain only a single grain of wheat, bearing no fruit at all, but if it dies, it will bear a harvest of much fruit. As this metaphor applied to Jesus’ life, we know that the fruit born as a result His death referred to the many who would receive the forgiveness of their sins, reconciliation to God, and eternal life through His sacrifice at Calvary.

This much of His teaching is easy for us to accept because we are the beneficiaries of His suffering and sacrifice. However after Jesus gave this teaching, He revealed in John 12:26 that *all of us who serve Him must follow Him*, and He also said that *where He was, His servants also would be*.

With these words, Jesus taught that spiritual fruit will be born in our lives just as it was in His life. This is to say that we will bear fruit as we follow Jesus in His death, which is a death to our own will and what we want for ourselves in this life and the obedient acceptance of God’s will and the life and place of service that He has ordained for us.

As God our Father determines for each of us, we will “follow” Jesus, and we will “be where He was”, in that we also will experience our own “Gethsemanes” in some measure, however small when compared to His suffering in the Garden as He agonized over His Father’s will for His life. Our “Gethsemanes” will be the times when we are faced with suffering in our lives. In these times we also, just as Jesus did, will bring our prayers to our sovereign God, knowing that all things are possible for Him and knowing that He could spare us from these painful things, and in these times we also will be called upon to submit to the will of God for our lives, just as Jesus was.

Also, as God our Father determines for each of us, we will “follow” Jesus, and we will “be where He was”, in that we also will experience our own “Calvaries” in some measure, however small when compared to the

suffering that He endured at Calvary. Our “Calvaries” will be the “deaths” that we experience through the losses and sufferings that our Father allows to affect our lives, according to His sovereign will and plan for each of us.

The Apostle Paul Echoes Jesus’ Teaching

There is no clearer summation of Jesus’ teaching in John 12:24-26 than the teaching of the Apostle Paul recorded in Romans 8. Paul taught that as God’s children, we are “heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, ***if indeed we suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him.***” (Romans 8:17, emphasis added).

God has ordained that every one of His children must follow His Son and be where He was (again John 12:26), in that we must, and we will indeed “suffer with Him”, or share in His sufferings, in order that we may also share in His eternal glory. With this teaching, given to us first by Jesus and then affirmed by Paul and other New Testament authors as well, we are given the reason for many of the sufferings, afflictions, losses, and troubles that come into our lives as believers, even as we walk in obedience to the word of God.

As young believers, many of us imagine that once we turn from what the Bible tells us is sin, that our life will become much easier, and we will obtain release from many of our difficulties. We may also imagine that God will then “bless” us with many of the things that we desire for ourselves in this life.

Obedience to God’s word will eliminate the suffering brought about by the consequences of sin. However at the same time, we can see from John 12:24-26 and Romans 8:17 that God has ordained that every believer must follow Jesus, experiencing in some measure a share in His sufferings. Though we may not understand it, and we will surely not like it, the Scriptures reveal to us that this is the path that God has chosen through which every believer will bear fruit, and thereby share in Christ’s eternal glory.

The death of the grain of wheat that Jesus spoke about in John 12:24 is the death, or relinquishing, of our own hopes, dreams, aspirations, plans

and desires for our lives, and the acceptance of that which God chooses for us. It is being willing to do without anything that God may choose to withhold from us and anything that He may choose to take from us.

With this death to our own will and desires, we are called upon to accept God's will for our lives as Jesus did when He prayed to the Father: "Yet not as I will, but as you will". Through our obedient submission to the word of God and the sovereign will of God for our lives, we will experience reflections of Christ's sufferings in our own lives, "becoming like him in his death" as Paul wrote in Philippians 3:10. God our Father has ordained just what these sufferings will be for each of us, and to what extent we will share in the sufferings of His Son Jesus Christ during our present lives.

A Lesson on the Road to Jerusalem

In Mark 10:35-40, Jesus gave His disciples another teaching that is in complete agreement with His teaching in John 12:24-26. As they were on their way to Jerusalem, James and John came to Jesus with a request. They wanted Him to grant to them that one of them would sit at His right hand and the other at His left in His glory.

With this request, James and John were asking Jesus for the places of highest glory and honor in Heaven, being seated next to Jesus Himself. Jesus responded to them saying: "You do not know what you are asking... Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?" (Mark 10:38).

The "cup" or the "baptism" that Jesus spoke about was the cup or baptism of suffering that He had already experienced in part as He walked in obedience to His Father's will for His life. His sufferings would later reach their apex as He submitted to His Father's will even to the point of death, dying on Calvary's cross to become the atoning sacrifice for the sins of His people (Matthew 1:21, John 10:11, 14-15).

When James and John brought their request to Jesus, they had no idea that their future glory in the kingdom of Heaven could be realized only if they experienced a share in His sufferings. Even though Jesus knew that they did not yet understand these things, He told them that they would indeed

drink from His cup and be baptized with His baptism, sharing in His sufferings in order that they would also receive a share in His glory, all according to God's particular plan and purpose for their lives.

At times in our lives, especially as young believers, we might pray to be used of God for some great purpose of His. God answers these prayers according to His will for our lives, even though we may have no idea or understanding at the time that our request will require of us that we drink from the cup or be baptized with the baptism of the sufferings of His Son, Jesus Christ. These sufferings will involve the "death", or the relinquishment, of our own desires and plans for our lives and possibly the relinquishment of many of the "good things" that we hoped God would bless us with in this life, if He should require it of us.

To Take up Our Cross and Follow Jesus

In Luke 9:23-24 Jesus said: "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake, he is the one who will save it." We might wonder what Jesus meant by this teaching, and what His words could mean for us as His disciples today.

During Jesus' lifetime on earth the cross was widely understood to be an instrument of death. To deny ourselves and take up our cross to follow Jesus means two things. First, we must deny ourselves, or "die" to, anything that is in violation of God's word, or that which the Bible calls sin. Secondly, we will be called upon to deny ourselves, or "die" to, the desire for anything that God may choose to take or withhold from us as part of His will and plan for our lives.

In Luke 14:27 Jesus said: "Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple." A few verses later He also said: "So then, none of you can be My disciple who does not **give up all** his own possessions." (Luke 14:33, emphasis added).

Jesus taught us again in these two verses from Luke 14 that in order to follow Him, we must give up, or die to, all that we had hoped to be in this life, and all that we had hoped to have or experience or accomplish in our

lives, if God our Father should require it of us. In place of what we would have chosen for ourselves, God calls upon us to submit to the life, place of service, and purpose that He has ordained for us.

This purpose of God's, this place of service that He has ordained for us, will be revealed by the circumstances of our lives that unfold as we walk in obedience to His word. All of the limitations, the difficulties, the hardships of all kinds, and all of the seemingly "good things" that are out of reach for us are all part of our sovereign God's plan for our lives. Jesus calls upon us to take up our cross daily, which is to "die" to, or give up, what we want for ourselves, and to embrace the life and place of service that God our Father has assigned for us. As we do so, we "lose our lives" for Jesus (Luke 9:24).

David wrote of the limitations that God places in the lives of His people in order to bring us to the place of service that He has ordained for us. In Psalm 139 we read:

You hem me in behind and before,
and you lay your hand upon me.
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me,
too lofty for me to attain. (Psalm 139:5-6)

And a few verses later in Psalm 139, David wrote of the sovereignty of God in everything that comes to pass in our lives:

...all the days ordained for me
were written in your book
before one of them came to be. (Psalm 139:16)

God has a particular plan and purpose for each of us as His people. The circumstances that our sovereign God allows into our lives "hem us in", so to speak, and limit us. They channel us or guide us into the life and place of service that He has ordained for us.

Dying to, or relinquishing, whatever God may choose to take or withhold from us, and accepting God's will and purpose for our lives, is the principle of spiritual fruit bearing that was at work in Jesus' life, and this same principle will also be at work in the lives of all of us who follow Him.

This is the teaching given to us in John 12:24-26, and in several other passages of Scripture as well.

There will be no fruit born without the death of the “grain of wheat”, that grain of wheat symbolizing our lives and all that we had hoped to have for ourselves in this life. Dying to what we want and obediently accepting God’s assignments in life is what it means to deny ourselves, and to take up our cross and follow Jesus.

We will all be called upon to submit ourselves to God’s plan for our lives as we experience our share in the sufferings of His Son in the ways and in the measure that God Himself has ordained for each of us. All of the losses and limitations that we experience are a part of God’s sovereign will for our lives. All of the things that we had hoped to have for ourselves in life, but we find that these things are simply out of reach in our case and unattainable for us – all of these things are a part of God’s plan for our lives, and He has promised us that all of these things are working together for our good and for our future glory together with His Son (Romans 8:28).

If we are honest about Jesus’ teaching in Luke 9:23-24, 14:27, and 14:33, then we must admit that the Gospel message is not one that will have broad appeal. Men do not want to hear that they must deny themselves and give up everything they have in order to be Jesus’ disciples. They want to hear about how serving God will get them more of what they want out of life, and there are many who will gladly take their money in return for telling them such things. Paul warned us that these things would happen when he wrote: “For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths.” (2 Timothy 4:3-4).

Notwithstanding all of men’s distortions, fabrications, and myths, the words in these passages of Luke 9 and 14 are Jesus’ words, and men will either accept them as the truth, or they will deny them. Every Christian should understand that it has been granted to us not only to believe the Gospel message, but God has also ordained that we will all, by His grace and through his working in our lives, take up our cross and follow Jesus (Philippians 1:29).

Blessed Encouragement

In Romans 8 Paul wrote: “And we know that God causes ***all things*** to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.” (Romans 8:28, emphasis added). When Paul taught that God causes all things to work together for the good of His people, he meant even the hard and painful things: the distresses, infirmities, losses, troubles, and hardships of ***all*** kinds that God allows to affect the lives of His people.

It can be very difficult for us to come to terms with sufferings and losses that our sovereign God allows to affect our lives apart from any wrongdoing of our own. However, it is precisely these sufferings that are for believers a share in the sufferings of Christ. These are sufferings that God allows and actually ordains that we are to endure as part of His plan for our lives, and they manifest themselves even as we walk in obedience to His word. These sufferings will be realized in our lives in the ways and in the measure that our sovereign God determines for each of us, and they will achieve for us a share in Christ’s eternal glory.

Even if we should find ourselves suffering as a consequence of our own wrongdoing, we as believers can take great comfort in knowing that ***all things*** will be made to work together for the good of those who love God. Such sufferings are for us the discipline of God, which serves to separate us from our sin and restore us to obedience so that we may be useful in His service and fruitful (Hebrews 12:1-13, 2 Timothy 2:19-21). As those who have been called to faith in Jesus Christ according to God’s eternal purpose, we have been given the blessed encouragement and promise that every circumstance and condition of our lives will be made to work together for our eternal good and glory together with His Son.

Paul encouraged us again regarding the troubles of our present lives when he wrote: “Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day. For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.” (2 Corinthians 4:16-18).

Our troubles may seem anything but “light” to us, and they may persist for years or decades, making them seem far from “momentary”. But Paul taught us that the measure of glory that will be achieved for us through these troubles will far exceed the weight and burden of the troubles themselves. And when considered from the perspective of the eternal, all of our troubles are indeed momentary.

Paul comforted us with the understanding that God our Father has our future glory in mind in every circumstance and situation that He allows to affect our lives. He could not have written this had he not understood that all things, even the sufferings of this present life, are working together for the good and future glory of the child of God. Paul encouraged us again regarding the sufferings we endure when he wrote: “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us.” (Romans 8:18).

In Conclusion

The Scripture passages that we have considered in John 12, Romans 8, Mark 10, Luke 9, and Luke 14 all teach us about the principle of spiritual fruit bearing that will be at work in the life of every believer. These Scriptures reveal that we must, and we will, as God will bring to pass in each of our lives, endure a share in the sufferings of Christ, becoming in some measure as He was: a man of sorrows who was familiar with suffering and grief (Isaiah 53:3). This share in Christ’s sufferings is the necessary path that God has ordained for His people whereby we will bear spiritual fruit, and thereby share in the glory of His Beloved Son for eternity.

For now, we will not like the fact that this principle is at work in our life. We might ask why does it have to be this way, and why can’t my life be filled with “good things”, things that bring happiness and gratification in this life? When we find ourselves asking these questions, we should realize that the reasons for the way God has ordered His creation are not always within man’s ability to comprehend. When we find ourselves questioning God’s ways, let us call to mind once again Isaiah 55:8-9 where we learned that God’s ways and His thoughts are not like ours, but they are above the ways and thoughts of man.

Paul also taught us about the ways of God when he exclaimed: “Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways!” (Romans 11:33). God’s ways and His thoughts are beyond the understanding of man. We cannot understand why God our Father has ordained that we must share in Christ’s sufferings in order to share in His eternal glory. However, it has been revealed to us through the Scriptures that indeed God has willed it to be so, and that this process will be at work in the life of every believer.

The writer of Hebrews taught us that God the Father ordained that His only begotten Son Jesus Christ, the first born among many brethren, the Author and Finisher of our salvation, would Himself be made perfect through sufferings. In Hebrews 2 we read: “For it was fitting for Him, for whom are all things, and through whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to perfect the author of their salvation through sufferings.” (Hebrews 2:10).

These are God’s ways, and they are above our ways. God is working in the life of every believer to conform us to the image and likeness of His Son, as Paul taught in Romans 8:29. As He does so, we will all in some measure drink from the cup that Jesus drank; we will all be baptized with the baptism of His sufferings. Knowing that God’s ways and thoughts are above ours, let us not question them. Rather let us be thankful that He has called us to be one of the many sons who will be brought to glory through the blood of Jesus Christ for the remission of our sins.

Paul encouraged us when he wrote: “For just as the sufferings of Christ are ours in abundance, so also our comfort is abundant through Christ.” (2 Corinthians 1:5). Things are hard for now, but the time is coming when our days of sorrow will end (Revelation 7:17, Isaiah 65:17-19). Let us look forward to the day when God will wipe away every tear from our eyes brought about as we shared in the sufferings of the Man of Sorrows (Revelation 21:4). Until that day comes for us, we can take comfort in Jesus’ promise of His grace and strength, which will be given to us in a measure sufficient for our every need and weakness, as Paul learned through his own affliction (2 Corinthians 12:9).

Jesus said: “Are not two sparrows sold for a cent? And yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. But the very hairs of

your head are all numbered. So do not fear; you are more valuable than many sparrows.” (Matthew 10:29-31).

God is intimately familiar with everything that happens on earth and with every detail of our lives. Nothing in His creation, not even an event as small as the death of one sparrow, happens apart from His sovereign will. The things that happen to us happen as part of God’s will for our lives, and the Bible teaches us that through all of these things God is working for our good and for our eternal glory together with His Son.

Consistent with His teaching in Luke 6:20-26, Jesus taught us in John 16:20 that during this present time of our lives on earth, we as His people will weep and mourn while the world rejoices. This will be our experience as we share in His sufferings. But with these sufferings we have the promise that our Heavenly Father, the “Father of mercies and God of all comfort” will provide His comfort to us (2 Corinthians 1:3).

We can take comfort as believers, knowing that every wrong we have suffered, God will avenge, and that every affliction, difficulty, hardship, and loss that God has allowed to touch our lives has eternal value. God is at work in our lives doing exactly what He said He would do in His word: He is conforming each of us to the image of His Son Jesus Christ as He brings about in each of our lives a share in His sufferings. As we experience our share in Christ’s sufferings, we can be certain based on the authority of the Scriptures that these present sufferings will bring about for us eternal glory and reward.

Understanding this spiritual principle will not take away the pain we are enduring; we will still grieve and mourn as a result of our losses and troubles. However, it will provide for us some understanding as to why undeserved sufferings come into our lives as God’s people.

When we have suffered a great loss in life, and we feel ourselves doubting the love and the goodness of God, becoming angry and disillusioned over the suffering that has come upon us, let us realize that through the sufferings that our sovereign God has allowed to affect our lives, we have been brought into the company and fellowship of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ Himself. It has been granted to us not only to believe in Him, but also to experience “the power of His resurrection and the

fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death” (Philippians 1:29, 3:10).

Through our sufferings we have also been brought into the company of the saints whose lives and experiences are recorded in the Bible. Their lives and what God chose to accomplish through their sufferings demonstrate the timeless and universal principle of spiritual fruit bearing that Jesus taught in John 12:24-26. Just as God brought forth life and good through the “death” that their sufferings wrought in their lives, so He will also do the same through the sufferings that we endure in our lives.

When we have suffered a great loss, let us run to the throne of grace, and let us avail ourselves of the mercy and help that is ours in Christ Jesus. The author of Hebrews encouraged us when he wrote: “For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin. Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” (Hebrews 4:15-16).

God did not spare His own Son from sufferings, and we can see from this passage of Hebrews that our faithful High Priest endured every form of temptation that we would endure. Jesus was “tempted in all things as we are”. This means that Jesus also endured the temptation to become angry and disillusioned with God His Father over suffering that He could have prevented in His life, but did not, according to His will, plan, and purpose (Mark 14:33-36, Matthew 27:46).

God loves His people with an unfailing, unconditional, and everlasting love, and He will ***never*** let go of any of us, regardless of our failings during some time of great trial in our lives. We will demonstrate this conclusively from the Scriptures in chapters to come.

Only those who have been called to faith in Jesus Christ will one day realize a share in His glory, and the necessary path to this glory, as God has ordained it to be so, is a share in the experience and suffering of the Man of Sorrows, who was Himself familiar with grief. Until that day, let us rely fully upon the promises of God’s help, comfort, deliverance, provision, and sustaining grace, as they are given to us in His word. Let us also do as the author of Hebrews exhorted us: let us “draw near with confidence to the

throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”

11.

A Share in the Sufferings of Christ – Part 1

In 2 Corinthians 4:6 Paul wrote that God made His light shine in our hearts when He called us to faith in His Son, Jesus Christ, and in the verses following he wrote:

But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves; we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. For we who live are constantly being delivered over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. (2 Corinthians 4:7-11)

Paul taught that we will possess the treasure of our faith in “earthen vessels”. Earthen vessels are fragile and weak vessels, which is why Paul used this metaphor to describe our lives lived in God’s service. The “surpassing greatness of the power” by which we will live our lives and serve God is His, and not our own.

Paul also taught that as believers we should expect, and we will in fact experience, what it is like to be “afflicted in every way”, “perplexed”, “persecuted”, and “struck down”, always carrying around in our body “the dying of Jesus”. These experiences will be allowed to touch our lives by our sovereign God and Father because of the principle that we studied previously. This principle can be summarized by Paul’s teaching in Romans 8 where he revealed that we are “heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him.” (Romans 8:17).

Though the Scriptures reveal to us that we will endure these sufferings as part of God’s plan for our lives, we are promised that we will not be crushed, and we will not be left in despair. We will not be forsaken, and we will not be destroyed. As Paul taught, even though we will carry

around in our bodies the “dying of Jesus”, and we are during the course of our lives “constantly being delivered over to death for Jesus’ sake”, the result of these “deaths” will be that the “life of Jesus” will be manifested in our lives lived here on earth.

It is through these “deaths”, or this share in the sufferings of Christ, that God has ordained we will bear fruit and thereby receive a share in the eternal glory of His Son. (Again, John 12:24-26). Knowing that this principle will be at work in the life of every believer, we may wonder how Jesus’ sufferings might be manifested in our own lives.

Persecutions

The first things that come to mind as we consider the sufferings of Christ are the persecutions He suffered from the Jews, and the crucifixion He suffered at the hands of the Romans due to the insistence of the Jews. His sufferings and death all came about according to the pre-determined plan and foreknowledge of God the Father (Acts 2:23), whereby His only begotten Son would give Himself as the atoning sacrifice for the sins of His people (Matthew 1:21, John 10:11, 14-15). This message was vehemently rejected and opposed by many of the Pharisees and scribes, who were the religious leaders among the Jews of that day.

God has called some of His people to suffer persecution to the point of physical death because of opposition to the Gospel of Christ. The martyrs will certainly be numbered among those who receive the greatest reward in Heaven, having shared in the sufferings of Christ to the extent that it cost them their lives.

Most of us however will suffer persecution to much lesser degrees because we are Christians. Perhaps this persecution will take the form of mocking, ridicule, rejection, or various conflicts where an unbeliever is involved. Being rejected simply because we are believers will prove to be a common experience for us. Even subconsciously some unbelievers will not be fully aware themselves why they dislike us, but they know that they do indeed dislike us, and maybe they will even detest and despise us. This subconscious disdain is a manifestation of the spiritual enmity that exists between believers and those of the world. Others will fully realize why they

dislike us when we refuse to approve of or participate with them in things that the word of God calls sin (1 Peter 4:4).

Experiencing persecution to some degree is certainly one aspect of Jesus' sufferings that we as believers will all experience, as Paul taught us when he wrote to Timothy: "Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." (2 Timothy 3:12).

Insights from Isaiah 53

In addition to persecutions, there are also other aspects of the sufferings of Christ recorded in the Scriptures. A verse-by-verse study of Isaiah 53 gives us further insight into some of the things that Jesus suffered during His life on earth. As we consider each of these aspects of His sufferings, we might also think about how these sufferings may have been, or could yet be, experienced in our lives in some measure as God's people. Beginning in verse 2 we read:

For He grew up before Him like a tender shoot,
And like a root out of parched ground;
He has no stately form or majesty
That we should look upon Him,
Nor appearance that we should be attracted to Him. (Isaiah 53:2)

The words "like a tender shoot, and like a root out of parched ground" could speak of one who comes to faith in Christ, who is born from the dry ground of very humble beginnings where many of the opportunities and benefits available to others are kept out of reach for them, according to the plan of God for their lives. Some believers will experience this aspect of Christ's sufferings.

The words "He has no stately form or majesty that we should look upon Him, nor appearance that we should be attracted to Him" are clear and easily understood. There was no impressive quality in Jesus' physical appearance, and looking at Him people saw nothing of what the world considers to be attractive or desirable.

Many of us may feel about ourselves that God has made us to be unattractive, with nothing in our appearance that others would find desirable. If this is the case with us, then God has ordained that we would suffer in this way, and through this experience we share in this aspect of the sufferings of Christ. From Isaiah 53:2 we see that Jesus knew what it was like to experience this kind of suffering.

In the next verse we read:

He was despised and forsaken of men,
A man of sorrows and acquainted with grief;
And like one from whom men hide their face
He was despised, and we did not esteem Him. (Isaiah 53:3)

Once again, the meaning of the text is clear. Jesus was despised and rejected by men. Some of this rejection could have come from what we read in verse 2, which speaks of Him having nothing in His appearance that we should be attracted to Him. Those of us considered by the world to be unattractive are often rejected, and we will know what it is like to be “one from whom men hide their face”, or one from whom others turn away. Jesus’ ultimate rejection was the rejection that He suffered for His message that He is the Son of God, and that no one can come to God the Father except by Him (John 14:6).

Finally in verse 3, the words “a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief” speak volumes about how the Scriptures in both the Old and the New Testaments characterize the life of Jesus Christ. As we have seen from the Scriptures, God has ordained that all believers must follow Jesus in His death, experiencing reflections of His sufferings in our own lives, in order that we may also share in His glory. Therefore we also will experience in some measure, as God determines for each of us, what it is like to be a man or woman of sorrows, who is acquainted with grief.

Continuing in Isaiah 53 we read:

Surely our griefs He Himself bore,
And our sorrows He carried;
Yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken,
Smitten of God, and afflicted. (Isaiah 53:4)

Have you, Christian, ever given of yourself, your time, or your financial resources to help someone else who was going through hard times which brought great sorrow into their lives? If so, you have sacrificed something of yourself in order to help carry someone else's sorrows, and in doing so you experience in some measure a share in Jesus' sufferings and sacrifice for the benefit of others.

Notice also in the last part of verse 4 the words "yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted". Many times, when people see others going through great suffering or difficulty in their lives, they may consider that those enduring the difficulty are actually being stricken by God, smitten by Him, and afflicted for some sin in their lives.

Let us be careful not make the same mistake that Job's three friends made when they judged Job's troubles to be the result of sin in his life. They had no idea about the cause of Job's sufferings, and neither did Job. In the final analysis, Job was shown to have a greater understanding of the ways of God than his friends when God rebuked his friends, saying that they had not spoken of Him what is right as His servant Job had done (Job 42:7-9).

If we see a fellow believer suffering some wrenching trial or difficulty, let us not be hasty in judging their situation to be the result of sin in their lives. Without question, sin always results in God's discipline in the life a believer (Hebrews 12:5-13), and in some cases there may be a clear connection between sin in one's life and their present troubles. However, where there is no clear connection to some known sin, it could very well be that what they are enduring is a share in the sufferings of Christ, as God has ordained for them.

Continuing in Isaiah 53 we read:

But He was pierced through for our transgressions,
He was crushed for our iniquities;
The chastening for our well-being fell upon Him,
And by His scourging we are healed.
All of us like sheep have gone astray,
Each of us has turned to his own way;
But the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all
To fall on Him. (Isaiah 53:5-6)

Have you, Christian, ever born the consequences of someone else's wrongdoing? If so, this reflection of the sufferings of Christ is shared in your life, even though in so much smaller measure than the sufferings He endured. It could then be said of you that you were crushed for someone else's iniquity, and that the punishment that brought them well-being was placed upon you.

Continuing further we read:

He was oppressed and He was afflicted,
Yet He did not open His mouth;
Like a lamb that is led to slaughter,
And like a sheep that is silent before its shearers,
So He did not open His mouth.
By oppression and judgment He was taken away;
And as for His generation, who considered
That He was cut off out of the land of the living
For the transgression of my people, to whom the stroke was due?
His grave was assigned with wicked men,
Yet He was with a rich man in His death,
Because He had done no violence,
Nor was there any deceit in His mouth. (Isaiah 53:7-9)

In verse 7 we see that Jesus took the suffering that His Father had ordained for Him, suffering for the transgressions of others, silently and without complaint. This is a virtue that few of us will ever possess. Most of us complain bitterly when undeserved suffering enters our lives. Even when we fail to take it silently and without complaint as Jesus did, we still share in His sufferings when we experience undeserved suffering because of the wrongdoing of others.

In verse 8 we see that Jesus was falsely accused and judged harshly. When we are falsely accused and judged harshly by others, we experience a share in this aspect of His sufferings, even if only in a very small measure when compared to the sufferings He endured.

The latter part of verse 8 speaks of Jesus saying: "And as for His generation, who considered that He was cut off from the land of the living for the transgression of My people". God has ordained that those martyred for the cause of Christ will share in this aspect of His sufferings.

It is also interesting to note in verse 8 the phrase, “And as for His generation”, which speaks of Jesus’ descendants. Jesus never married and had children. It is a great sorrow in the lives of some believers that God keeps marriage out of reach for them. Others marry but never have the children that they very much want to have. This aspect of Christ’s suffering is shared in the lives of those believers who desire a godly marriage and children, but God, according to His own plan and purpose for their lives, withholds these things, choosing rather to lead them in other paths.

Verse 9 again speaks of the unjust treatment that Jesus received, being assigned a grave “with wicked men”. Crucifixion was the punishment given to guilty criminals of that time, and not treatment deserved by the blameless Son of God. Even with all of our faults and shortcomings, when we endure unjust accusation and undeserved suffering, we experience in some measure a share in the sufferings of Christ.

In the following verse we read:

But the Lord was pleased
To crush Him, putting Him to grief;
If He would render Himself as a guilt offering,
He will see His offspring,
He will prolong His days,
And the good pleasure of the Lord will prosper in His hand. (Isaiah 53:10)

In Isaiah 53:10 we see that it was God’s will to “crush” His Son, “putting Him to grief”. When we consider Isaiah 53:10, together with the teaching of John 12:24-26 and Romans 8:17, we can see that it is also God’s will to “crush” us and to “put us to grief”, in some measure, however small when compared to Jesus’ grief and sufferings, bringing about in our lives a share in His sufferings, which God has ordained will be the necessary path to a share in Jesus’ eternal glory.

Concluding this passage from Isaiah 53 we read:

As a result of the anguish of His soul,
He will see it and be satisfied;
By His knowledge the Righteous One,
My Servant, will justify the many,

As He will bear their iniquities.
Therefore, I will allot Him a portion with the great,
And He will divide the booty with the strong;
Because He poured out Himself to death,
And was numbered with the transgressors;
Yet He Himself bore the sin of many,
And interceded for the transgressors. (Isaiah 53:11-12)

These verses speak of the sacrifice that Jesus made of Himself, the sinless Lamb of God who laid down His life for the sins of “many” (verse 12), so that they would be found acceptable in the sight of God. Certainly our death will justify no one in the sight of God, but reflections of Christ’s sufferings experienced in our lives are for us as believers a share in His sufferings, even if only in some small measure.

In verse 11 we read: “As a result of the anguish of His soul, He will see it and be satisfied”. This Scripture reveals to us that Jesus was satisfied when He saw what was accomplished through the sufferings He endured according to His Father’s will; He was satisfied with the “many” who were given to Him by His Father.

As we consider our share in Christ’s sufferings according to our Father’s will for our lives, we can recall from Paul’s teaching that now during this present time, we know and we understand only in part, but the day is coming when we will know and understand fully what God was accomplishing through the sufferings that we endured (1 Corinthians 13:9, 12). In that day, we too will be satisfied, and we will be overjoyed as we share in the glory of our Lord for eternity (1 Peter 4:13).

12.

A Share in the Sufferings of Christ – Part 2

Isaiah 53 gave us insights into the life of the “Man of Sorrows”, and we considered some of the ways in which a share in His sufferings might be manifested in our own lives. There are also other Scriptures that speak of the sufferings Jesus endured.

In John 13:18-30, Jesus told His disciples that one of them was going to betray Him. In verse 18 He said: “I do not speak of all of you. I know the ones I have chosen; but it is that the Scripture may be fulfilled, ‘He who eats My bread has lifted up his heel against Me’” (See also Psalm 41:9).

Jesus was referring to the betrayal of Judas Iscariot, who took thirty pieces of silver to guide a group of Roman soldiers and representatives from the chief priests and Pharisees to Gethsemane where He often met with His disciples, to arrest Him. The arrest is recounted later in John 18:1-11. This betrayal set in motion the events that would lead to His crucifixion.

When we as believers suffer a betrayal of trust, we experience a share in some measure in this aspect of the sufferings of Christ. The betrayal that Jesus suffered would cost Him His life. Even when we suffer a betrayal that costs us only money or reputation, then in some small way we have shared in this aspect of Jesus’ sufferings. Therefore, the suffering of a betrayal and the consequences of that betrayal is yet another way in which a believer might experience a share in Christ’s sufferings.

Mark 14:32-36 recounts Jesus’ agony at Gethsemane just before His arrest. In this passage Jesus said to Peter, James, and John: “My soul is deeply grieved to the point of death; remain here and keep watch.” (Mark 14:34).

Overwhelming sorrow, even sorrow to the point of death, is another aspect of the sufferings of Christ that a believer may also experience at

times. This is sorrow so intense that it brings one to the point that he would rather his life be ended than to continue to bear the weight of his suffering.

In 2 Corinthians 1:8-11, the Apostle Paul revealed that while he was in the province of Asia, he was under pressure that far beyond his ability to endure, and so much so that he despaired even of life itself and having to live on to face such troubles. Through this experience Paul was shown a principle that he in turn would pass on to all of God's people: We are not to rely on our own strength to face the troubles of this life, but instead we are to rely upon God, who is able even to raise the dead.

All believers should be aware that there may be times in our lives when we too will experience overwhelming sorrow, sorrow so profound that we would rather not live any longer than to have to bear the weight of our suffering. In these times we experience some share in the overwhelming sorrow that Jesus experienced in the Garden of Gethsemane. Paul also shared in this aspect of Christ's suffering in his experience in the province of Asia.

When considering the sufferings of Christ as recounted in the Scriptures, we must not overlook the physical suffering and pain that Jesus endured. After Pilate handed Jesus over to be crucified, He was first flogged by the Roman guards. These floggings were so severe that some died just from this beating alone. After that, a crown of thorns was made and pushed down onto His head so that He bled from it also. During all of this He also endured mocking and jeers from the Roman soldiers.

Jesus was then forced to carry His own cross to Calvary where He was to be crucified. Because of the beating He had endured and because of the weight of His cross, He was not able to carry it the whole way. Someone else, Simon of Cyrene, was pressed into service to carry His cross the rest of the way. When Jesus finally arrived at Calvary, He was nailed to the cross instead of being tied to it as others were.

The means of death from hanging on a cross was a slow death from asphyxiation, where the lungs filled with water over a period of hours. When Jesus had been hanging there on the cross for some time, a Roman soldier thrust a spear into His side, and both blood and water ran out. Crucifixion was both a physically painful and a humiliating, degrading way to die.

As believers, suffering affliction or pain in our physical bodies is yet one more way in which we may share in Christ's sufferings. The Apostle Peter wrote: "Therefore, since Christ has suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same purpose, because he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, so as to live the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for the lusts of men, but for the will of God" (1 Peter 4:1-2).

As Jesus was arrested at Gethsemane, we see another way in which He suffered. In Mark 14:48-50 we read that Jesus was confronted by a crowd of Roman soldiers and representatives sent by the Pharisees and chief priests who had come to arrest Him. At this time, we see from the Scripture that His disciples "all left Him and fled." (Mark 14:50).

In this passage we see that Jesus suffered abandonment by those who were closest to Him, those who should have been the ones who stood by Him in His time of distress. In the Gospel of John, just before Jesus was arrested, He told his disciples that they would soon desert Him saying: "Behold, an hour is coming, and has already come, for you to be scattered, each to his own home, and to leave Me alone; and yet I am not alone, because the Father is with Me." (John 16:32). Those closest to Him, those whom He had appointed Apostles, those who had been with Him since the early part of His ministry, those whom He now called friends (John 15:15), forsook Him and left Him to whatever fate was to come next for Him.

Jesus' experience of abandonment was much deeper than any we will experience. From the cross He cried out in a loud voice: "...My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" (Mark 15:34, Psalm 22:1). It is impossible for us to contemplate the depth of abandonment that Jesus experienced as He hung on the cross bearing the punishment due for our sins.

For those of us who believe on His name, we have the promise of God: "I will never desert you, nor will I ever forsake you." (Hebrews 13:5, Deuteronomy 31:6). Even with this promise, in the depths of our sorrow and feelings of desperation when we experience abandonment by those closest to us, those whom we hoped would be there for us in our time in distress, we too may feel like we have been abandoned even by God, but because of His promise we know that He will never leave us or forsake us. In the depths of our abandonment, we are not alone, because our Father is with us (John

6:32). When we experience abandonment by those closest to us, we experience a share in this aspect of the sufferings of Christ.

Further Instruction from the Apostles Peter and Paul

Peter wrote to believers: “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; but to the degree that ***you share the sufferings of Christ***, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of His glory you may rejoice with exultation.” (1 Peter 4:12-13, emphasis added). So Peter also revealed to us that a share in the sufferings of Christ is to be expected in our lives, and something about which we should not be surprised.

As he continued in verse 15, Peter also said that if we suffer, it should not be for wrongdoing, or that which the Bible calls sin. Suffering for wrongdoing is not suffering according to the will of God (1 Peter 4:19). It is abundantly clear throughout the Bible that it is God’s will for His people that we should live a life separated from sin.

If however we do find ourselves at a time and place in life where we are suffering as a consequence of our own sin, we can take comfort from Paul’s teaching in Romans 8:28, where he revealed that ***all things*** God allows to touch our lives as His people will be made to work together for our eternal good, and ***all things*** include God’s painful disciplines, which serve to separate us from our sins. Even in the midst of these disciplines and the losses that often accompany them, God will continue to work in the lives of every believer to bring forth fruit with eternal value.

Regardless of whatever failings may have come before in our lives, let us resolve to repent of our sins and leave them in our past. Let us obey God by doing as Paul exhorted us in Philippians 3:13-14: let us forget what is behind us, and let us diligently strive toward what lies ahead. Let us press on toward the finish line of the race that is our life on this earth, so that we may win the prize of a share in Christ’s eternal glory.

At the end of this passage in 1 Peter 4:12-19, the apostle exhorted us again when he wrote: “Therefore, those also who ***suffer according to the***

will of God shall entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right.” (1 Peter 4:19, emphasis added). Just as we have seen from other passages of Scripture, Peter also revealed to us that a share in the sufferings of Christ is God’s will for each of His people, and he exhorts us to entrust our souls to our loving and faithful God as we share in the sufferings of His Son, obediently continuing to do what is right.

This suffering “according to the will of God” that Peter mentioned is the “death” of the grain of wheat that Jesus spoke about in John 12:24. These sufferings are for us our “Gethsemanes” and our “Calvaries”. They are the places in life where we are called upon to submit to God’s will when it is a hard and painful thing, when we know that all things are possible with Him, and that He could remove our burden if He chose to do so. Such sufferings are for us a share in the cup or the baptism of Jesus’ suffering, which as He taught in Mark 10:35-40, is necessary for a share in His eternal glory and a place of honor in the kingdom of God.

In Summary

In John 12:24-26, Jesus compared His life and the lives of all of those who would follow Him to a grain of wheat, which must fall to the ground and “die” in order to bear fruit. Just as Jesus laid down His will and His life in order to do His Father’s will, so also all of us who serve Him must follow Him in this way, sharing in His sufferings as we “die” to our own will and what we would choose for ourselves in life, and we accept God’s will and the life that He has ordained for us.

Paul also taught us clearly in Romans 8:17 that we as the children of God must share in the sufferings of Christ, in order that we may also share in His glory. The Scriptures reveal to us that God has ordained it will be through our sharing in the sufferings of His Son Jesus Christ that spiritual fruit will be born, which will bring about for us a share in Christ’s eternal glory.

As we can also see from the Scriptures, the sufferings that Jesus endured took many forms. In Isaiah 52:14 we learn that “His appearance was marred more than any man”. He was disfigured, and “many were astonished” at Him.

Continuing in Isaiah 53 we learn that Jesus had “no stately form or majesty that we should look upon Him, nor appearance that we should be attracted to Him.” He was despised and rejected by others. Men had no esteem for Him; they hid their faces from Him. He was “a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief”.

Though He was “crushed for our iniquities”, we wrongly considered Him as one who was stricken and afflicted by God because of His own sin. He bore the punishment due for our wrongdoing, and “by His scourging we are healed”. He was “oppressed and afflicted”, and He unjustly suffered a death due to the wicked, though He had done no wrong.

We learn in Isaiah 53:10 that it was God’s will to “crush” His Son and cause Him to suffer these things. When we consider Isaiah 53:10, together with the teaching from John 12:24-26, Mark 10:35-40, and Romans 8:17, we can see that it is also God’s will to crush us and cause us to suffer, in some measure, bringing about in our lives a share in the sufferings of His Son in order that we may also share in His eternal glory.

From other passages in the Bible, we learn of still more ways in which Jesus suffered. In Matthew 8:20, we see that Jesus had no place to lay His head; He had no home of His own. He was also betrayed by one who was close to Him. He suffered overwhelming sorrow in the Garden of Gethsemane as He submitted Himself to His Father’s will for His life. He suffered exhaustion, and He was unable to bear the weight of His cross the whole way to Calvary. He suffered great pain in His physical body as he was scourged and then crucified according to God’s will, though He had done nothing to deserve it. He suffered abandonment by His closest friends during the time of the greatest trial in His life. As He hung on Calvary’s cross, He also suffered the desolation of feeling that He had been abandoned even by His Father God (Matthew 27:46).

As we consider the many ways in which Jesus suffered during His life on earth, we may be able to see reflections of His sufferings in our own lives. Maybe we have or we will at some point experience being “despised and rejected” by others, through no fault or wrongdoing of our own. Maybe we will suffer the consequences of a betrayal. Maybe we also, as Jesus did, will suffer abandonment by those who are closest to us during a time of great trial in our life. Maybe we have, or we will at some point in our lives,

suffer any other aspect of His sufferings as we have seen revealed in the Scriptures.

With these things in mind, some of us may notice that the sufferings we are enduring are not among those mentioned in the Bible as something that Jesus suffered. As we consider the troubles, hardships, and afflictions that our sovereign God has allowed to affect our own lives, we should understand that the sufferings we endure as we walk in obedience to God, ***whatever form these sufferings may take***, are for us a share in the sufferings of the “Man of Sorrows”, who was Himself familiar with grief (Isaiah 53:3).

As we have seen from the Scriptures before, everything that God allows to touch our lives as His people, even the hard and painful things, will be made to work together for our eternal good and glory together with His Son (Romans 8:28). Paul encouraged us again when he taught that our sufferings in this present life are “producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.” (2 Corinthians 4:17-18. Consider also Romans 8:17-18).

The Christian life is not a matter of having enough “faith” to “believe” God for the things that we want out of life, as some would say. Instead, the mindset and understanding that we should have regarding our Christian faith is reflected in Paul’s exhortation: “***Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus***, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, ***He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.***” (Philippians 2:5-8, emphasis added).

Jesus Christ is our example of what the Christian life is all about. He took the form of a bondservant, and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. As those who have come to faith in Christ, we also are to consider ourselves as bondservants of God, obediently serving Him in the place and the capacity that He has ordained for each of us individually.

God our Father calls upon us to submit ourselves to His will for our lives, as Jesus did. We are called upon to humble ourselves and become

obedient to the point of death, taking up our cross daily to follow Jesus (Luke 9:23-24). This death involves our death to that which the Bible calls sin, and it also involves our being willing to “die to” anything that God may choose to take from us or withhold from us as part of His will for our lives.

We are called upon to die to that which we would choose for ourselves, and as obedient servants, we are to accept the assignments and place of service in life that God has ordained for us. This obedient acceptance of God’s will for our lives is the way that we carry around in our body “the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body.”, as Paul taught us in 2 Corinthians 4:7-11.

Even though these “deaths”, or this share in the sufferings of Christ, is God’s will for each of His people, we are not left without comfort. Once again, we recall the encouragement that Paul gave to us when he said: “For just as the sufferings of Christ are ours in abundance, so also our comfort is abundant through Christ.” (2 Corinthians 1:5).

This comfort that “is abundant through Christ” is provided to us through His grace and strength, which is given to us in a measure sufficient for our every weakness and need in life (2 Corinthians 12:9-10). This comfort is also given to us through the word of God as revealed in the Scriptures, because Jesus Christ Himself is the living Word of God (John 1:1, 14). As we study God’s word, we find many promises of His help, mercy, forgiveness, restoration, and provision for our lives, and we take comfort in knowing that every one of these promises is given through the One who is called Faithful and True (Revelation 19:11-13).

13.

Two Lives, Two Destinies

We may sometimes look around at the things we see happening in the world and wonder why God has ordered His creation the way He has. We see that there are those individuals to whom God has given great wealth, or those to whom God has given some exceptional talent, ability, or opportunities by which they are able to obtain some measure of wealth, prestige, prominence, or power for themselves.

At the same time, we see others who struggle in life. For these the ability to obtain wealth and sometimes even the ability to make ends meet seems to be out of reach. Many of us as believers may look at those who have been given so much of what the world values and esteems highly, and we may find ourselves wondering why God does not give us more of the “good things in life”, so that our burdens might be eased, and so that we could enjoy more of what many would call “the good life”.

An Interesting Interview

Years ago, an interview was conducted by a very well-known individual at the time, who interviewed many of the world’s most prominent and accomplished people. On this occasion he was interviewing one of the world’s wealthiest men. This man was even more interesting to many because his wealth was not inherited. As believers, we understand that the means to obtain this great wealth was ultimately given to this man by God. However, from his perspective, he believed that his wealth was obtained by way of his own abilities and talents, which enabled him to take advantage of some chance opportunities that came his way.

During the interview, the host put the question to this very wealthy and accomplished man, asking him if he believed in God. As he pondered the question, looking slightly off to the right and just above the host who

was seated opposite from him, he replied that he was not sure if there is a God. He went on to say that there might be a God, but he was not really sure. Once again, fixing his gaze back on the host conducting the interview, he said that he tried to focus on things that he did know and understand, rather than on things he did not know.

This was a very interesting reply, and one that appeared to be candid, straightforward, and honest. Although God had given great material wealth to this man, in his own mind he did not even know whether God exists or not. In this present life he is tremendously wealthy, but from the perspective of the eternal, one who does not know God is a pauper. What an irony to contemplate.

A Contrary View of Blessing

In Luke 6:20-26 Jesus gave a teaching characterizing the lives of His disciples, whom He proclaimed to be those who are truly blessed by God. He spoke of the troubles they would endure, and He contrasted their lives with others who experienced many good things in life. In this passage we see that God's view of blessing is one that is very much contrary to the views and understanding of men. In Luke 16 Jesus gave us another very similar teaching. In this passage we read:

“Now there was a rich man, and he habitually dressed in purple and fine linen, joyously living in splendor every day. And a poor man named Lazarus was laid at his gate, covered with sores, and longing to be fed with the crumbs which were falling from the rich man's table; besides, even the dogs were coming and licking his sores. Now the poor man died and was carried away by the angels to Abraham's bosom; and the rich man also died and was buried. In Hades he lifted up his eyes, being in torment, and saw Abraham far away and Lazarus in his bosom. And he cried out and said, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus so that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool off my tongue, for I am in agony in this flame.' But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that during your life you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus bad things; but now he is being comforted here, and you are in agony. And besides all this, between us and you there is a great chasm fixed, so that those who wish to come over from here to you

will not be able, and that none may cross over from there to us.” (Luke 16:19-26)

How contrary this scenario is to the world’s thinking and understanding. Most people would have considered the rich man to be blessed by God because of the many advantages he enjoyed in life, while they considered Lazarus to be under some sort of curse because of the afflictions and poverty he endured.

The Scripture says that Lazarus was laid at the rich man’s gate, and so it is apparent that he was not even able to walk, or to otherwise get around on his own. He was dependent upon others to take him wherever he needed to go. Since he was laid at the rich man’s gate to beg, “longing to be fed with the crumbs which were falling from the rich man’s table”, it is again apparent that the extent of his infirmities was so severe that he was not able to work at anything by which he could have earned money to provide for himself. Added to these infirmities he was also “covered with sores”, which the dogs came and licked. One could imagine that he seemed repulsive to all who saw him.

The rich man by contrast lived a life filled with “good things” in that he lived in luxury every day, having received many benefits in life. By the world’s way of thinking, many would consider the “good things” enjoyed by the rich man to be evidence of God’s acceptance of him and His approval of the life he lived, but such was not the case.

When the rich man saw Lazarus laid there by his gate, he may have wondered what this poor beggar had done to deserve such a miserable fate. At the same time, he may have imagined that God must be pleased with him because of the many material blessings he enjoyed. In the final analysis however, it was the poor, miserable, and afflicted beggar Lazarus who was accepted by God, and it was the rich man, whom most would have considered to be blessed by God, who was ultimately rejected by Him.

Our Portion is Not in this Life

As believers, our portion is not in this life. Our portion is an inheritance in Heaven that will last forever. We may wonder why God has

ordered and ordained things in His creation the way He has, and we may very much wish that He had done things differently. However, the ways and wisdom of God are beyond man's understanding, as the Bible teaches us in passages such as Romans 11:33, Ecclesiastes 8:16-17, and Ecclesiastes 11:5.

Since God in His wisdom has ordained that we must share in Christ's sufferings now, during our present lives, in order that we may also share in His glory in Heaven (John 12:24-26, Romans 8:17), we as God's people may well find ourselves among those who are poor, who hunger, and who weep now (Luke 6:20-21). We can expect that we will be hated, rejected, and excluded by those of the world who do not know God (Luke 6:22).

We could also expect that our lives may be more characterized by having received our "bad things", rather than the many "good things" received by the rich man in Jesus' parable (Luke 16:25). When we consider the life of the rich man and the many material blessings he enjoyed in his life, let us also consider Psalm 17 where David prayed:

...Deliver my soul from the wicked with Your sword,
From men with Your hand, O Lord,
From men of the world, whose portion is in this life,
And whose belly You fill with Your treasure... (Psalm 17:13-14).

We as believers are not among those whose portion and reward are in this life. Rather, we are among those who will weep and mourn in this life, while those who belong to the world will rejoice, as Jesus taught us in John 16:20-22. Now is our time of mourning as we share in the sufferings of Christ, but the day is coming for every believer when we will see Him face to face (1 Corinthians 13:12), and then no one will ever take away our joy again. At that time, we will fully understand what God was accomplishing through all the sufferings we endured. Until that day, God requires of us that we walk by faith, and not by the sight of that which can be seen and fully understood (2 Corinthians 5:7).

In Conclusion

In Jesus' parable of the rich man and the beggar Lazarus, we are presented with a stark contrast in two very different lives lived, and we have

what will seem to be a complete contradiction in the understanding of those of this world. On the one hand we have the rich man, a winner in the eyes of the world, and one whom the world would consider to be blessed by God, enjoying many luxuries and all of the benefits that material wealth can bring. On the other hand we have the beggar Lazarus, a loser in the eyes of the world, and one whom the world might consider to be under some sort of curse by God. He suffered great affliction in his body, and we would surely consider him as one who was poor, hungry, and who wept during his life (Luke 6:20-21).

In His teaching Jesus said: “Now the poor man died and was carried away by the angels to Abraham’s bosom; and the rich man also died and was buried.” (Luke 16:22). From these words we might assume that Lazarus was never healed of his affliction, and that he remained a poor man until the day he died.

Ironically in the understanding of many, we see in this parable that the rich man was rejected by God, despite the many temporal blessings he enjoyed in life. At the same time, we see that the poor, miserable, afflicted beggar Lazarus was known by God and accepted by Him. Let us all be mindful of these things when we encounter the afflicted during the course of our lives. When we come face to face with them, we may be looking at our brother or sister in the Lord. Let us also be mindful of these things when affliction comes into our own lives.

The Scriptures teach us that as believers we should not make valuations in our lives and assess the blessing of God in the same way that the world does. All of the valuations and ways of the world are contrary to the ways of God, as Jesus taught us when He said: “...that which is highly esteemed among men is detestable in the sight of God.” (Luke 16:15).

14.

The Righteous and the Wicked

There are several passages in the Bible that contrast the lives of the righteous and the wicked. Within these passages we learn that the wicked often enjoy relative ease and prosperity in their lives, but the righteous often endure troubles and hardship, even as they walk in obedience to the Lord.

In the midst of his sufferings, Job, in one of his rebuttals to the theology of his three friends, voiced his observations regarding the prosperity that he saw in the lives of the wicked. Job's observations are consistent with the observations that we see in Psalm 73, and with teachings in several New Testament passages as well.

Lessons from Job 21 and Psalm 73

Job is described in the Bible as “blameless” and “upright”, and as a man who feared God and turned away from evil.” (Job 1:1, 1:8, 2:3). As recorded in Job 21:7-18, we see that in the depth of sufferings and losses that had come upon him through no fault or wrongdoing of his own, Job questioned why the wicked prospered and lived to grow old, increasing in power and wealth. He observed that their homes were free from fear and threatening circumstances. He also observed that God's rod of correction did not come upon them, and that both they and their children prospered and enjoyed life.

Job observed that the wicked, with all of the abundance they enjoyed, had no place for God in their lives, and they perceived nothing to be gained by praying to Him. Although he questioned why God had given them so much in terms of material prosperity and benefits in this life, Job understood what the wicked did not: the prosperity they enjoyed was ultimately not something that they had managed to achieve for themselves, but it was given to them by God.

Job said regarding the prosperity of the wicked: “Behold, their prosperity is not in their hand; The counsel of the wicked is far from me.” (Job 21:16). Job was completely uninterested in the counsel of the wicked and whatever advice they may give because he knew that they have no wisdom to offer. He understood that worldly prosperity is often given to the wicked, but it is not given to them because God accepts them, approves of their actions, or is pleased with them.

In Psalm 73, we see that the psalmist’s observations are very similar to Job’s. He struggled when he saw the relative ease and prosperity in the lives of the wicked, compared to the troubles and afflictions of his own life.

He had become disillusioned, and his faith had nearly faltered because he envied the wicked when he saw that they had good health and strong bodies, and they were free of many of the burdens and afflictions that are common among men. Because of their prosperity and freedom from affliction, he observed that they became prideful, arrogant, callous, and conceited, speaking with malice and threatening oppression.

In verse 9, the psalmist observed that in the midst of their evil ways, the wicked still claimed to serve God and claimed that Heaven would be their eternal destiny. They were most likely convinced that their sinful courses of action were indeed the right things to do. At the same time, they probably would have seen their prosperity and good fortune as evidence of God’s approval of them and the things they do.

As he continued with his observations of the lives of the wicked, the psalmist wrote: “Therefore his people return to this place, and waters of abundance are drunk by them.” (Psalm 73:10). When others of the world see the prosperity of the wicked and how well things are going for them in life, they will turn to them for advice and counsel about how they managed to obtain all of these benefits for themselves.

In verse 12 we see that the psalmist had concluded that the wicked always seem to be at ease and carefree, and they always seem to be getting even wealthier. In the next verse, we see that in his disillusionment he wondered what use there was in obeying God’s commands, since he saw that the wicked are the ones who so often prosper. However, in verse 15 he wrote that if he had voiced his opinion that it was useless to keep one’s heart pure,

walking in obedience to the Lord, he “would have betrayed” God’s children, causing them to stumble by speaking falsely about Him.

Though the psalmist was at first grieved and embittered when he saw the prosperity of the wicked, God did not leave him in the barrenness of this bitter disillusionment. God gave him the understanding that the prosperity of the wicked is only for a time, and their final destiny will be ruin and destruction, being “utterly swept away by sudden terrors” (Psalm 73:19).

An Example of Continuity in the Teachings of the Bible

Job and the author of Psalm 73 both observed the prosperity enjoyed by the wicked and the hardships faced by those who obey the Lord, and their observations are consistent with teachings given by Jesus centuries later. In John 16:20-22, Jesus taught us as His disciples that now during this present life we will weep and mourn, while those of the world rejoice. He then encouraged us when He said that although now is our time of grief, the day will come when we will see Him face to face, and at that time all of our grief will turn to joy.

When we consider Psalm 73 in the light of John 16:20-22, we see that the psalmist grieved when he saw the prosperity and relative ease of the lives of the wicked, in contrast to the hardships of his own life. He watched in the midst of his own mourning as the wicked experienced their prosperity and rejoiced.

In Luke 6:20-26, Jesus taught along similar lines when He pronounced woes upon those of the world who enjoyed their abundance and consolations in this life, and He pronounced blessings upon His disciples who were poor, who mourned, and who hungered during this present life. In Luke 16:19-31 we see yet another consistent teaching. In this passage Jesus taught that the rich man who enjoyed a life of luxury was ultimately rejected by God, while the poor, afflicted beggar Lazarus was ultimately accepted by God and comforted.

The consistency of the teaching in these passages is only one example among many in the Bible of several different passages of Scripture being in complete harmony and agreement with one another on a particular subject.

When we interpret Scripture in the light of other Scriptures, and the teachings and understanding that we derive from our interpretations are in no way contradicted by other teachings in the Scriptures, then we can be confident that we have correctly handled the word of truth, as Paul exhorted Timothy (2 Timothy 2:15).

Biblical interpretations that are not contradicted by other passages of Scripture can be accepted as God's word to us on a particular subject, as given through several different authors of various books of the Bible. However, if we encounter contradiction and confusion in our interpretation, then we can be sure that there is some degree of misunderstanding in our interpretation. We should then ask God to reveal His truth to us, which He will do in His time for all believers.

The Holy Bible is God's consistent revelation given over the centuries of His plan for the salvation of men through faith in Jesus Christ, and through Him alone. The Scriptures are God's directives, precepts, and commands on how man should conduct himself during his time here on earth, and they provide insights into some of the ways of God.

The Scriptures also give us understanding and comfort in perplexing times of trial, just as the psalmist received comfort when God revealed to him that his obedience to Him was not in vain, and that the prosperity he saw in the lives of the wicked was only temporary. He was given the understanding that the final destiny of the wicked was to be destruction and ruin. But for him, God would guide him through this life with His counsel, and afterward take him home to glory (Psalm 73:14).

Other Teachings from Jesus and James

Another passage that demonstrates the contrast between the righteous and the wicked is Jesus' teaching on the sheep and the goats, which is given to us in Matthew 25:31-46. In this passage Jesus used the analogy of a shepherd separating the sheep from the goats in a flock, in order to describe the way that He will separate those who are blessed by His Father from the wicked.

Jesus characterized those who are blessed by God as His sheep, and He said that their inheritance and place in God's kingdom has been prepared for them since the creation of the world. Jesus' teaching here brings to mind Ephesians 1:4, where Paul taught that we as God's people were chosen by Him before the world was created to be holy and blameless before Him.

Continuing in this passage of Matthew 25, Jesus taught about the good works that will be manifested in our lives as His blessed people. These works will demonstrate a love for our fellow believers and will include such things as giving of the resources that God has given to us so that others in the Body of Christ who are in need may be helped. Other examples of these works of love that Jesus mentioned are visiting brothers who are in prison or looking after other believers who may be sick or infirm in some way.

When we do good works like these, then we also give something of our lives as a "ransom" for those we help, in that we are sacrificing something of ourselves for the benefit of other believers (Mark 10:45). As we do so, we will, even if only in some small way, share in the suffering and sacrifice that Jesus endured for the sake of His people (Romans 8:17).

Jesus continued in this passage of Matthew 25, teaching that His sheep will all give evidence of their genuine faith by the works of love that will be manifested in their lives. And He said that just as we have shown love, mercy, and compassion to the least of His brethren and ours, we have also done the same for Him. Jesus proclaimed that the destiny of all His sheep will be eternal life.

In contrast to the good works that will be manifested in the lives of His sheep, Jesus described the deeds of the wicked, whom He symbolized as goats. Works of love that are demonstrated in the lives of His sheep are absent from their lives. Jesus said that just as they refuse to show love, mercy, and compassion toward the least of His brethren, they have also done the same to Him.

Even though they may claim to be Christians (Matthew 7:15-23), by their works they demonstrate that the faith they claim to have is not genuine. Jesus proclaimed that their ultimate destiny will be eternal punishment and separation from God.

What we learn from Jesus' teaching on the sheep and the goats is that a genuine faith is going to manifest itself by actions; it is going to be evidenced by what one does – by his works. Once again, there is another passage of Scripture that provides instruction for us along these same lines. This passage is in the letter of James, and perhaps James recalled Jesus' teaching on the sheep and the goats when he gave us this instruction. James taught that regardless of one's claim to have faith in Christ, if their claimed faith is not manifested by action taken that will meet the needs of a brother or sister in Christ who is lacking the necessities of life, when one has the means to meet the need, then their claimed faith is dead (James 2:14-17).

Jesus and James both taught the same truth: a genuine faith will always be accompanied by good works, which demonstrate love for other believers. These good works are the evidence that our faith is real. Jesus said, "By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another." (John 13:35).

Jesus' teaching in Matthew 7:15-23 is yet another passage that contrasts the lives of the righteous and the wicked, and His teaching here is also consistent with His teaching on the sheep and the goats. In this passage Jesus taught that good fruit will be born in the lives of believers, in contrast to the bad fruit that will be born in the lives of the wicked. He concluded by saying that that not everyone who calls Him Lord, or claims to be a Christian, will enter the kingdom of Heaven, but only those who do the will of God the Father. Jesus taught that many of the wicked will acknowledge Him as Lord, and even claim to have done many miraculous deeds in His name, but in the end He will tell them that He never knew them, and He will command them to depart from Him (Matthew 7:21-23).

Those however whose faith is proven to be genuine by the good works they do will one day hear the words of their Lord and Savior saying:

"Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry, and you gave Me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me something to drink; I was a stranger, and you invited Me in; naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me.".... "Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me." (Matthew 25:34-36, 40).

15.

A Place of Honor in the Kingdom of God

There may have been times when we wondered who will have the places of highest honor in Heaven, and what it is required of those who will be numbered among the greatest in the Kingdom of God. There are several Scriptures that give us insights and answers to these questions.

Jesus' Teaching in Mark 10

In Mark 10, James and John came to Jesus asking a favor of Him. In this passage we read:

James and John, the two sons of Zebedee, came up to Jesus, saying, "Teacher, we want You to do for us whatever we ask of You." And He said to them, "What do you want Me to do for you?" They said to Him, "Grant that we may sit, one on Your right and one on Your left, in Your glory." But Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?" They said to Him, "We are able." And Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink you shall drink; and you shall be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized. But to sit on My right or on My left, this is not Mine to give; but it is for those for whom it has been prepared." (Mark 10:35-40)

When James and John asked Jesus that one of them would sit at His right hand and the other at His left in His glory, they were in fact asking to have the places of highest honor in Heaven that any servant of Christ could have, being seated next to Jesus himself. Jesus answered them by saying that they did not know what they were asking. He then began to explain what is involved and what is required of those who will be considered great in the kingdom of God by putting this question to them: "Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?"

The “cup” that Jesus drank, or the “baptism” with which He was baptized, are metaphors that Jesus used to symbolize the sufferings He would endure in order to fulfill His Father’s will and purpose for His life. When Jesus replied to the request of James and John, He was teaching them that those who would be great in the kingdom of Heaven must share in His sufferings in order to share in His eternal glory. Jesus’ teaching here in Mark 10:35-40 is consistent with teachings that we have considered in depth previously when we studied John 12:24-26 and Romans 8:17.

After Jesus asked James and John if they were able to drink from His cup, or be baptized with His baptism, they answered Him saying that they could. Even though at that time they did not understand what was involved and what was required of them for their request to be granted, they were willing. And even though Jesus knew they did not yet understand these things, still He granted their request for a place of glory and honor in Heaven when He replied to them: “The cup that I drink you shall drink; and you shall be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized. But to sit on My right or on My left, this is not Mine to give; but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.” (Mark 10:39-40).

In addition to granting their request for a place of honor and glory in Heaven through their sharing in His sufferings, Jesus at the same time taught them that the places of highest honor in Heaven belong to those “for whom it has been prepared”. In other words, it is determined by the plan and purpose of our sovereign God who will occupy those places of highest honor.

A point to be made again is that even though Jesus told James and John that the places in Heaven at His right hand and His left were not for Him to grant, but for the Father, He did grant their request for a place of honor in the kingdom of God. The lesson here for all of us as believers is that when we bring such requests to God in prayer, it is the Spirit of God who motivates such prayers, and we should understand that our request for a place of honor in God’s kingdom will be answered and granted as He has ordained for each of us. We should also understand that in granting our request, we as well will be required to drink from the cup or be baptized with the baptism of the Jesus’ sufferings, as He taught us in this passage.

Mark 10 continues with Jesus contrasting those who are great in the world with those who will be great in the kingdom of God, as we read beginning in verse 42:

Calling them to Himself, Jesus said to them, “You know that those who are recognized as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them; and their great men exercise authority over them. But it is not this way among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant; and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.” (Mark 10:42-45)

Greatness in the kingdom of God will be evaluated in a completely different way than greatness in the world. By the world’s standards, servants are numbered among the least, taking their orders from those who exercise authority over them. However in the kingdom of God, those who serve will be numbered among the greatest.

Paul taught in Philippians 2 that our attitude should be the same as the attitude Jesus had during His life on earth. He took the very nature of a servant, being obedient to God to the point of death, even the humiliating death of crucifixion where He was stripped, beaten, and nailed to a cross all according to the will of God, in order to accomplish for His people what they could not accomplish for themselves: the forgiveness of their sins and salvation (Matthew 1:21).

Just as Jesus did not come to be served, but to serve others and “to give His life as a ransom for many”, and just as He took the form of a servant, humbling Himself and becoming obedient to the point of death, so we also as His followers are called upon to humble ourselves in submission and obedience to the word of God, and some of us will be called upon to do so even to the point of physical death. We will all have our share in the sufferings of Christ according to God’s plan and purpose for each of our lives individually.

When we strive to obey God throughout our lifetime regardless of what it may cost us, and regardless of what we may have to give up in temporal gratification in order to be obedient, then we also have humbled ourselves by being obedient to God’s word, as we deny ourselves or “die to” (Luke 9:23) anything we may desire that would involve sin. Whatever

hardship that God allows to touch our lives, and whatever temptation to violate the principles in the Bible that we may experience, when we remain obedient to His word, then we also have taken the very nature of a servant, putting His will above our own.

Just as Jesus came to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many, so we also, even if in some very small measure, will be called upon to give our lives as a “ransom” so to speak for others. For example, we may give up some of the financial resources that God has given to us so that someone else may benefit from our sacrifice. We may also be called upon to give up some of our time in an endeavor that benefits others, when we could have spent that time doing something to benefit ourselves.

Giving of ourselves to serve others, even in some very small measure when compared to Jesus’ sacrifice at Calvary, is for us a share in His sufferings and sacrifice, in that we too have given something of ourselves as a “ransom” for someone else so that they may benefit from our sacrifice. Such sacrifices are a manifestation of the mercy and love that will always accompany a genuine faith in Christ.

Other Insights from God’s Word

From looking at the lives of God’s servants as recorded in the Scriptures, we see that greatness in the kingdom of God is not often accompanied by wealth, prestige, worldly power, or any of the other things prized and valued by the world. Such things were not possessed by Jesus during His life on earth, nor is there any mention of the apostles or their co-workers possessing these things. Jesus did not even possess a home of His own (Luke 9:58).

Jesus also taught in Luke 16 that we as His servants cannot serve two masters; we cannot serve both God and money. He then continued in this same passage to teach that the things which are highly esteemed among men are an abomination in the sight of God (Luke 16:13-15). Jesus taught us that the things which are highly valued among men of this world: material wealth, worldly power, prestige, position, prominence, worldly wisdom or ability, all of these things are detestable in God’s sight.

The Apostle John also exhorted us as believers when he wrote: “Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world. The world is passing away, and also its lusts; but the one who does the will of God lives forever.” (1 John 2:15-17).

James wrote in his epistle: “But the brother of humble circumstances is to glory in his high position; and the rich man is to glory in his humiliation, because like flowering grass he will pass away.” (James 1:9-10). James gave us an interesting revelation in these verses as he contrasted the poor believer in humble circumstances, and the rich believer.

He taught that the poor believer living in humble circumstances should “glory” or take pride in the high position that God has chosen for him in His kingdom. At the same time, he taught that the believer who is rich in this present life should “glory in his humiliation”, which means he should take pride in the humble position that God has assigned for him in His kingdom.

For poor believers living in humble circumstances, there are often many struggles, concerns, and difficulties that will drive them to God in prayer. There is often a greater realization in the life of a believer in humble circumstances of experiencing what it is like to be a man or woman of sorrows, who is acquainted with suffering and grief (Isaiah 53:3). The hardships experienced in the lives of believers living in humble circumstances bring about a greater share in Jesus’ sufferings, which will bring about a greater share in His glory, as God has assigned and prepared a place for each of us (Mark 10:40, James 1:9-10).

Jesus’ Teaching in Matthew 18

In Matthew 18, Jesus’ disciples asked Him who would be considered the greatest in the kingdom of Heaven. Jesus began His answer to their question by calling a little child over to them, and He had the child stand among them. Then He taught His disciples that unless they were converted and became like children, they would by no means enter the kingdom of Heaven. (Jesus here referred to being born again, not in the natural way, but

being born again by the Spirit of God, which is necessary for anyone to enter God's kingdom). Jesus then said to His disciples that whoever humbled themselves like the little child standing in front of them would be counted among the greatest in the kingdom of Heaven (Matthew 18:1-4).

What are the attributes of humility demonstrated by that little child, which one must possess in order to make them great in the kingdom of Heaven? The little child that Jesus called over to them *obeyed* Him, and he did what he was told to do when Jesus called to him. He also showed that he *trusted* Jesus when he obeyed and came to Him. Another attribute of humility common to little children is that they are dependent upon their parents for everything they need to sustain their lives.

God, as He works out His sovereign plan for our lives, may bring us to places where we realize that we have no choice but to cast ourselves upon His mercy, waiting for His provision and sustenance for our lives. Such conditions are often experienced by poor believers living in "humble circumstances", and again as James taught us, those believers who find themselves living in humble circumstances should "glory" or take pride in the "high position" that God has assigned for them in His kingdom.

In Summary

From the Scriptures that we have studied here, an understanding of who will realize a place of honor or greatness in the kingdom of God comes into focus. As Jesus taught in Mark 10, those who desire to be great will, as all believers must do in some measure, drink from the cup or be baptized with the baptism of His sufferings.

Jesus also taught that those who will be great in the kingdom of God will not be numbered among those who are great in this world, but among those who serve. They must do in some measure as He did, which is to say that they must serve by giving of themselves "as a ransom" for the sake of others, so that others may be benefited from their sacrifice.

Jesus again spoke of those who would be the greatest in the kingdom of Heaven as we see recorded in Matthew 18. He taught that those who humble themselves like a little child are among the greatest in the kingdom

of Heaven. These believers have been brought to the place where they realize their complete dependence upon Him; they trust in Him for their every need, and they obey Him.

James also gave us insight about those who would be among the greatest in God's kingdom. James taught that poor believers who find themselves living in "humble circumstances" should take pride in their high position in the kingdom of God.

Our God is sovereign over His creation, and He has ordained all of our days and all of the events and circumstances of our lives (Psalm 139:16). If God has placed us in humble circumstances, perhaps in situations and conditions in life where we find ourselves frequently before Him in prayer asking for His help and sustenance, then as James revealed, we have been given a "high position" in God's kingdom. James also said that we should "take pride" in this high position that God has assigned for us.

When sufferings and hardships of various kinds come into our lives as we are endeavoring to walk in obedience to God's word, let us understand that these things are for us a portion of the cup or baptism of sufferings that Jesus endured. Let us also understand that God has ordained that such things are necessary for a measure of greatness in His kingdom.

We have been assured through God's word that everything He allows to touch our lives is working together for our good and for our eternal glory. With this insight from the Scriptures, we can begin to understand why we are exhorted to give thanks to God in all of the circumstances of our lives. This thanksgiving reflects a trust in Him and all that He has promised in His word (Romans 8:28, 1 Thessalonians 5:18).

The circumstances of our lives, and the giving of thanks to God in the midst of these circumstances because of the good that He is bringing from them, are both God's will for us as His people. Drinking from the cup or being baptized with the baptism of Jesus' sufferings is God's will for each of us as believers, and these sufferings will be experienced during the course of our lives in the measure that God has determined for each of us. The Bible teaches us that God has ordained it will be through these sufferings that we will realize a share in Christ's eternal glory, and a place of honor in the kingdom of God.

16.

The Testing of Our Faith

In the Apostle Peter's first letter, he addressed God's elect, "...who are chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, by the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to obey Jesus Christ and be sprinkled with His blood..." (1 Peter 1:1-2). Peter then praised God for the great mercy He showed to us when He gave us new birth through Christ's resurrection from the dead, and with this new birth, an inheritance in Heaven "which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away". Peter continued saying: "In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, so that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ." (1 Peter 1:6-7).

Through whatever trials God has ordained for us during the course of our lives, we will ultimately be made to stand by God's power, and not our own. Our preservation in the faith will not come about through our own determination or our own perceived personal loyalty and dedication to the cause of Christ. Even if we fail during some time of great trial in our life, as happened in the life of Peter, Jesus is coming back for us, just as He did for Peter. What we fail to do in our own power, God will bring about in our lives by His power at work in us.

This preservation in our faith, or what is sometimes referred to as the "perseverance of the saints", is something that we will begin to discuss here, and we will discuss this subject in much greater detail later in this book. As Peter said, we have received an inheritance that is imperishable and undefiled; it will not fade away. Those of us who have come to faith in Christ will all be kept safe and made to persevere in our faith by the power of God, and this perseverance will demonstrate and prove that the faith we profess to have is genuine.

The Temptation of Jesus in the Wilderness

In Matthew 4:1-11 we find the account of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. The Scripture tells us that Jesus was led by the Spirit of God into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. After He had fasted forty days and nights, He was hungry, and this is when the tempter came to Him with his deceptions, which included twisting the meaning of Scriptures in an attempt to coerce Him into transgressing the word of God.

The devil's first two temptations are a type of brazen and arrogant challenge in which he is essentially saying to Jesus that if He really is the Son of God, then He should prove it. First, he said to Jesus that if He really is the Son of God, then He should command the stones before Him to become bread. Jesus responded to this first temptation with a Scripture from Deuteronomy 8:3, when He said: "It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God.'" (Matthew 4:4).

In his second temptation, the devil cleverly tried to use Scripture himself in an attempt to justify his challenge to Jesus. He taunted Jesus by saying that if He really is the Son of God, then He should throw Himself down off of the high place where they were, because the Scripture says: "He will command his angels concerning You, and on their hands they will bear You up, So that you will not strike Your foot against a stone." (Psalm 91:11-12). Jesus answered this second temptation of the devil, this time quoting Deuteronomy 6:16: "On the other hand, it is written, 'You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.'" (Matthew 4:7).

Finally, in his third temptation, the devil used a false promise, an outright lie, to tempt Jesus when he promised to give Him all the kingdoms of the world if He would bow down to worship him. Again, Jesus met the devil's temptation with Scripture, this time from Deuteronomy 6:13 when He said: "Go, Satan! For it is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God, and serve Him only.'" (Matthew 4:10). Though the devil promised Jesus the kingdoms of the world in this third temptation, they were not his to give, and it was not in his power to give them, because as God's word tells us in Psalm 24:1: "The earth is the Lord's, and all it contains, the world, and those who dwell in it."

As believers, there will be times in our lives when we will be led, as Jesus was, by the Spirit of the Lord into a “wilderness” of our own difficult and trying circumstances, where we also will be tempted to transgress God’s word. Our “wildernesses”, or the places and circumstances in which our faith is tested, will take different forms, and manifest themselves in different ways. They will be harsh and barren places in life where we will be tempted to transgress God’s word as a way out of our painful and trying conditions, just as Jesus also was tempted.

The devil will often bring temptation to us in times like these, when we are more vulnerable. We may be hungering for some gratification that God has withheld from us, according to His sovereign plan and purpose for our lives. At such times the devil may come to us with all kinds of reasons why we, under the circumstances, are entitled to obtain what we want for ourselves, even if it means transgressing the word of God.

During these times, our response to temptation should be the same as Jesus’ response to His temptations: we are to stand fast upon the truth of the word of God, being obedient to His commands, and using the instruction we have from the Scriptures to meet every argument and enticement of the devil. Sometimes these enticements may even come by the twisting of a passage of Scripture in an attempt to justify some sinful course of action, just as the devil tried with Jesus during His temptation in the wilderness.

In the same way that the devil twisted the Scriptures in his attempt to deceive Jesus, false teachers will also twist the Scriptures, isolating them from the context of the passage in which they are found, or isolating them from the rest of the Scriptures as a whole, in an attempt to make them say something that they want them to say. These messages are usually very appealing, and people want to believe they are true, but these false teachings are in fact inconsistent with and even contradicted by other Scriptures.

The motive of the false teacher in bringing such messages is usually financial gain, as Paul wrote to Timothy (1 Timothy 6:3-5), and as Peter instructed us in his second epistle (2 Peter 2:1-3, 13-14). The origin of these false teachings is the devil, whose servants masquerade as servants of righteousness (2 Corinthians 11:14-15), but in reality they have been taken captive by him to do his will (2 Timothy 2:26).

Knowing that temptations may come our way through false teachings, let us understand that we are to hold firmly to the truth of the word of God during our time of trial and testing. Let us be wary of the false teacher who twists or isolates Scripture passages in order to formulate his own doctrines, by which he claims to have insights from the Scriptures as to how we can obtain the things we desire for ourselves in life. Let us also be wary of the devil's deceptions and the twisted reasoning that he may present to us during a time of hardship in our lives, in an attempt to get us to transgress God's word.

Our sovereign and loving God directs our steps, and we should understand that sometimes we may be led by the Spirit, as Jesus was, into a barren "wilderness" of our own troubling circumstances, where we too will be tempted, and our faith will be tested. In such times we share in this aspect of the sufferings of Christ, and as we have seen from the Scriptures before, God has ordained that our share in the sufferings of His Son will achieve for us a share in His eternal glory.

The Apostle Peter is Tested

Peter knew first-hand about the trials that would come our way as believers. God allowed Peter's trial and failure, and He saw to it that they were recorded in the Scriptures so that all believers who would later read of them would take heart and know that He will never abandon us.

Just as Satan was given power to wreak havoc in Job's life for a time, he also wanted to try Peter to see if he could make him deny the Lord. Jesus said to Peter: "Simon, Simon, behold, Satan has demanded permission to sift you like wheat; but I have prayed for you, that your faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned again, strengthen your brothers." (Luke 22:31-32).

Jesus knew that such trials are a part of God's will for the lives of His people. Therefore He encouraged Peter by telling him that He had already prayed for him, that his faith would not fail. Peter replied to Jesus saying that he was ready to go to prison and even to death with Him. Jesus then answered Peter: "...I say to you, Peter, the rooster will not crow today until you have denied three times that you know Me." (Luke 22:34).

At this point in the Gospel account, Jesus knew that He would soon face death by crucifixion, and He went up to the Mount of Olives where He prayed to His Father. He knew that all things were possible for God, and He asked that the cup He was about to drink might be taken away from Him. Nevertheless, He prayed that His Father's will would be done and not His own.

Soon afterward, Judas appeared with a crowd that included the chief priests, the officers of the temple guard, and the elders, and he betrayed Jesus to the soldiers with a kiss. Knowing which one Jesus was, the guards proceeded to arrest Him. Peter then drew his sword and cut off the ear of the High Priest's servant.

Jesus put a stop to this violent response; He touched the servant's ear and healed him. Jesus then said to the crowd that every day He was with them in the temple courts, and no one laid a hand on him. Then He told them that this was their hour, the hour when darkness would reign.

The answer to Jesus' prayer that His cup of suffering might be taken away from Him was now moving forward rapidly with events. It was indeed God's will that He die on Calvary's cross to become the propitiation for the sins of His people, obtaining forgiveness and reconciliation to God for all of those who believe on His Name.

One account of Peter's denial of Jesus is given in Luke 22:54-62. After the guards arrested Jesus, they took Him to the house of the high priest. Peter followed them at a distance. Those in the crowd who were there when Jesus was arrested sat down in front of a fire in the courtyard to warm themselves, and Peter also sat down with them. A servant girl noticed Peter by the light of the fire, and she said that he was with Jesus at the time of His arrest. Peter denied this charge and claimed that he did not know Jesus.

A short time later someone else recognized Peter and said that he was one of Jesus' disciples, and again Peter denied it. Then an hour or so later another man also noticed Peter and said to him that surely he was with Jesus, because he recognized Peter's speech as being Galilean. Peter emphatically denied this charge also, and as he was voicing his third denial of Jesus, he heard the rooster crow. At this point Peter remembered that Jesus had told

him before the rooster crowed that day, he would deny Him three times, and he “went out and wept bitterly” (Luke 22:62).

It comes as no surprise that Peter’s denial happened exactly as Jesus had predicted. When Peter realized what he had done, he wept bitterly over his denial and abandonment of his Lord and Savior. This failure must have shaken his faith severely, because he was with Jesus when He said: “everyone who confesses Me before men, the Son of Man will confess him also before the angels of God; but he who denies Me before men will be denied before the angels of God.” (Luke 12:8-9).

Peter had his chance to stand with Jesus in His time of trial, and to do exactly as he said he would do, which was to go with Jesus to prison and to death if need be (Luke 22:33), but when his testing came, and it was time for him to do just that, he failed miserably. Not only did Peter flee when the guards arrested Jesus (Mark 14:50), but he later denied that he even knew Jesus at all. Not only did he deny that he knew Jesus once, but he denied Him three times. Any illusions that Peter had of his own great love, loyalty, and devotion to the Lord, which he had so confidently expressed just a short time earlier, had now been completely shattered.

Jesus Reaffirms His Love for Peter

Soon after Peter abandoned Jesus and denied that he knew Him, Jesus was crucified according to the sovereign plan and purpose of God, by which He became the atoning sacrifice for the sins of His people (Matthew 1:21). Then His disciples went into hiding for fear that the Jews would come for them as well.

Jesus rose from the dead on the third day after He was crucified. Soon afterward He appeared to Mary Magdalene, and later He also appeared to the disciples as they were meeting inside a locked room.

After these events, Jesus again appeared to several of His disciples by the sea. Peter and some of the others had decided to go fishing. They fished all night but had caught nothing. It was early in the morning when Jesus appeared to them standing on the shore, but the disciples did not at first realize that it was Jesus. This event is recorded in John 21:5-9.

Jesus called out to them, asking them if they had caught any fish. They answered that they had not. Then Jesus told them to throw their net over the right side of the boat, and they would find a catch there. They did as they were told and caught so many fish that they were not able to haul in the net.

At this point, John recognized that it was Jesus who had called to them, and he told Peter. Peter then immediately wrapped an outer garment around himself, and he jumped into the water to swim to Jesus ahead of the others, who followed in the boat towing the net full of fish. When they all got to shore, they saw a fire of glowing coals with fish cooking over it, and bread also.

We can imagine that Peter's awareness of his abandonment and denial of Jesus was still painfully present in his mind at the time they were eating breakfast together on the shore. After they had eaten, Jesus reaffirmed His love for Peter in the presence of them all. Jesus knew that Peter needed to be reassured, and He came back for him and made sure Peter knew, that despite his failings, he was still loved and accepted by Him. The account of Jesus' reaffirmation of Peter is given a few verses later in the Gospel of John:

So when they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love Me more than these?" He said to Him, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You." He said to him, "Tend My lambs." He said to him again a second time, "Simon, son of John, do you love Me?" He said to Him, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You." He said to him, "Shepherd My sheep." He said to him the third time, "Simon, son of John, do you love Me?" Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, "Do you love Me?" And he said to Him, "Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You." Jesus said to him, "Tend My sheep. (John 21:15-17).

It is interesting to note the two Greek words from the original text that are translated as the English word "love" in this passage of John 21. Jesus asked Peter three times if he loved Him. The first two times Jesus asked Peter if he truly loved Him (verses 15 and 16). The Greek word that was used in Jesus' first two questions to Peter was the word "agapao", which is a supreme, unconditional type of love.

Peter answered Jesus these two times saying, “Yes, Lord...you know that I love you.” However, the Greek word for “love” that was used in Peter’s answer to Jesus was not “agapao”, but it was “phileo”, which is a lesser type of love, not an unconditional, supreme love, but only a type of brotherly love or fondness. Peter knew that his earlier failure had plainly demonstrated that the love he had for Jesus did not rise to the level of a supreme, unconditional love, and he had to admit this in his answer to the Lord.

The third time that Jesus asked Peter if he loved Him (verse 17), the word “phileo” is now used in His question to Peter, according to the original Greek text, and again, “phileo” means a brotherly love or fondness for someone. Peter was hurt when Jesus asked him this third time, as if Jesus were asking if he even loved Him as a brother.

Peter replied to Jesus again saying that he did love Him, and that He as Lord knew all things. Peter knew that the love he had shown for Jesus in his recent abandonment and denial of Him made it clear that his love for Him did not rise to the standard of an unconditional love, but something less, a love which was only a brotherly love or fondness.

It is also interesting to note Jesus’ words to Peter in John 21:18-19. Before Peter abandoned Jesus and then denied that he even knew Him, he boasted that he was ready to lay down his life for Him (John 13:37). As we know, just a short time later Peter had his chance to do that, but he forsook Jesus and fled along with the other disciples. However, as Jesus came back to reaffirm His love for Peter, He told him that indeed the time was coming when he *would* lay down his life for Him.

The devotion unto death that Peter had failed to demonstrate in his own strength, his God would work to bring about in his life, in His time. Jesus said to Peter: “Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were younger, you used to gird yourself and walk wherever you wished; ***but when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands and someone else will gird you, and bring you where you do not wish to go.***” Now this He said, signifying by what kind of death he would glorify God. And when He had spoken this, He said to him, “Follow Me!” (John 21:18-19, emphasis added). As we see from verse 19, these words were understood to mean that Peter also would be crucified, laying down his life for the cause of Christ.

Even though when tested, Peter had failed in his devotion to Jesus so miserably, his failure demonstrates the supreme and unconditional love that our Lord has for all who come to Him, a love which never forsakes us, regardless of our failings. Peter was not banished from the Lord because of his failings, as grievous as they were; rather Jesus came back for Peter to reassure him of His love for him.

Despite his failings, Jesus commanded Peter three times to feed His sheep. And just as He had done at the Sea of Galilee when He first called Peter and his brother Andrew to follow Him (Matthew 4:19), so at this time as He came back to reaffirm His love for Peter, Jesus once again commanded him, this time with emphasis, saying: "Follow me!" (John 21:19).

This supreme and unconditional love that Jesus showed for Peter demonstrates the love that God has for all of us who come to faith in Christ. It is a love by which God, through no merit or worthiness of our own, chose us before the creation of the world to believe on His Son Jesus Christ and to obtain the forgiveness of our sins through Jesus' shed blood (Ephesians 1:4-5, 1 Peter 1:1-2).

When Jesus predicted Peter's denial of Him, He told Peter: "Simon, Simon, behold, Satan has demanded permission to sift you like wheat; but I have prayed for you, that your faith may not fail; and you, *when* once you have turned again, strengthen your brothers." (Luke 22:31-32, emphasis added). Notice that Jesus did not say to Peter "if" you return to Me, or "if" you persevere in your faith, but He said to Peter: "*when* once you have turned again, strengthen your brothers" (emphasis added). Peter's perseverance in his faith and ultimate victory were assured, just as ours is also as believers when we face our times of trial. It is God who saves us, and it is God who preserves us (John 6:37-40, 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24, Romans 8:38, 1 Peter 1:4-5).

We Will Be Made to Stand by God's Power

Jesus faced his time of testing in the desert, and He did not fail. Peter faced his time of testing and almost immediately he failed, and he failed abysmally. Let us think about whom this is who failed so quickly and so miserably. This is one of only twelve apostles, one who was privileged to

author two books in the Bible, and one who was martyred for the cause of Christ. Surely the Apostle Peter is one of the greatest saints in all of history.

Peter's failure and restoration are recorded in the Bible to encourage us and to demonstrate the unconditional love that God has for us as believers. God's love for His people never fails and never changes. Just as Jesus restored Peter, and with that restoration He bestowed upon Peter the privilege of serving Him in such a great way, so also will our loving God continue the good work that He has begun in us, regardless of our failures. The Apostle Paul assured us when he wrote: "For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus." (Philippians 1:6).

Jesus is not only the "Author" of our faith, but He also "perfects" or "finishes" our faith, carrying it through to its completion (Hebrews 12:2). Our salvation depends upon Him from beginning to end. He is the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last (Revelation 1:8, 17).

Though our love and devotion for Him are found lacking, and though we fail Him miserably during some time of trial in our lives, He will not fail. Jesus is coming for His sheep, every one of them, and none of them will be lost (Matthew 18:10-14, John 6:39).

If we should find ourselves in the company of the Apostle Peter, who failed the Lord so miserably during a time of trial and testing in his life, then let us take comfort in knowing that our Lord and Savior is coming back for us as well, just as He came back for Peter. We also will be restored to fellowship with Him and service for Him. This is the heritage and the blessing that we have been given through the incomprehensible grace, forgiveness, and love that our God has for all of us who believe on the name of His Son Jesus Christ.

17.

The Trial of Job

At times we will not be able to see any “reason” for the troubles we are enduring, and we may not be able to see anything good at all coming from our sufferings and losses. Job also was a man who could see no reason for the losses and affliction that God had allowed to touch his life.

In reading the book of Job, we are made aware of a “contest”, so to speak, between God and Satan, in which Job was involved. We are also clearly told that Job had done nothing wrong to bring all of these miseries upon himself, because the word of God tells us three times in the first two chapters of the book that Job was “blameless” and “upright”, and a man who feared God and turned away from evil. (Job 1:1, 1:8, 2:3).

Job was a very wealthy man. He was described as “the greatest of all the men of the east” (Job 1:3). From the beginning of the book, we see that the Lord God Himself brought up the case of Job to Satan, suggesting to Satan that Job was a man of great faith and devotion to Him.

Satan replied to the Lord saying that the only reason for Job’s devotion to Him was that He had given him so much in the way of prosperity in life, and He had placed His hedge of protection around him. Satan then challenged God to take all that He had given to Job, insisting that Job’s devotion would then surely fail, and he would curse Him to His face.

In response to this challenge, The Lord God agreed to give Satan control over everything that Job had, but He would not allow Satan to touch Job himself. After this, by various tragedies many of Job’s servants were killed, and all of his flocks were destroyed. His wealth had quickly been taken from him.

As soon as he found out about this loss, one of his servants came to tell him that all of his seven sons and three daughters were feasting at the oldest brother’s house when suddenly a powerful wind swept in from the

desert, and the house collapsed on them, killing them all. In a very short span of time, Job suffered the loss of all of his wealth, and if that blow was not enough, he suffered the loss of all of his ten children.

Job's response to these grievous losses is recorded in Job 1, where we read:

Then Job arose and tore his robe and shaved his head, and he fell to the ground and worshiped. He said,

“Naked I came from my mother's womb,
And naked I shall return there.
The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away.
Blessed be the name of the Lord.

Through all this Job did not sin nor did he blame God. (Job 1:20-22).

After these events, God again brought up the case of Job to Satan, saying that Job still held to his integrity despite all of his losses and suffering. Satan's reply to his defeat at this point was to challenge God again. This time Satan insisted that if Job's physical body was afflicted, his faith and devotion to Him would surely crumble.

Satan was then given permission to afflict Job's health as well, but he was told that he must spare Job's life. So Satan went out and afflicted Job with painful sores all over his body. All that Job could do at this point was to sit down in the ashes of what used to be his prosperous life and scrape his sores with a shard.

To make matters worse, Job's wife turned against him and God in the face of these tragedies, as we see in Job 2:9. She mocked him for still holding on to his integrity after all the tragedy that God had allowed to come upon him, and she told him to curse God and die. Job had now lost his wealth, all of his children, his health, and the sympathies of his wife, who could have provided some comfort to him in this time of suffering. We might assume that she abandoned him because she is not mentioned in the book again.

Job's response again to all that had happened to him is still the same expression of faith in God, as we see from his reply to his wife's suggestion

that he “curse God and die”. Job told her that she was talking foolishly, and he asserted that we should be willing to accept trouble and suffering from God as well as prosperity and abundance. Up to this point, Job still did not sin by accusing God of wrongdoing or injustice in all that had come upon him (Job 2:10).

Most of us are frightened to think about losing what wealth and resources we may have and becoming impoverished, and we dread the thought of losing one child, let alone all of our children. When we think of losing our health and finding ourselves unable to work and support ourselves, we also become frightened. It is hard for us to imagine the impact that all of these things happening together at the same time had upon Job, but this still was not the full extent of the misery that he was to suffer.

Job had three friends, and when these friends heard about all of the troubles that had come upon him, they went to comfort him. As can be seen from the many discourses they had with Job, it turned out that they only added to his misery by suggesting that his troubles were the result of some fault or wrongdoing of his own. Their understanding of God was that He rewarded good people with health and prosperity, and He punished evildoers with tragedy and suffering.

With every erroneous assertion and insinuation of his friends, Job came back with his rebuttals, insisting that he had done nothing wrong. He did not understand God’s reasons for allowing all of this suffering to come upon him.

Job had no idea that God had presented him to Satan as blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil. Further, Job had no idea that God had determined to demonstrate to Satan, and to all who would read the account of his trial for centuries to come, that he would be made to persevere in his faith, continuing to fear God and shun evil, regardless of whatever tragedies and sufferings came upon him. Job’s response to the weight of his misery and pain up to this point is recorded in chapter 14 where he said: “...All the days of my struggle I will wait until my change comes.” (Job: 14:14).

Job Accuses God of Wrongdoing

Early in the account of Job's response to his troubles, the Bible tells us that he did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing. Later however, as the weight of his suffering began to wear upon him over time, Job's ongoing misery was overwhelming him. At this point He angrily accused God of wrongdoing, indifference, and injustice in his case, saying to his friends: "Know then that God has wronged me and closed His net around me. Behold, I cry, 'Violence!' but I get no answer; I shout for help, but there is no justice. (Job 19:6-7).

Our response too will be much the same when in the depth of our sufferings we become angry at our sovereign God, whom we know could have prevented tragedy and grief from coming upon us but did not. At that point we too may rail against Him for all of the misery and suffering that He has allowed to come into our lives. When this happens with us as it did with Job, let us understand that God knows our weaknesses, and He has compassion on His children. David wrote in the Psalms:

Just as a father has compassion on his children,
So the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him.
For He Himself knows our frame;
He is mindful that we are but dust. (Psalm 103:13-14).

We as believers have been given many comforts in the Scriptures concerning our sufferings, and we have been given many promises of God's help and sustenance. Job did not have these comforts because the Scriptures had not been written during his lifetime, as many scholars consider the Book of Job to be the oldest book in the Bible.

Job withstood this tremendous trial of his faith not because of some strength that he pulled from deep within himself, whereby he managed to deal with all that had come upon him. Rather he persevered by the same power through which we also will persevere during the trial of our faith, and that is by the power of the Spirit of God. In the book of Zechariah we read these words: "... 'Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit,' says the Lord of hosts." (Zechariah 4:6).

The Lord God Confronts Job and His Three Friends

Finally, after enduring all of these losses and then having to endure the accusation of his friends, who in many eloquent speeches said to Job that the tragedies which had befallen him were the result of his own sin, God answered Job saying: “Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Now gird up your loins like a man, and I will ask you, and you instruct Me!” (Job 38:2-3).

The Lord then began to ask Job question after question, the answers to which no man has. The Lord did this to demonstrate that His wisdom and His ways are beyond the comprehension of man, and to make Job understand that he had neither the right nor the wisdom to complain angrily against Him, accusing Him of wrongdoing for all of the suffering and loss that had come into his life. Job then replied to the Lord’s questioning saying:

“I know that You can do all things,
And that no purpose of Yours can be thwarted.
‘Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?’
Therefore I have declared that which I did not understand,
Things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.”
‘Hear, now, and I will speak;
I will ask You, and You instruct me.’
“I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear;
But now my eye sees You;
Therefore I retract,
And I repent in dust and ashes.” (Job 42:2-6)

After the Lord had questioned Job, He turned His attention to Job’s three friends. Speaking to one of them, Eliphaz the Temanite, the Lord said: “My wrath is kindled against you and against your two friends, because ***you have not spoken of Me what is right as My servant Job has***. Now therefore, take for yourselves seven bulls and seven rams, and go to My servant Job, and offer up a burnt offering for yourselves, and My servant Job will pray for you. For I will accept him so that I may not do with you according to your folly, because ***you have not spoken of Me what is right, as My servant Job has***.” (Job 42:7-8, emphasis added).

In these verses God said twice to Job's friends that they had not spoken the truth about Him, as His servant Job had done. The three friends considered themselves to be wise men with considerable spiritual understanding, but this was not the case.

They possessed no wisdom with which to comfort Job, and they only added to his misery by accusing him of wrongdoing, which they asserted had brought about the troubles that had befallen him. Job had a much greater understanding of the ways of God than his three friends, though he had no idea why God had allowed all of this tragedy to come upon him.

The Scriptures do not tell us that Job was ever given insight about the things that had happened to him, and the conversations that had taken place between God and Satan concerning him. He did however come to the place where he understood that God's wisdom, His ways, and His reasons for events unfolding as they do were far above his own wisdom and ability to comprehend. Job was given the understanding that any questioning of God's ways or angry accusations about what had happened to him would stem only from an ignorance of the ways and thoughts of God, many of which man was never intended to understand.

After Job prayed for his three friends, God restored his fortunes. In fact, God gave him twice as much wealth as he had before, and Job also had seven more sons and three more daughters. After this Job lived to an old age, and the Bible says that he saw his children and his children's children to the fourth generation.

The Days of Job's Hard Service

At this point, we might wonder why God saw fit to put Job through all of this suffering and loss. We might also wonder what was accomplished by all of the undeserved suffering that God allowed to touch Job's life. One answer to these questions can be seen from Romans 9:17, where we learn that God orchestrates events to display His power on the earth so that His Name will be declared among both angels and men.

We might also wonder what, if any, service did Job render to God through all of the suffering that he endured. *The service that Job rendered*

to God through his sufferings was to demonstrate, to both angels and men, God's power and His unchanging, irrevocable decision to preserve His saints through anything in all of creation that would attempt to separate us from His love.

This is the same message of comfort that Paul gave to us in Romans 8 when he wrote: "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8:38-39). This service that Job rendered to God was so important to Him, that the account of Job's sufferings and his perseverance through these sufferings has been preserved forever in the Scriptures, in order to comfort, instruct and edify His people.

One has to suspect that God has His "Jobs" in every generation, those believers whose faith is tested with great suffering and loss that comes about through no wrongdoing of their own. If we find ourselves to be among those who experience such things, then let us recognize that it has been given to us in a measure greater than many others to drink from the cup or be baptized with the baptism of Christ's sufferings. As we have seen from the Scriptures before, God has ordained that such things are necessary for those who will be among the greatest in His kingdom (Mark 10:35-40).

In Conclusion

Job faced his time of trial and started out admirably, but as time went by and his affliction wore on, he eventually became angry with God over the apparent injustice of all that had happened to him. He could not understand what was going on in his life at the time, or why God had allowed such tragedy to come upon him despite his devotion to Him.

There is no indication given in the Scriptures that the reason he suffered was ever revealed to him during his lifetime. More than likely Job never understood why he suffered the way he did, until he was finally together with the Lord in Heaven.

As his losses and affliction began to weigh heavily upon him, Job's faith in the goodness of God did falter, as ours will at times under the weight of our own sufferings. However, our perseverance in the faith is not brought about by our own devotion; rather we are kept by the power of God (1 Thessalonians 5:23-24, 1 Peter 1:3-5). Though our faith may seem to falter at times, and though we may fail miserably when confronted with our own time of trial, God does not fail, and He does not change His mind concerning those whom He calls to faith in His Son: "for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable." (Romans 11:29).

When we experience overwhelming misery and grief as our sufferings weigh heavily upon us, and we respond by railing angrily against God because of the troubles and losses that He has allowed to touch our lives, let us remember that nothing in all of creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is ours in Christ Jesus our Lord, not even our own anger toward Him (again, Romans 8:38-39). God our Father, for reasons and purposes of His own, allows trials of various kinds to come into the lives of His people. God will see to it that we persevere through these trials, just as He sustained Job in his sufferings.

Deliverance from our troubles and restoration always comes for believers, and it always comes in God's time. Whether deliverance from our suffering comes in this life, or on the day that we leave this life and go to be with the Lord forever in Heaven, restoration and abundance is always coming for us as God's people.

James comforted believers when he wrote: "As an example, brethren, of suffering and patience, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. We count those blessed who endured. You have heard of the endurance of Job and have seen the outcome of the Lord's dealings, that the Lord is full of compassion and is merciful." (James 5:10-11).

James wrote that those who "endure" are counted as blessed. He also spoke of the "endurance of Job" and "the outcome of the Lord's dealings" as a result of all that Job had suffered. James also emphasized the great compassion and mercy of our God and Father.

Ultimately, as Job's faith in the goodness of God began to falter under the weight of his suffering, ***he was made to endure and persevere by God Himself; he was upheld by the power of God.*** Through the compassion,

mercy and power of God, Job was sustained through his trial, and he was ultimately blessed because of all that he had suffered (Job 42:10, 12).

In God's time, Job's trial came to an end, and he was restored and made twice as prosperous as before. God demonstrated his power among angels and men by sustaining Job through his trial, and then He demonstrated His power again when He delivered Job out of his trial and restored him. Also in God's time, the trials that we are facing will come to an end, and we too will be delivered and restored.

For some losses, full restoration and healing will not be realized until we are with the Lord in Heaven, but as James has assured us, "the Lord is full of compassion and is merciful", and the end intended by our God is one of blessing and abundance. Paul gave us similar encouragement when he revealed that the troubles of our present lives will be made to achieve for us an eternal measure of glory that far exceeds the weight of the troubles themselves (2 Corinthians 4:16-18).

Just as Job could very well have lived out the remainder of his days on earth never fully understanding what God was doing through all that he had suffered, so also the same may be true for many believers. However, the word of God assures us that our present sufferings, as painful as they may be, are not worthy to be compared with the glory that will one day be revealed in us as a result of having endured them (Romans 8:18).

None of the things that happen to us happen by chance. Our God is sovereign over His creation. God has ordained all of the events that touch our lives as they happen to each of us individually (Psalm 139:16).

We know from God's word that it has been given to every believer to share in the sufferings of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, the "Man of Sorrows", who was Himself familiar with suffering and grief (Isaiah 53:3). We also know that this share in His sufferings will achieve for us a share in His eternal glory (Romans 8:17).

When we find ourselves facing hardships that are far beyond our ability to endure, and so much so that we despair even of life itself and having to live on to face these burdens, we will be sustained and delivered, not by our own power or steadfastness, but by the power of God Himself, who raises the dead (2 Corinthians 1:8-11). Just as it happened in the life of

Job, we also will be sustained through our trials and ultimately delivered from them by the infinite compassion, mercy, and power of God.

18.

A Lesson from the Life of Joseph

Joseph was a man who suffered years of adversity and suffering through no fault or wrongdoing of his own. He was hated by his brothers, sold into slavery, and imprisoned, though he had done nothing to deserve any of these things. As we study the life of Joseph, we will see that all of this suffering came about in his life, as it did in the life of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, “by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God” (Acts 2:23).

Joseph remained faithful to God through all of the hardships that he endured, even though he could have had no idea at the time why God had allowed these things to happen to him, or what good could possibly come from any of them. We will see that through all of the unjust sufferings Joseph endured, God was working in his life to prepare him and to bring him to the place where he would do the work that He had determined Joseph would do in His service, work which would bear fruit to His glory.

The ways that God has worked in the lives of His servants to accomplish His will through them are all recorded in the Scriptures for our instruction and edification, so that we as His people might have insight into some of the ways in which He may work in our lives as well, as He accomplishes His will, plan, and purpose for each of us. We also know from the Scriptures that His will for each of us is that we bear fruit to His glory, fruit that will last (John 15:16).

Joseph Favored by His Father, Hated by His Brothers

In Genesis 37-50 we find the biblical account of the life of Joseph, where we read of the sufferings and adversities that he experienced as God was bringing him to a place where he would be instrumental in saving and sustaining the entire family of his father Jacob through a seven-year famine that occurred throughout the land of Canaan where Jacob lived, and in Egypt

also. It is through the natural lineage of Jacob's son Judah that Jesus Christ Himself was born into the world through the Virgin Mary as recorded in Matthew 1:18-25.

Joseph was a young man of seventeen when his troubles began. He was Jacob's favorite son, as we read in Genesis 37: "Now Israel loved Joseph more than all his sons, because he was the son of his old age; and he made him a varicolored tunic. His brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers; and so they hated him and could not speak to him on friendly terms." (Genesis 37:3-4).

It is hard to imagine that Joseph was not aware of the special favor his father had for him, and that his brothers resented him for it. Nevertheless, he had two dreams that he told to them, which increased their animosity toward him.

Joseph's first dream is recorded in Genesis 37:5-8. In this first dream Joseph and his brothers were in the field binding together sheaves of grain. Suddenly Joseph's sheaf stood up, and the sheaves of his brothers all gathered around his sheaf and bowed down before it. When his brothers heard his dream, they were angered at the thought of Joseph ruling over them, and their hatred for him grew even greater.

Joseph also told his second dream to his brothers, and it as well did nothing to endear himself to them. This second dream is recorded in Genesis 37:9-11. In Joseph's second dream, the sun, the moon, and eleven stars bowed down before him. Joseph also told this second dream to his father Jacob. When he heard the dream, Jacob rebuked Joseph at the thought that he, Joseph's mother, and his eleven brothers would all bow before him. Joseph's brothers continued to be jealous of him, and even though Jacob rebuked him for telling the dream, he kept it in his thoughts.

For Jacob's favor toward Joseph, and for his dreams of exaltation above his brothers, the Bible tells us that Joseph's brothers hated him to the extent that they were ready to kill him. Soon they saw an opportunity to rid themselves of Joseph once and for all.

Joseph Sold into Slavery

Joseph's brothers were out grazing their father's flocks, and Jacob sent Joseph to check on them and bring a report back to him. Joseph left the valley of Hebron and travelled first to Shechem and then to Dothan. As his brothers saw him approaching from a distance, they saw their chance to do away with him as we see in Genesis 37:19-20. They came up with a plan to kill Joseph and then tell their father Jacob that a wild animal had devoured him. With Joseph dead they knew that his dreams of authority over them would never come to pass.

Reuben, Jacob's oldest son, tried to talk the others out of their plan. He suggested that they not kill Joseph but throw him into a dry cistern that was nearby and leave him there to die. Reuben suggested this plan because he intended to later rescue Joseph and take him back to their father. The rest of the brothers went along with this plan. They stripped off Joseph's ornate robe that Jacob had given to him, and they threw him into the cistern. A short time later they sat down to eat.

Then the brothers saw a caravan of Ishmaelite merchants approaching them, coming from Gilead and on their way to Egypt. At this point Judah had the idea that they should not leave Joseph to die, but rather sell him as a slave to the Ishmaelites. They all agreed and pulled Joseph up out of the cistern and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty shekels of silver.

Soon afterwards Reuben went back to the cistern to rescue Joseph, unaware of what his brothers had done, because he was not with them when they sold Joseph as a slave. When he discovered that Joseph was not there, he returned to his brothers and exclaimed that Joseph was not in the cistern, and he did not know what to do.

At this point the brothers came up with the story that they would tell their father Jacob about Joseph's disappearance, as we see in Genesis 37:31-34. They took Joseph's robe, which Jacob had given to him, and they dipped it in the blood of a goat they had slaughtered. Then they took the robe back to Jacob, telling him that they had found it, and they asked him to examine it to see if it was Joseph's.

Jacob recognized the robe as the one he had given to Joseph, and he surmised that a wild animal had attacked him and torn him to pieces. Jacob then tore his robe, he put on sackcloth, which was customary at that time for those who mourned, and He grieved over the loss of Joseph for many days.

When the Ishmaelites arrived in Egypt they sold Joseph to Potiphar, who was one of Pharaoh's officials, the captain of the guard. Joseph found favor with his Egyptian master as recorded in Genesis 39:2-5. The Scripture tells us that the Lord was with Joseph and prospered him during the time he lived in Potiphar's house as his servant. Potiphar could see that the Lord was with Joseph and that He gave him success in everything he did. Because of this Potiphar trusted Joseph and put him in charge of his household and all that he owned. The Lord prospered everything Potiphar owned because of Joseph.

Joseph Imprisoned

Despite his loyalty and trustworthiness, more trouble soon came into Joseph's life. As we see in Genesis 39:6-7, Joseph was a handsome young man, and Potiphar's wife soon pursued him to come to bed with her. Joseph rejected her advances, but she kept pursuing him as we see recorded in Genesis 39:11-18.

On a day when none of the other servants happened to be in the house at the time, Joseph went in to do his work. Potiphar's wife then caught him by his garment, demanding that he come to bed with her. Joseph ran out of the house to get away from her, and as he did so, he left his garment in her hand.

In her anger and frustration at having been rejected yet again, she called out to some of her other servants, showed them Joseph's garment that he had left behind, and then she accused of him of trying to force himself upon her. She said that as soon as she screamed for help, Joseph fled, leaving his garment beside her. When Potiphar came home, she told him the same story, and when he heard it, he had Joseph imprisoned.

While Joseph was in prison, the Lord showed him kindness and granted him favor with the prison warden. The warden, as Potiphar had done

before, came to trust Joseph and eventually put him in charge of the other prisoners. He gave him responsibility for running the affairs of the prison, because it was evident that the Lord was with Joseph and gave him success in whatever he did.

Sometime later, Pharaoh's cupbearer and baker displeased him, and he had them thrown into the same prison where Joseph was. After they had been in custody for a while, both the cupbearer and the baker had a dream the same night. Each one told Joseph of the dream he had, and Joseph, saying that interpretations belong to God, interpreted the dream of each man.

Joseph interpreted the dream of the cupbearer saying that he would be released from prison and restored to Pharaoh's service in three days. He then asked the cupbearer to remember him and mention his case to Pharaoh, because he had done nothing to deserve the imprisonment that he was suffering. Joseph then interpreted the dream of the baker, saying that he would be beheaded in three days.

When the three days had passed, events transpired exactly as Joseph said they would. The cupbearer was restored to Pharaoh's service. However he did not remember Joseph, but forgot about him and did not mention his case to Pharaoh as Joseph had asked him. Joseph continued to be imprisoned though he had done no wrong.

Joseph Brought before Pharaoh

Joseph remained in prison for two more years, and then Pharaoh had two dreams that troubled him. He sent for all of the magicians and wise men of Egypt, but none of them could interpret the dreams for him.

At this point the cupbearer remembered that Joseph had accurately interpreted his dream and the dream of the baker while they were in prison. When he told Pharaoh about Joseph, the king sent for Joseph, "and they hurriedly brought him out of the dungeon" (Genesis 41:14). After Joseph shaved and changed clothes he was brought before Pharaoh. Joseph told Pharaoh that he could not interpret the dreams, but that God would give Pharaoh the interpretation.

Pharaoh told Joseph his two dreams. Joseph then gave the interpretation, saying that the two dreams were one and the same. He then said that through these dreams, God had revealed to Pharaoh what He was about to do.

Joseph said the dreams meant that there would be seven years of abundance throughout Egypt, followed by seven years of famine. The seven years of famine would be so severe that they would ravage the land to the extent that the years of abundance would be forgotten. Joseph then told Pharaoh that the reason the dream was given to him in two forms was that God had decided to bring about these events soon.

In view of the God's impending action in the matter, Joseph advised Pharaoh as recorded in Genesis 41:33-43. He said that Pharaoh should find a wise and discerning man and put him in charge of managing the affairs of all Egypt. He then advised Pharaoh to appoint authorities to collect a fifth of the crops harvested during the seven years of abundance, and to store the grain under Pharaoh's authority in various cities. These stores were to be kept for food during the seven years of famine.

Pharaoh and his officials approved of Joseph's plan. When they considered Joseph's wisdom in interpreting Pharaoh's dreams and in devising this plan to save the country from ruin during the famine that was to come, they decided there would be no one better than Joseph to manage this effort. Pharaoh then put Joseph in charge of his palace and the whole land of Egypt, saying that all of the people of Egypt were to submit to his orders and direction. Joseph was made second in command over all of Egypt, subject only to Pharaoh himself.

In Genesis 37:2 we read that Joseph was seventeen years old when his troubles began, and in Genesis 41:46 we read that he was thirty years old when he was made second in command over all of Egypt. In God's time, the suffering and hardship that He allowed to affect Joseph's life had accomplished the purpose He intended. After thirteen years of undeserved suffering in slavery and in prison, within the space of a few hours, Joseph was delivered out of the dungeon and put in charge of the entire land of Egypt.

As Joseph was first put in charge of Potiphar's household, and then in charge of the affairs of the prison and all that went on there, so now he was

put in charge of the entire land of Egypt to manage the resources of the land and prepare them for the famine that was to come. Joseph, according to the plan and purpose of his sovereign God, suffered the loss of the best years of his young manhood and strength, thirteen years from age seventeen to age thirty, first to slavery that came about by the treachery of his brothers, and then to imprisonment that came about by the false accusation of Potiphar's wife, though he had done nothing to deserve either slavery or imprisonment.

Joseph stored up food in storehouses throughout Egypt during the seven years of abundance that followed, as God had given him the interpretation of Pharaoh's dreams. Then came the years of famine, as Joseph had also foretold.

God's purpose in bringing Joseph to this position of power in Egypt was to save the entire family of Jacob and his sons (Joseph's brothers, who had sold him into slavery years earlier) from the famine that was to spread also to the land of Canaan where they were all living. The events that transpired whereby Jacob, his sons, and their families were brought to Egypt to be preserved through the famine are recorded in Genesis 42-47.

Why All of this Undeserved Suffering in Joseph's Life?

We might question why God chose to bring Joseph to this position of power in Egypt and this place of service for Him by means of all this suffering and adversity in his life. We know that God is all-powerful and that nothing is too hard for Him, and we might ask why He did not bring all of this about in some other way – some easier way. After all, Joseph had done nothing to deserve all that he endured during this process. We might also question why God chose to bring about a famine at all, and why He chose to move His people to Egypt to be preserved through the famine, where they would later be enslaved and oppressed.

One answer to the latter question is given in Romans 9, where Paul quoted from Exodus 9:16, saying: "For Scripture says to Pharaoh, 'For this very purpose I raised you up, to demonstrate My power in you, and that My name might be proclaimed throughout the whole earth.'" (Romans 9:17). God would later demonstrate His power in delivering His people from

Egyptian bondage with a mighty deliverance, working through His servant Moses as recorded in the Book of Exodus.

We cannot know why God has chosen to bring about the bearing of spiritual fruit by means of suffering in the lives of His people. However, we do know that the suffering Joseph experienced in this process is completely consistent with teachings from the Scriptures that we have considered previously.

Once again, we recall the lesson that Jesus taught in John 12 when He said: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” (John 12:24). When Jesus said that “unless” the grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, He was saying that this dying *must* occur in order for the fruit to be born, and *unless* this death occurred, the grain of wheat would remain only a single seed, bearing no fruit at all.

In John 12:24, Jesus used the analogy of a grain of wheat to symbolize His life and the suffering that He was about to endure at Calvary in order to bear the fruit that God had ordained for Him. Then in the verses immediately following, He revealed that the same principle of spiritual fruit bearing that was at work in His life, will also be at work in the lives of all those who follow Him, as they also bear fruit according to the plan and purpose of God for their lives.

In another very similar teaching, Jesus taught that we as His disciples must deny ourselves and take up our cross daily to follow Him (Luke 9:23). This means that we must deny, or “die to”, our own will and what we would choose for ourselves in life, and in place of what we want for ourselves, we are to submit to God’s will and His plan for our lives.

God’s will for all of His people is revealed to us through His word, and His will for each of us individually is revealed through the events, circumstances, and conditions which He has ordained for our lives. In other words, God’s sovereign will for each of us individually is revealed through the things that He brings about in our lives and through the things that He allows to “happen” to us. Through some of these events we will suffer the loss, or the “death”, of things that we want for ourselves in this life.

Jesus taught us clearly in John 12:24-26, and also in Mark 10:35-40, that such sufferings as we have seen in the life of Joseph, and in the lives of other of God's servants as recorded in the Scriptures, are necessary if spiritual fruit with eternal value is to be born to the glory of God. Nowhere is this principle exemplified with greater glory than in the life of Jesus Christ Himself. This same principle of spiritual fruit bearing has always been, and will always be, at work in the lives of every one of God's people, until Christ's second coming.

The principle that Jesus taught in John 12:24-26 is like a continuous thread that runs throughout the entire tapestry of the Scriptures, from Genesis to Revelation. This timeless and universal principle of spiritual fruit bearing, ordained by God, is the reason that Joseph had to endure the undeserved sufferings he experienced, in order to bear the fruit of saving the family of Jacob through the famine that was to come. In this service for God, Joseph was instrumental in the preservation of the lineage through which Jesus Christ Himself would be born into the world.

Looking back, Joseph came to understand why God had brought about all of these painful events in his life, as we see when he finally revealed himself to his brothers in Genesis 45. Up to that time his brothers had not recognized him, but now he chose to reveal himself to them:

Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Please come closer to me." And they came closer. And he said, "I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. Now do not be grieved or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life. For the famine has been in the land these two years, and there are still five years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvesting. God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant in the earth, and to keep you alive by a great deliverance. ***Now, therefore, it was not you who sent me here, but God....***" (Genesis 45:4-8, emphasis added).

Joseph had come to understand the sovereignty of God in all that had happened to him, and it was given to him to see the good that God brought about through the unjust sufferings he endured. After Jacob died in Egypt, Joseph's brothers were once again afraid that he might take his revenge upon them for what they had done to him and the misery they had caused, but Joseph understood what God had intended to bring about through it all, and he reassured them as we read in Genesis 50:

But Joseph said to them, “Do not be afraid, for am I in God’s place? ***As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good*** in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive. So therefore, do not be afraid; I will provide for you and your little ones.” So he comforted them and spoke kindly to them. (Genesis 50:19-21, emphasis added.)

In retrospect, Joseph was able to see what God intended to accomplish through the years of his suffering in slavery and in prison, though while he was enduring these troubles, he could have had no idea of the way events would unfold as a result of all that he was suffering. ***Joseph had come to understand the sovereignty of God in the things that happen in men’s lives, as we see in Genesis 45:5-8. He had also come to understand that God is working for good through the events and circumstances which He allows to touch the lives of His people, even when the intent of others is to do harm by their actions.*** We as believers have this same assurance that everything our sovereign God allows to affect our lives is working together for our good and for our eternal glory.

19.

A Lesson from the Life of Moses

Just as Joseph endured years of suffering in preparation for the work that God had for him to accomplish, so also Moses endured years and even decades of suffering in preparation for the work that God had chosen for him. In the years after Joseph's death, the Israelite population multiplied greatly in Egypt. After a time, another Pharaoh came to power in Egypt, one who did not know Joseph.

The Israelites had become so numerous that the Egyptians feared they might one day side with Egypt's enemies in the event of a war. They therefore enslaved the Israelites, putting them to forced labor building with bricks and mortar and working in the fields. Despite their slavery, they multiplied even more. At this point, out of fear that the Israelites might one day become powerful enough to overcome the Egyptians, Pharaoh commanded that all newborn Hebrew male children must be killed. It was during this time that Moses was born.

Moses in Egypt - A Life of Privilege

In Exodus 2:1-10 we find the account of Moses' birth and God's providence in the circumstances that resulted in him being raised in the house of Pharaoh's daughter. Moses was born to a Levite man and woman. His mother hid him for three months so the Egyptians would not kill him. When she could no longer hide him, she took a basket made from papyrus and coated it with tar to prevent it from leaking. Then she put Moses in the basket and laid it among the reeds by the bank of the Nile. Moses' sister watched from a distance to see what would happen to her infant brother.

At that time, Pharaoh's daughter went down to the river to bathe, accompanied by her servants. As they were walking along the riverbank, she noticed the basket floating among the reeds, and she had one of her servant

girls bring it to her. When she opened the basket, she saw the baby crying, and she felt sorry for him. She realized that it must be one of the Hebrew babies who had been hidden by his mother.

When Moses' sister saw this, she approached Pharaoh's daughter and asked if she could go and get a Hebrew woman to nurse the baby for her. Pharaoh's daughter said yes and told her to go and do so. Moses' sister went home and got their mother for the task, and Pharaoh's daughter even offered to pay her for nursing the child.

Moses' mother then took him back home with her. When he was a little older, she brought him back to Pharaoh's daughter, and he became her son, living in the household of Pharaoh. It was Pharaoh's daughter who gave Moses his name, which means "I drew him out of the water" (Exodus 2:10).

In the Book of Acts, we find another account of Moses' life in Egypt. This account is given by Stephen in his address to the Sanhedrin. Opposition arose from the Jews to Stephen's preaching of Christ, and they produced witnesses who brought false charges against him. He was then seized and forced to appear before the high priest and the council to answer these charges and to explain the message that he had been spreading.

Stephen's address contained a brief summary of the lives of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, and Moses, and it ended with his condemnation of the Jews for being a stiff-necked and rebellious people, who though they had received the Law, they had persecuted the prophets and killed the Righteous One Himself. For this, Stephen was stoned.

The biblical account of Stephen and his address before the Sanhedrin is recorded in Acts 6:8-8:1. Within this passage, we find his account of the early life of Moses and the events that led to his fleeing from Egypt.

In Acts 7:20-29, we learn that Moses was raised by Pharaoh's daughter as her own son, and that he was well educated in all of the wisdom and culture of the Egyptians. When Moses was forty years of age, he wanted to visit his fellow Hebrews. He went out to where they were working as Pharaoh's slaves, and he saw one of them being treated harshly by an Egyptian overseer. This angered Moses, and he defended his Hebrew brother by killing the Egyptian. Moses thought that his fellow Hebrews who

witnessed the event would realize that he had been sent by God to deliver them, but they did not see it at the time.

The next day Moses saw two Israelites who were fighting with each other, and he tried to make peace between them. One of the men shoved Moses and asked him who had made him a ruler and judge over them. The man then asked Moses if he wanted to kill him also, just as he had killed the Egyptian the day before. Moses now knew that the story of him killing the Egyptian had spread and that his life would be in danger when Pharaoh heard of the matter, so he fled to the land of Midian.

Moses in Midian - Forty Years on the Far Side of the Desert

When Moses arrived in Midian, he sat down by a well, and this is where he met the daughters of the “priest of Midian”, as recorded in Exodus 2:16-22. This priest of Midian, whose name was Reuel, had seven daughters and apparently no sons. He had sent his daughters to draw water for his flocks, but some shepherds who were there drove them away. Moses witnessed this, and he intervened for the young women, drawing water for their flocks himself.

When his daughters got back home, they told their father how Moses had defended them when the shepherds tried to drive them away, saying that Moses even drew water for them and helped to water the flock. Reuel told them to invite Moses to eat with them. Moses then agreed to stay with them, and Reuel gave his daughter Zipporah to be Moses’ wife. Sometime later, Zipporah gave birth to a son, and Moses named him Gershom, saying “I have been a sojourner in a foreign land.” (Exodus 2:22).

Moses had a zeal for his own people, the Israelites. At forty years of age “he went out to his brethren and looked on their hard labors” (Exodus 2:11), and he wanted to do something to help them. However, his rash and impulsive killing of an Egyptian who had beaten one of his fellow Hebrews was not at all what God had in mind for the deliverance of His people out of Egyptian bondage.

Because Moses tried to take matters into his own hands, he was forced to flee to Midian, where he met the daughters of a priest of Midian.

He married one of them, and God provided for him as he took care of his father-in-law's sheep for the next forty years on the far side of the desert. It was here that God was preparing him for the task of leading, or shepherding, His people out of Egyptian bondage to a land of abundance that He had promised them.

Since Moses was raised by Pharaoh's daughter, he was no doubt used to living a life of luxury and privilege. He would also have been used to the deference and respect of other Egyptians because most of them would obviously want to avoid offending anyone associated with the king's family. Since he was used accustomed to this position of privilege and power, he may have felt that he had every right to take vengeance on the Egyptian overseer who was beating one of the Hebrew slaves, one of his own people, and he acted accordingly.

Our tendency as human beings is to bring our natural strengths to bear on any particular problem or obstacle that we may face. By natural strengths we mean whatever abilities, talents, or resources that we may have at our disposal.

This is the way that the natural man, or unregenerate man, approaches life. It makes complete sense to him to approach life in this way, and in fact he can understand nothing else. Many times he is successful with this approach. He sees that his strengths and the resources and opportunities that are available to him are what enable him to excel above others and accomplish his goals, some of which others are not able to accomplish. The bigger picture however is that he is only fulfilling the destiny which God has chosen for him, and God has put all of these resources at his disposal to do just that.

Even as believers in Christ, our first tendency is often to approach our service for God with our natural strengths, or with the strength of our flesh. This is what Moses did when he killed the Egyptian. He may have thought that God would be pleased with what he considered to be an act of loyalty and solidarity with his Hebrew brothers who were in bondage under the Egyptians. Though our natural tendency may be to use or own strengths in our service to God, we can see from the way that God has worked in the lives of many of His servants as recorded in the Scriptures, that He actually brings us to the point where our own strengths, talents, and abilities are

proven to be completely inadequate for the task at hand and the challenges to be faced.

Being raised in the household of Pharaoh's daughter, Moses enjoyed a position in life with a high degree of prestige, power, wealth, and privilege, which had shaped him into a man who was accustomed to using his own strengths and resources to deal with the challenges that he faced. God however, for the next forty years (Acts 7:30, 31-36), would strip Moses of all of the benefits that he had known in Egypt, making him a shepherd, a class of people whom the Egyptians looked down upon and despised (Genesis 46:33-34).

Since he had been raised in Egyptian culture, being a shepherd may have been very distasteful to him. Not only would he be made a shepherd, but he would not even be given his own sheep to tend; he would tend the flocks belonging to someone else, his father-in-law.

All of the losses, hardships, and indignities that Moses endured were necessary in the sight of God in order to prepare him for the task of shepherding His people Israel and leading them out of Egyptian bondage. This deliverance would not be accomplished by the power of Moses or man, because no man was able to deliver from Pharaoh's hand.

The deliverance would come by the power of God working through a man who would endure forty years of an obscure existence on the far side of the desert, where he was stripped of the dignity and privilege he had once known and shaped into a vessel prepared for the task and service which God had assigned for him. The result of the sufferings and losses that Moses endured was that he was transformed into a man whom the Scriptures would later characterize in this way: "Now the man Moses was very humble, more than any man who was on the face of the earth." (Numbers 12:3).

This was the way that God chose to prepare Moses for the work that He had for him. God brought him from a place of wealth and privilege in Egypt, to a place of obscurity where for decades he rose no further than the position of a shepherd tending someone else's sheep.

After the forty years of preparation was finished, through long years of adversity on the far side of the desert of as God saw fit, the time had come for Moses to begin the work that God had determined he would do in His

service. The Lord then appeared to Moses from the burning bush, calling him to the work and place of service that He had ordained for him, and for which He had prepared him.

It is interesting to note that Moses expressed reluctance and a sense of inadequacy to do what God was calling him to do, saying to the Lord that he had never been eloquent, and that he was “slow of speech and slow of tongue” (Exodus 4:10). It is also interesting to note that others characterized the Apostle Paul in much the same way, as we read in 2 Corinthians 10:10. Paul knew that others had criticized him, mentioning his weak and unimpressive physical appearance and his plain-spoken speech and lack of eloquence. God has no need of man’s eloquence, talents, or abilities to accomplish His work.

God is not impressed with the strength or abilities of man, as we see in Psalm 147:10-11, but He takes delight in those who fear Him, and who set their hopes upon His unfailing love and mercy. All that goes with worldly position and the praise of men is a hindrance in the lives of God’s people when it comes to being used in His service, bearing spiritual fruit that will last. These worldly things, along with man’s sense of self sufficiency and confidence in his own strengths, are among the things that must die in our lives in order that the fruit may be born, as Jesus taught in John 12:24-26.

Once again we recall Jesus’ words recorded in the Gospel of Luke where He said: “that which is highly esteemed among men is detestable in the sight of God.” (Luke 16:15). Jesus taught that those things which are highly esteemed and sought after among men: power, prestige, prominence, the pride of life, material wealth, worldly success, and the praise of others – all of the things which are held in high regard among men are detestable in the sight of God. These “detestable” things, as Jesus described them, are the very things that will be removed from our lives as we are being prepared for the work that God has for us, just as we have seen in the life of Moses.

In Conclusion

God has a pre-determined plan and place of service for every one of His people. Preparation for the work that God has ordained for us to do in His service may take years, or even decades, as we can see from the lives of

both Joseph and Moses. As we can also see from their lives, this preparation will involve sufferings, losses, and hardships of various kinds, which is consistent with lessons that we have learned from John 12:24-26 and other passages of Scripture.

When he was a slave in Potiphar's house, and later when he was confined in Pharaoh's prison, Joseph in his wildest dreams could not have imagined what God was going to do as a result of all that he was suffering. Moses also could not possibly have imagined how God would use all of the losses that he had endured for any good purpose.

We can see from the Scriptures that it was given to both Joseph and Moses to be able to look back and see the good that God brought about through the years of suffering and hardship they endured. However, as we consider the experiences of our own lives, we may not be able to look back and see with clarity in this lifetime what good came out of the sufferings that we endured. Instead, our experience may be more like Job's, and we may not be shown what God was accomplishing through our sufferings and losses until we are together with Him in Heaven. Paul taught us in 1 Corinthians 13:12 that now, during our present lives, we see and know and understand only in part, but the time will come when we will see clearly and understand fully.

Paul also taught in Romans 15:4 that everything written in the Scriptures was written to instruct and encourage us. Everything recorded in the Scriptures of the ways in which God has worked in the lives of His servants to prepare them for the work and place of service that He has ordained for them is recorded to teach us about some of the ways in which He may work in our lives as well, as He prepares each of us for the work and place of service that He has ordained for us.

The timeless principle of spiritual fruit bearing revealed by Jesus in John 12:24-26 was at work in the lives of Job, Joseph, and Moses. The sufferings and losses they endured and the good that God brought about through their sufferings are recorded in the Scriptures for our benefit, so that we may have insight and understanding of how God works in the lives of His people to accomplish His will, plan, and purpose.

As we have seen from the Scriptures before, the troubles, hardships, and sufferings of our present lives all have eternal value (2 Corinthians 4:16-

18, Romans 8:17-18, 28, others). Just as we have seen demonstrated in the lives of Job, Joseph, and Moses, God will bring forth life and good through the deaths that our sufferings have wrought in our lives, and as He does so, we will bear a harvest of fruit that will last, which will achieve for us a share in Christ's eternal glory.

20.

Predestination – Part 1

There are many different Christian denominations: from Southern Baptist, to Primitive Baptist, to Roman Catholic, to Methodist, to Pentecostal, to Presbyterian, and all points in between it seems. All of these different denominations came about because of differences in interpreting the Scriptures. Some of the most common differences of opinion and interpretation occur on doctrines about baptisms, eternal security, and the concept of free will, or man's choice in the matter of his own salvation. This matter of free will gets directly to the subject of predestination, and the issue of whether God chooses who will be brought to faith in Christ, or whether each man chooses for himself whether he wants to believe in Christ and be saved.

The doctrine of predestination is one of the most controversial and divisive doctrines among Christians. Believers who earnestly desire to know the truth about predestination should be willing to thoroughly and carefully examine the biblical teachings on this subject in order to determine what the word of God teaches us about our salvation in Jesus Christ, and to what extent our own will or decision is involved in our salvation.

All Christians can agree from reading the Bible that there is a Heaven and a Hell, and that those who have not come to faith in Christ during their lifetimes here on earth will spend an eternity in Hell separated from God. Jesus taught His disciples that relatively few will be saved, and that most will in fact spend eternity separated from God (Matthew 7:13-14). The disagreements begin when we begin to discuss whether man has a say in determining his own salvation, or whether God Himself determines who will be saved and who will be left in their sins.

During our study on predestination, we will look at “both sides of the coin” so to speak. We will consider Scriptures used by those who say the Bible teaches that man's own decision either to accept Christ or reject Him is the determining factor in his salvation. We will also consider Scriptures

used by those who say that God decides who will ultimately come to faith in Christ, and who will be hardened and left in their sins with no hope of salvation.

In our endeavor to determine just what the word of God teaches us on this difficult subject, we will interpret the Scriptures considering the context of the passages in which they appear. We will also consider who is being addressed in these passages, and we will interpret these Scriptures in the light of all the rest of the Scriptures as a whole. When we derive an interpretation of God's word that is not contradicted by other passages of Scripture, then we can be confident that we have derived a correct interpretation, and that we have correctly handled the word of truth (2 Timothy 2:15).

Later in this book, we will also consider what the Bible teaches about the sovereignty of God in the lives of all men, and in the events that transpire in His creation. We will examine Scriptures that speak of the sovereignty of God in determining the paths that men take during the course of their lives, whether they are believers or unbelievers. We will also see from the Scriptures how God works in the lives of His people to motivate them, sometimes even forcefully overcoming their own wills, in order to make them will and act according to His sovereign will and purpose for His creation.

The Apostle Paul prayed that we as God's people would grow in our knowledge and understanding of the things of God. Paul wrote: "And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment" (Philippians 1:9). Again Paul wrote: "...we have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding" (Colossians 1:9). Therefore, let us now look diligently into the Scriptures to see what God's word teaches, so that we may fully understand what God has done for us as recipients of His saving grace.

Predestination – Two Widely Held Interpretations

In the Bible we find numerous references used to describe those who have, or will at some point in time, come to faith in Christ. These references

describe believers with words such as “predestined”, “chosen”, “elect”, and as those who are “called” by God. With this in mind, we must admit that the subject of predestination is mentioned in the Bible, and at some point during our walk as believers, we will find ourselves wanting to know more about this teaching.

What exactly do the Scriptures teach us about predestination, and does man himself have a choice in the matter of his own salvation? Predestination refers to one’s eternal destiny after their life here on earth is over, and the issue of that eternal destiny having already been decided beforehand by God.

Some interpret the Bible as saying that God’s salvation through faith in Jesus Christ is an offer that is open to each and every human being who has ever lived, and that their ultimate destiny rests with their own decision either to accept Christ or reject Him. Those who interpret salvation in this way will say that predestination, or God’s choice of those who will be saved, refers to those whom God foreknew, or knew before hand, would make the decision to accept Christ as opposed to rejecting Him, at such time as they are drawn or enabled by God to do so.

Others believe the Bible teaches that those who will receive eternal life are predestined to come to faith in Christ, in that they are foreknown and chosen beforehand by God Himself to be brought to faith, regardless of any works of their own whatsoever, including any decision made while they are still dead in their sins as to whether or not they will accept Christ. In this second case, God foreknew from before the creation of the world those individuals whom He will call to faith in His Son. This calling is effectual, meaning that all of those who are called to faith in Christ will come to Him, and none will refuse that call.

So we see that there are two widely held and different interpretations of the biblical doctrine of predestination. Regardless of which interpretation we hold as being the correct biblical teaching, let us resolve to do as the Bereans did when they considered the message brought by the Apostle Paul, and let us search the Scriptures ourselves, to see whether these things are true (Acts 17:11).

As we begin our study of predestination, we should first consider what the Bible teaches about the depravity of man. When we understand what the Scriptures reveal to us about man’s sinfulness and the extent of his

wickedness and depravity, we will better understand our own salvation and what God has done for us through His saving grace.

The Fall of Man and Its Consequences

In Genesis 2, after the Lord God had created the heavens and the earth, the plants and the creatures that live on the earth, we find that He created Adam, and then Eve to be Adam's helper. God planted the Garden of Eden, and He placed Adam and Eve in the garden to tend it and take care of it. He put all kinds of trees in the garden that were good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. God commanded Adam and Eve, saying that they could eat from any tree in the garden, but they must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, or they would surely die.

Following in Genesis 3, we read the account of the fall of man. The serpent, or the devil, deceived Eve with a lie, saying that if she ate the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil that her eyes would be opened, and she would be just like God. The serpent also lied to Eve again saying that she would not surely die if she ate the fruit, as God had said she would.

Eve, after hearing this enticement, looked at the fruit and saw that it was good for food, pleasing to the eye, and desirable as something that would give her wisdom. So she took some and ate it. Then she gave some to her husband Adam who was with her. Adam, who also knew that God had forbidden them to eat this fruit, ate it as well.

This is the point at which sin entered the world. Immediately after they ate the fruit, Adam and Eve became aware that they were naked, and they felt shame, whereas they had no awareness of their nakedness before. As a result of this transgression, God cursed the serpent saying:

“And I will put enmity
Between you and the woman,
And between your seed and her seed;
He shall bruise you on the head,
And you shall bruise him on the heel.” (Genesis 3:15)

This curse that the Lord God pronounced upon the serpent was fulfilled in Christ's victory over Satan at Calvary's cross. After cursing the serpent, the Lord said to Eve that He would greatly increase her pain in childbearing, and that her desire would now be for her husband, who would rule over her. The Lord then said to Adam that because he had listened to his wife and had eaten the fruit of the tree that He had commanded him not to eat, he would have to toil painfully by the sweat of his brow to obtain food from the land until he died and returned to the ground from which he was taken (Genesis 2:7).

At the point in time when Adam and Eve ate the fruit that God had told them not to eat, sin entered the world. This was the fall of man. Before that time, Adam and Eve had the power to either obey God, or to sin by disobeying him. After that point, the inclination and tendency of man was to do only evil. The extent of man's depravity after the fall is revealed in Genesis 6 where we read: "Then the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually." (Genesis 6:5).

Paul described the fall of man saying: "Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned—for until the Law sin was in the world, but sin is not imputed when there is no law. Nevertheless death reigned from Adam until Moses, even over those who had not sinned in the likeness of the offense of Adam, who is a type of Him who was to come." (Romans 5:12-14). Paul then explained that just as sin came into the world through one man, Adam, and that one sin of Adam's brought death and condemnation to every man, so also through one Man, Jesus Christ, and His one act of righteousness, God's grace would overflow to many, resulting in justification that brings life.

No One Seeks God, Not Even One

Paul wrote about man's depravity in Romans 3:9-18, and within this passage he taught us that there is no one who seeks God, not even one. Paul also described the extent of man's wickedness when he wrote in verse 9 that all men, both Jews and Gentiles, are under sin. Beginning in verse 10 we read:

“There is none righteous, not even one;
There is none who understands;
There is none who seeks for God.
All have turned aside, together they have become useless;
There is none who does good,
There is not even one.” (Romans 3:10-12)

In these verses, Paul quoted Scriptures from Psalm 14:1-3, Psalm 53:1-3 and Ecclesiastes 7:20 to describe the extent of man’s wickedness, and to emphasize that ***there is not one man who seeks God, not even one***. Paul then continued in this passage to quote several verses from the Psalms and Isaiah that speak of man’s wickedness and depravity. Since Paul taught us clearly that “there is none who seeks for God”, then God Himself must seek men if any from among them are to be reconciled to Him.

Unregenerate Man is Dead in His Trespasses and Sins

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul described the totality of man’s depravity by saying that he is “dead” in trespasses and sin. In chapter 2 we read:

And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience. Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest. But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them. (Ephesians 2:1-10)

In verse 1, Paul did not say that man is sick with sin, or terminally ill with sin with some small spark of life left in him, but he said that man is

dead in trespasses and sin. He described man's total depravity and condition of deadness and inability to respond to the things of God in order to emphasize the magnitude of God's grace toward us whom He has saved.

Paul taught that all of us as believers were also once dead in our transgressions, until God, because of His love and mercy which He chose to show toward us, made us alive with Christ, even when we were still dead in our sins (verses 4-5). Paul then taught that it is solely by God's grace that we have been saved, through faith in Christ. He also taught that our faith does not come from within ourselves, but it is a gift given to us by God. (Consider also Philippians 1:29). Paul made it clear that our salvation does not come about through any work or effort of our own whatsoever, so that no one may boast that he had anything at all to do with his salvation (verses 8-9).

If our faith were somehow based on even one good work of our own, even making a "right decision", then we would be able to boast that we made the right decision when others refused to do so, when they too supposedly could have. However, Paul taught that for those of us who have come to faith in Christ, we should understand that our faith is the gift of God and has nothing to do with any works of our own.

Paul again emphasized the inability of unregenerate man to receive and respond to the things of God when he wrote: "But a natural man *does not accept* the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he *cannot understand* them, because they are spiritually appraised." (1 Corinthians 2:14, emphasis added).

The natural man, or man in his lost, unregenerate state, does not accept the things of the Spirit of God because he cannot understand them. The things of the Spirit of God cannot be discerned with the intellect alone. Rather, as Paul said, "they are spiritually appraised", which is to say they are discerned and understood only through the Spirit of God. For this reason, when the lost, unregenerate man hears the Gospel message given to us through the word of God, it sounds like foolishness to him. He is simply unable to understand or accept it because he is without the Spirit of God, which means that he is still spiritually dead in his trespasses and sins.

A dead body is unable to respond to any outside stimulus other than the call of God raising it to life, as was the case when Jesus called Lazarus to

life though he had been dead for four days (John 11:38-44). In the same way, the unregenerate man who is dead in his transgressions is unable to respond to the Gospel message until he has been called to life by God, and his regeneration occurs. At this point he is made alive with Christ, and he is then able to respond to Jesus Christ as his Lord who has saved him, just as Saul, who would later become the Apostle Paul, was able to do for the first time when the time for his conversion came on the Damascus Road.

Saul's Conversion on the Damascus Road

Saul's conversion is recounted three times in the Book of Acts: the first time in Acts 9:1-16, the second time in Acts 22:1-11, and the third time in Acts 26:9-18. When our sovereign God chooses to repeat events and teachings in His word, we should consider very carefully just what He is saying to us.

At the time of Saul's conversion, he was still thoroughly intent on persecuting the church. He had made no decision at all to come to Christ. In Acts 9:1-2, we see that he was "still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord", and that he was on his way to Damascus to bring back to Jerusalem in chains any followers of Christ he found there, to be punished (See also Acts 22:4-5 and Acts 26:9-12).

Saul had heard the Gospel message. He knew what it was about, and he was opposed to it. We see from these accounts of his conversion in the Book of Acts that he had remained steadfastly opposed to the Gospel, right up until the instant in time when he was confronted by Jesus Christ Himself.

However, this persecutor of the church and enemy of the Faith was one whom God had foreknown from before the creation of the world (Ephesians 1:4-5). In His time, though Saul was overtly hostile to the Gospel of Christ, God intervened in his life to bring him to faith. God forcefully overcame Saul's own will, which was hostile to the Gospel message as is the case with all unregenerate men (Romans 8:7). As a result of God's forceful intervention in his life, Saul responded to Jesus Christ as his Lord for the first time, as we see recorded in Acts 22:

“But it happened that as I was on my way, approaching Damascus about noontime, a very bright light suddenly flashed from heaven all around me, and I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?’ And I answered, ‘Who are You, Lord?’ And He said to me, ‘I am Jesus the Nazarene, whom you are persecuting.’ And those who were with me saw the light, to be sure, but did not understand the voice of the One who was speaking to me. And I said, ‘What shall I do, Lord?’ And the Lord said to me, ‘Get up and go on into Damascus, and there you will be told of all that has been appointed for you to do.’ (Acts 22:6-10)

If we read the text in the passages of the book of Acts recounting Saul’s conversion, and if we refrain from adding our own thoughts and conditions to the text, we will come to this conclusion: ***Saul got saved contrary to his own will, and apart from his own decision in the matter.*** At the time of Saul’s conversion, he was still hostile to the Gospel message; he had made no decision to come to Christ. God intervened in Saul’s life to change him and bring him to faith, and He does the same in the lives of every one of us who comes to faith in Christ.

Paul himself emphasized the inability of unregenerate men, all unregenerate men, to respond to the things of God when he wrote: “For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace, because the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for ***it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able***, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.” (Romans 8:6-8, emphasis added).

Paul taught us in these verses that “the mind set on the flesh”, or the mind of unregenerate man, is hostile toward God; it will not subject itself to the law of God ***because it is not even able to do so***. Sinful, unregenerate man is unable to accept or subject himself to the word of God, and therefore he cannot please God. Paul’s teaching in these verses is consistent with his teaching in Romans 3:10-12, where he emphasized that no one seeks God, not even one.

Since no unregenerate man will seek God, because he is unable to do so, how then can man be saved? How can sinful man be freed from his inability to respond to the Gospel message of salvation through Jesus Christ and through him alone?

The answer is that God must intervene in an individual's life to overcome their own will, which is hostile toward Him, and He must forcefully and effectually bring them to faith, just as He did in the life of Saul. When God does this, an individual's regeneration has occurred; they have been born again (John 3:3). The evidence that they have been born again is that they respond to Jesus Christ as Lord, and they believe the Gospel message, just as happened in the life of Saul.

This is the lesson that God communicates to His people through the conversion of Saul, which is recounted three times in the Book of Acts. As we will soon see, this same teaching is consistently communicated through other passages of Scripture as well.

21.

Predestination – Part 2

As we continue our study of predestination, we will consider more teachings from the Bible that speak of God's sovereign choice of a people for Himself, whom He has foreknown since before the creation of the world. One of the things that we will notice as we study further is that teachings given to us by Jesus are consistent with teachings given by the apostles John, Peter, and Paul, and their teachings are in agreement with teachings given to us by the authors of the book of Acts and the letter to the Hebrews.

The Effectual Calling of God

In John 6, Jesus said: “No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day.” (John 6:44). In this verse Jesus taught that for anyone to be able to come to Him, they must be drawn by God the Father. Otherwise, they are unable to accept the Gospel of Christ; they are unable to believe in Him. Now let us look carefully at the second part of this verse. After Jesus said that no one can come to Him unless the Father draws him, He then immediately said, “and I will raise him up at the last day”.

Notice the certainty in the statement where Jesus said, “I will”, which teaches us that those whom the Father draws to His Son *will* be raised up at the last day. Jesus did not say that those who are drawn must then make the decision to come to Him in order to be saved. However, Jesus did say clearly, and without any added conditions or any mention of man's cooperation, that those whom the Father draws *will* be raised up at the last day.

John 6:44 is one of several Bible passages that teach us about the calling of an individual to faith in Christ. Jesus taught us that this calling of God, this drawing by God the Father, is an effectual calling, meaning that all

of those who receive this inward calling *will* indeed come to Him, and they *will* all be raised up at the last day. Without this effectual calling of God, the mind of sinful man, which is hostile toward God, has no desire to come to Christ and has not even the ability to come to Him (again, Romans 8:7).

There is an outward calling whereby the Gospel of Christ is preached in the hearing of men, which is illustrated in the Parable of the Sower recorded in Matthew 13:1-23. Jesus taught us in this parable that *the only place where the seed sown by the farmer produced a harvest of good fruit was where it fell upon "good soil"*. This is to say that when the seed of the Gospel of Christ is spoken in man's hearing, the only place where a harvest of good fruit will be realized is where the message is heard by God's elect. In contrast to others who hear the same Gospel message, God's elect both hear *and understand* the message, and they will therefore be saved and bear fruit to the glory of God. (Consider Matthew 13:23 and Acts 22:9).

In contrast to others who may receive the outward proclamation of the Gospel of Christ in their hearing, God's elect not only hear this outward calling for men to put their faith in Christ for the forgiveness of their sins, but they also receive the inward calling of God, which always results in the regeneration of those who receive it. In His time, the Father draws His elect to faith in His Son Jesus Christ, and they all do in fact come to Him.

This drawing, which Jesus spoke about in John 6:44, is the inward calling of God, and it always results in the one who is drawn being raised up at the last day, just as Jesus said. *With this inward, effectual calling of God regeneration occurs, and one is born into the kingdom of God, apart from their own personal decision or cooperation.* The one who has received this calling has no more chance of refusing it than Saul had when he was called to faith on the Damascus Road, even while he was still intent on persecuting the church.

If anyone rejects the Gospel of Christ, it is only because they have never been drawn by the Father; they have never received this inward, effectual calling of God that Jesus spoke about in John 6:44. Believing in Christ is not something that sinful, unregenerate man has the ability or capacity to do, in and of himself, in order to obtain salvation for himself. He must be drawn by the Father.

When a man is drawn to Christ by the Father, he is regenerated. He is born into the kingdom of God, and evidence of this regeneration and conversion which God has wrought within him is that he does indeed believe in Christ. Man does not reject the inward calling of God. Rather when the Father draws a man, Jesus *will* raise him up at the last day, just as He said He would.

There is one other thing that we should mention regarding the “drawing” by the Father that Jesus spoke about in John 6:44. The Greek word in the original text which is translated to English as “draws” in John 6:44 is the word “helko”, which means “to draw” or “to drag”. With this meaning in mind, we can easily see from the accounts of Saul’s conversion in the Book of Acts how he was forcefully “dragged” into the kingdom of God apart from any decision or cooperation of his own, even as he was “still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord’s disciples” (Acts 9:1).

Later in John 6, Jesus once again emphasized man’s inability to come to Him, unless it has been granted to him by the Father. Speaking to a crowd, Jesus said that the words He had spoken to them are “spirit” and “life” (John 6:63), and yet there were some there who did not believe. Jesus then explained the reason that there were some who had heard His words but did not believe, when He said to them: “For this reason I have said to you, that no one can come to Me unless it has been granted him from the Father.” (John 6:65).

Jesus knew that some of those following Him at the time refused to accept Him and His words. Knowing His own sheep, and knowing that there were also some there who did not believe, Jesus emphasized again in John 6:65 what He had already taught in John 6:44, when He said that no one *could* come to Him; no one was *able* to come to Him, “unless it has been granted him from the Father”.

In John chapters 8 and 10, Jesus again taught of the inability of unregenerate men to hear His words and come to Him, unless they are numbered among those whom He referred to as His sheep. In John 10:24-26, we read that some Jews had gathered around Jesus and asked Him not to keep them in suspense, but to tell them plainly if He was indeed the Christ. Jesus replied to them saying that He had already told them, and that the miracles He had done in His Father’s name among them bore witness to His claim that He was in truth the Christ. Then Jesus told them: “But you do not

believe ***because you are not of My sheep.***” (John 10:26, emphasis added). It has only been granted to God’s elect, or those whom Jesus referred to as His sheep, to believe in Him.

Notice that Jesus did not say to them they were not His sheep because they had decided for themselves not to believe, but conversely, He said that the reason they did not believe in Him was because they were not His sheep. Only those who belong to God, or those whom Jesus calls His sheep, will hear His voice (John 10:3-4, 10:27). ***All of the rest will not be able to hear*** (John 6:44, 6:65, 8:43, 8:47, 10:25-26).

Jesus, being the Son of God, knew that these individuals to whom He was talking were not numbered among His sheep. Again, only God’s elect, or those whom Jesus referred to as His “sheep”, will hear His voice. These will be called to faith in Christ, and they will therefore believe in Him. All the rest will be left in their sins.

Jesus said: “It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and are life.” (John 6:63). The Spirit of God gives eternal life, and unregenerate man, or man who is “in the flesh” so to speak, is completely without the ability to accept the Gospel of Christ unless he is called to faith by God Himself (John 6:44, 6:65, Romans 8:7, 1 Corinthians 2:14).

If and when this calling of God occurs in an individual’s life, they are regenerated; they have been born again. Their being born again does not come about as a result of their own decision made when they are still dead in their sins, or still in the flesh, because as Jesus said: “the flesh profits nothing”. Man’s salvation comes about by the sovereign choice and effectual calling of God.

All men will remain hostile toward God unless and until they are called by Him to faith in Christ, just as was the case with Saul right up until the moment of his conversion on the Damascus Road. The Scriptures teach us that man’s depravity is total. Since man in his unregenerate state is hostile toward God and unable to seek Him, then God must seek men and Himself bring them to faith, if any are to be saved.

Paul Described the “Order of Salvation”

In his letter to the Romans, Paul wrote: “For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren; and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified.” (Romans 8:29-30).

In these verses Paul spoke of God’s foreknowledge of those who would receive the gift of eternal life. Paul taught that those whom God “foreknew” are the ones who are “predestined” to be conformed to the likeness of Jesus Christ, which means that those whom God foreknew are the ones who are predestined to be the recipients of eternal life. Further, Paul taught that those whom God predestined; He also called, and those whom He called; He also justified, and those whom He justified; He also glorified.

Romans 8:29-30 describes the chain of events by which each of us as believers comes to faith in Christ, and ultimately spends eternity with Him in Heaven. Notice that action by God is involved in every event in the chain. Paul said that God foreknew, God predestined, God called, God then justified, and God finally glorified. In every case action by God is mentioned, and action by man is not mentioned.

All who come to faith in Christ come to faith in Him and ultimate glory by the order given in Romans 8:29-30. Each of these events happens in succession, and once again, each of the actions involved in these events is brought about by God Himself; there is no action or cooperation by man mentioned at all.

First, God foreknew these individuals, meaning that He chose them from before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in His sight (Ephesians 1:4-5). Those whom He foreknew are predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son. In God’s time, these individuals are born into the world, and again in God’s time, He calls these chosen individuals to faith in His Son. Paul then taught that God justifies those whom He calls, and finally in this chain of events, we see that those whom God justifies, He also glorifies.

Let us now look very carefully at the “link” in this chain of events where Paul said that those whom God called, He also justified. Paul did not say that “some of those” whom God called are also justified, if they decide to heed that call of God and accept Christ. Rather, Paul taught very succinctly in this passage, and with no added conditions or cooperation by man mentioned whatsoever, that ***all of those whom God calls to faith in His Son are also justified by Him.***

This calling that Paul wrote about in Romans 8:30 is the same effectual calling of God that Jesus taught about in John 6:44 and 6:63-65. The lesson from all three of these passages is that ***all of those*** who are called to faith in Christ with this inward, effectual calling of God ***will*** come to Christ, and none will refuse.

In Romans 8:29-30 where Paul described the order of salvation, and also in John 6:37, we find stated very concisely the teachings of both predestination and the eternal security of the believer. Every step in the salvation of an individual is brought about by God Himself, and the decision to bring that individual to faith in Christ was made by God before the foundation of the world. Further, that salvation is eternally secure and certain, as Paul also taught elsewhere in the book of Romans when he wrote: “for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable” (Romans 11:29).

Chosen by God - Appointed to Eternal Life

Paul mentioned predestination again in his letter to the Ephesians, where he wrote: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him. In love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will”. (Ephesians 1:3-5).

The letter to the Ephesians is written to God’s saints (Ephesians 1:1). God’s saints are those who have, or will in God’s time, be brought to faith in Christ. Speaking of God’s saints, Paul taught that God “chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless

before Him”. Paul also said that God “predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself”, and that He made His choice of us “according to the kind intention of His will”.

Paul mentioned predestination yet again as he continued his teaching in Ephesians 1. Paul wrote that in Christ “we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will” (Ephesians 1:11).

In this verse Paul taught that God works out “all things” in conformity with His sovereign will, plan, and purpose. “All things” includes His choice of those who will be brought to faith in Christ, receiving redemption through His blood, which bought for us the forgiveness of our sins. God Himself chose to reveal His Son to those whom He foreknew, His elect, and it is the result of His choice of us that we are brought to faith and believe in Christ.

We are those whom the Father has given to His Son Jesus Christ, and we will indeed come to Christ (John 6:37). Jesus referred to those of us who were given to Him by the Father as His “sheep” in John 10. Elsewhere in the Bible, those of us chosen to receive eternal life are referred to as “the elect”. Elect means chosen, and an election simply means a choice.

Considering once again Paul’s teaching in Ephesians 1, we will notice that it is God who chooses men for salvation, and that man’s choice or decision is not mentioned (Ephesians 1:4-5, 11). In another passage in the Gospel of John, Jesus spoke to His disciples, and He told them plainly that it was not they who had chosen Him, rather it was He who had chosen them and appointed them to bear fruit that would last (John 15:16).

The writer of the Book of Acts spoke of those whom God has chosen, or God’s elect, as being those who are *appointed* to eternal life. In Acts 13 we read: “When the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord; and *as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed.*” (Acts 13:48, emphasis added).

Who were those who believed? It was those who were “appointed” to eternal life who believed. Let us not overlook the order of the events in this verse: the appointing to eternal life by God came first, and then as a result came the believing in Christ.

Those who do ultimately come to faith in Christ are those whom God chose before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in His sight. These are the ones whom He appointed to eternal life. In God's time these individuals are born into the world, and again in God's time they are all called by Him to faith in Christ. When they are called, they all come to Christ.

When we believe in Christ, it is *evidence* that God has chosen us and has appointed us to eternal life. In fact, it is evidence that we have already been called to faith in Christ by God the Father; it is evidence that we have already been born again.

Believing in Christ is not an act of our own will that we choose to do when we are still unregenerate and dead in our sins, by which we avail ourselves of God's "offer" of salvation, as some say. Paul taught in Ephesians 2:8-9 that it is by God's grace we have been saved, through faith, and this faith which saves us is not a result of *any* works of our own. Rather, our faith in Christ is a gift that God gave to us apart from any work, action, merit, or decision of our own. The Scriptures we have considered so far indicate that getting saved is something that happens to an individual as a result of God's choice and His calling, and not something that unregenerate man attains by way of his own choice or decision to believe in Christ.

If we believe in Christ, it is because we have been appointed to eternal life, and all of those appointed to eternal life will come to faith in Christ at such time as they are called by God, as Jesus taught in John 6:44. When these elect are called to faith in Christ, they all come to Him, regardless of their present hostility toward the Gospel, and regardless of any decision of their own, just as was the case with Saul when he was called to faith on the Damascus road, even while he was still hostile toward God and intent on persecuting the church (Acts 9:1-16, 22:1-10).

As we can see from John 6:44 and 6:63-65, Jesus taught that unregenerate men are *not able* to come to Him apart from His Father's drawing or calling. Let us consider once again Paul's teaching in Romans 8 where he wrote: "the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, *for it is not even able to do so.*" (Romans 8:7, emphasis added). If it were not for God's irresistible grace demonstrated by His effectual calling to faith of His elect, no one would be

saved, because we would all remain hostile toward Him, and unable to come to Christ.

Our coming to faith in Christ has nothing to do with any decision that we make while we are still unregenerate and dead in our sins, either to receive Christ or to reject Him, because we are incapable of coming to Christ when we are still dead in our sins. Rather, our faith in Christ is the gift that results from the decision of God, who “chose us in Him before the foundation of the world” (Ephesians 1:4), and who “predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself”. (Ephesians 1:5).

Many Are Called, But Few Are Chosen

In Matthew 22:1-14, Jesus gave the Parable of the Wedding Banquet. In verse 11 we see that the king, who had prepared the wedding banquet for his son, noticed that there was a man there who was not wearing wedding clothes. The wedding clothes in the parable signify the righteousness of Christ, without which no one will enter the kingdom of Heaven. The king told his servants to tie the man up, and throw him outside into the darkness, where there would be “weeping and gnashing of teeth”, which signifies eternal separation from God. In the final verse of the passage Jesus said: “For many are called, but few are chosen.” (Matthew 22:14).

When Jesus said that many are called, He was teaching that many are called outwardly, when they hear or read the proclamation of the Gospel message. Many are called outwardly to repent of their sins and come to Him. But Jesus then said that though “many” are called in this way, only “few” are chosen. These few who are chosen are God’s elect, who hear not only the outward call for men to repent of their sins and believe in Christ, but through the hearing of the word of God they are also called with the inward, effectual calling of God which always results in the regeneration of those who receive it.

Many may hear the outward call of the proclamation of the Gospel message, but as Paul wrote to Thessalonian believers, he knew that God had chosen them because “our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction” (1 Thessalonians 1:5). Those who receive God’s calling hear the outward proclamation of the

Gospel, and it comes to them not in word only, “but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction.” Here is the evidence manifested by those whom God has chosen, those who have received God’s calling to faith in Jesus Christ.

As we consider Jesus’ teaching in the Parable of the Wedding Banquet, let us once again consider His teaching in the Parable of the Sower given to us in Matthew 13:1-23. Both of these parables provide an illustration of men hearing the Gospel message, and both parables demonstrate the results in their lives of them having heard the message.

In the Parable of the Sower, a farmer went out to sow seed. The seed is the metaphor that Jesus used to symbolize the Gospel message. As the farmer spread the seed, some fell beside the road, some fell on rocky places, some fell among the thorns, and some seed fell on what Jesus described as “good soil”.

In each of the first three cases, no harvest was realized from the seed that was sown. Only in the case where the seed fell on “good soil” was a harvest indeed realized. The “good soil” in this parable symbolizes God’s elect, who receive the seed of the Gospel message and understand it. They are the only ones who come to faith in Christ. As a result of their genuine faith, they will bear a harvest of spiritual fruit to the glory of God (Matthew 13:23).

Even though many are called outwardly, as Jesus taught in Matthew 22:14, only few are chosen by God to come to faith in Christ. All of these chosen, or God’s elect, will all be called with His effectual calling to faith in Christ, and they will all indeed come to faith in Christ. This again is what Jesus was teaching when He said: “All that the Father gives Me *will* come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out.” (John 6:37, emphasis added).

In Conclusion

When Paul wrote in Romans 8:30 that those whom God calls, He also justifies, he did not say that those whom God calls are justified, if they should cooperate by making the right decision. Paul said without ambiguity

and without any added conditions whatsoever that those whom God calls He also justifies. ***Any added implication of the decision of man being necessary is something that is not contained in the Scripture.***

No one resists this inward, effectual calling of God. Many may reject the outward call of the spoken or written Gospel message, but all of those who are called inwardly by God do indeed come to faith in Christ, and none who receive this calling resist it or refuse it. This is the destiny of those of us whom God has chosen to come to faith in His Son Jesus Christ, and it is a destiny that God decided and appointed for us before the world was created.

The Apostle Peter also spoke of God's elect, or those chosen by God, when he addressed the recipients of his first letter with the words: "To those who reside as aliens, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, who are chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, by the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to obey Jesus Christ and be sprinkled with His blood: May grace and peace be yours in the fullest measure" (1 Peter 1:1-2).

Peter addressed his letter to those who are "chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father", as Paul also taught in Romans 8:29-30. For what purpose were they chosen? They were chosen by God "to obey Jesus Christ and be sprinkled with His blood", and God's choice of His elect was made before the foundation of the world (Ephesians 1:4-5).

22.

Predestination – Part 3

As we have noted before, many dedicated Christians interpret the Bible as teaching that God's salvation through faith in Christ is an offer that is open to each and every individual who has ever lived. With this belief and understanding of the Scriptures, the determining factor involved in each person's salvation is their own decision as to whether they want to believe in Christ.

Other dedicated believers interpret the Bible as teaching that those who come to faith in Christ are those individuals whom God chose before the creation of the world, and that God brings these chosen individuals to faith in Christ apart from any decision of their own. These come to faith at such time as they are effectually called by God, after which they believe in Christ and find themselves with a heart to obey Him. Their belief in Christ is both a result and evidence of their regeneration.

In the first case, man's own will and decision is the determining factor in his salvation. In the second case, man's will and decision have nothing at all to do with his salvation; rather God's choice is the determining factor. The question that we should ask ourselves as dedicated disciples of Jesus Christ, is which of these two teachings is the scripturally consistent, and therefore the correct teaching.

Salvation – Does God or Man Decide?

In the first case of those who believe the Bible teaches that man's own will and decision is the determining factor in his salvation, many will agree completely with John 6:44 and 6:65, where Jesus said that no man can come to Him unless the Father draws him. Then, in order to make the free will doctrine of salvation logically consistent, they must insist that there is a time, at least once in every individual's life, when they are drawn by God to

come to Christ, and at that time the individual must decide for themselves whether or not they will accept Christ.

The problem with this interpretation is that the idea or the assertion that there is at least one “drawing” by God in every individual’s life is *stated nowhere in the Bible*. The assertion that God gives every individual at least one opportunity to choose to believe in Christ is a teaching that is not found in the Scriptures, but it is a necessary assertion for man to make in order to “fill in the gaps”, so to speak, in an effort to support the free will doctrine of salvation, at least logically.

Continuing with this line of interpretation, part of which comes from the Scriptures, and the rest which comes from man “filling in the gaps” with his own assertions and reasoning, some will then interpret God’s foreknowledge mentioned in Romans 8:29 and elsewhere as God knowing from before the creation of the world those individuals who would choose to accept Christ when drawn and enabled by God to do so. They will also say that the individual could reject Christ at this time if they choose to do so.

To make matters even more complicated, in the light John 6:37, 6:44, 6:65, and Romans 8:30, some who adhere to the free will doctrine of salvation feel compelled to acknowledge that there is an effectual calling of God, and that none of those who receive this calling will refuse it. However, because they interpret God’s foreknowledge as God knowing ahead of time those individuals who will make the decision to accept Christ and not reject Him when they are drawn or enabled to do so, they must then assert that God only extends His effectual calling to those whom He knew would accept Christ of their own free will anyway, without an effectual calling.

This idea of God only extending His effectual calling to those whom He knew would accept Christ of their own free will anyway is yet another idea and concept that is *stated nowhere in the Bible*. Therefore, it is yet one more attempt by man to “fill in the gaps” by adding his own assertions and reasoning to what is written in the Bible in an effort to support the free will doctrine of salvation by attempting to explain passages of Scripture that clearly challenge this doctrine.

In the second case of those who believe the Bible teaches that man’s own will or decision has nothing at all to do with his salvation, God’s foreknowledge is understood as follows: God chose before the world began

to save certain individuals, and He “knew” these individuals from the beginning. In His time, each of these chosen individuals is born into the world, and again in His time, He calls each of them to faith in Christ through the hearing of the Gospel message (Matthew 13:8, 23, Romans 10:17). Everyone who receives this calling does indeed come to Christ, and no one who receives this calling rejects Him. This means that the calling of God, which Jesus mentioned in John 6:44, and which Paul mentioned in Romans 8:30, is an effectual calling; it always results in regeneration for those who receive it. This interpretation is supported entirely by the Scriptures themselves, and it requires no additional assertions or reasoning by man in order to make it consistent and cohesive.

God's Sovereign Choice

Perhaps no other passage in Scripture gets right to the core of the question as to whether or not man's own will, desire, or decision is involved in his salvation, as does the Apostle Paul's discussion of God's sovereign choice of a people for Himself in Romans 9. The reader is encouraged to first review and study prayerfully the entire passage of Romans 9:6-24 before proceeding with the explanations that follow, so that a complete consideration can be given to the context of this passage and the individual verses themselves. We should consider very carefully, verse by verse, what Paul is teaching and exactly what he intended to communicate.

Paul began Romans 9 by lamenting that many of the Jews rejected the message that Jesus Christ was indeed the Messiah, and that salvation and the forgiveness of sins comes through Him alone. Paul said that the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship, and the promises were all given to the Israelites. He then continued to explain in the following verses that it does not mean that God's word had failed because so many of the people descended from Israel (or Jacob) were rejecting His salvation through His Son Jesus Christ.

As he continued his teaching in verse 6, Paul explained that not all of the people of Israel by birth will be included in spiritual Israel, but only those who are the “children of the promise”. In this passage Paul used the example of God's sovereign choice of a particular people in the Old Testament in order to demonstrate God's sovereign choice in His calling of a

particular people to faith in Christ, not only from among the Jews but also from among the Gentiles.

Here Paul began his discussion of God's sovereign choice of His people, even from among the descendants of Israel, by saying that just because they were directly descended from Jacob in the natural way did not mean that they would be included with spiritual Israel. This is what Paul meant when he said: "For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel; nor are they all children because they are Abraham's descendants" (Romans 9:6b-7a).

Paul then continued the discussion by quoting Genesis 21:12, saying that it would be through Isaac that Abraham's true offspring, the children of God, would come. Isaac himself was the child of promise born to Abraham and Sarah. God promised Abraham that he would have a son through Sarah, even though Abraham himself was about a hundred years old and Sarah was known to be barren. Nevertheless, in God's time, Sarah did conceive even in her advanced age, though she was unable to do so as a young woman, and Abraham did have the son of God's promise, who was Isaac. God gave life in the dead womb of Sarah, fulfilling His promise of a son to Abraham. As Paul also taught, God "gives life to the dead and calls into being that which does not exist." (Romans 4:17).

As he continued his teaching in Romans 9:10, Paul carried the discussion of God's sovereign choice of a people for Himself a generation further by considering the twin sons of Isaac and his wife Rebekah, who were Jacob and Esau. Let us look carefully at the following verses where Paul wrote: "for though the twins were not yet born and had not done anything good or bad, so that God's purpose according to His choice would stand, not because of works but because of Him who calls, it was said to her, 'The older will serve the younger.' Just as it is written, 'Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.'" (Romans 9:11-13).

Paul taught in these verses that God makes His choice or election of His people, just as He had decided to do concerning Jacob and Esau, before they are even born, and before they have done anything at all, either good or bad. The teaching that Paul intended to communicate here becomes very clear in the next verse, because we see that he anticipated objections to what he had just written. Beginning in verse 14 we read: "What shall we say then? There is no injustice with God, is there? May it never be! For He says to

Moses, ‘I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.’” (Romans 9:14-15).

If Paul were teaching that each and every person ever born could be saved if they so desired by deciding for themselves that they would receive Christ and not reject Him, then there would be no reason for him to anticipate any objection at all. After all, if everyone had a chance at salvation, and if their salvation ultimately depended upon their own choice and decision whether to accept Christ or reject Him, then in terms of human ideas of what is fair and what is just, nothing could be fairer and more just than allowing each man to decide for himself.

However, Paul was not teaching that man’s salvation rests ultimately with his own personal decision either to accept Christ or reject Him. On the contrary, what Paul taught in these verses was that the choice of man’s salvation rests with God alone, and that He has mercy and compassion in this respect upon whomever He chooses. Paul understood that in the minds of most men, this concept of God’s salvation will be considered unfair, unjust, and unreasonable, and this is exactly why he anticipated that many would object to what he was teaching.

In verse 14, Paul responded to these anticipated objections and protests by stating emphatically that God is not unjust. All of those whom God leaves in their sins receive justice, in that they pay the just penalty for their sins in an eternity separated from God. Those of us whom God has chosen to bring to faith in Christ, however, receive something far better than justice. We receive God’s mercy, and not the justice due us for our sins, in that the blood of Christ will cleanse us from all of our sins. From Paul’s teaching here we see that some receive mercy from God, while all of the others receive justice, but no one receives injustice from God.

Paul then continued, teaching clearly that a person’s own will or desire or effort has nothing at all to do with their salvation, but their salvation is solely and completely dependent upon God’s decision as to whether He will show mercy to them. This teaching is revealed in verse 16 where Paul wrote: “So then it ***does not depend on the man who wills*** or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy.” (Romans 9:16, emphasis added).

As we have noted previously, many who say that man ultimately decides for himself whether or not he will receive Christ will freely admit that no man can come to Christ unless the Father draws him, just as Jesus taught in John 6:44. They will then insist that at some point in each and every individual's life, the Father does draw or enable them to come to Christ. They will then go on to say that at this point the individual must decide for himself whether he will accept or reject Christ as his Lord and Savior. Those who hold this view are saying that indeed salvation *does* depend on man's will, and the decision is his, but the Apostle Paul is saying with clarity and with no ambiguity in Romans 9:16 that salvation *does not* depend on man's will, or his effort, but the decision is God's.

There is clearly a contradiction here between the teaching of those who say that man's own will is the determining factor in his salvation, and the teaching of the Apostle Paul who said that man's salvation does not depend upon his own will, or his effort, but it depends upon God, who decides to whom He will show mercy. If we as believers hold the view that each man's own will and decision to either accept Christ or reject Him is the determining factor in his salvation, then we must ask ourselves how this teaching of Paul's in Romans 9, and especially in verse 16, can possibly be consistent with our own opinion.

The Holy Bible is the inspired word of God, and it is profitable for doctrine, reproof, correction, and instruction in righteousness (2 Timothy 3:16). If there is ever a contradiction between what the Bible teaches and our present understanding of things, then we should be willing to let the Scriptures themselves be the guide for what we embrace as the truth.

Does God Harden Some People Against Himself?

After Paul's statement in Romans 9:16 that man's salvation does not depend upon his own will, or his own effort, he continued his teaching of election and God's sovereign choice of a people. Paul emphasized God's decision to save those individuals to whom He has decided to show mercy, and he also taught that God chooses not to show mercy to others, even hardening them against His will. Paul wrote: "For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, 'For this very purpose I raised you up, to demonstrate My power in you, and that My name might be proclaimed throughout the whole earth.' So

then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires.” (Romans 9:17-18).

Here Paul used the example of Pharaoh, whom God hardened against His will and against the request of Moses to let the people of Israel go from their bondage in Egypt. As Paul quoted from Exodus 9:16, God hardened Pharaoh against Himself in order that He might show His power and that His name might be proclaimed in all the earth by the miracles He wrought through His servant Moses when He brought His people out of Egyptian bondage by His own might and power.

God hardened Pharaoh against Himself and accomplished His own purpose through it. One might ask: Why did God harden Pharaoh; why did He not just show mercy to Pharaoh and make him willing to obey Him? God does not reveal His “reasons” why He chooses to harden some, and He chooses to show mercy to others. However, it is revealed to us that God’s mercy shown to those whom He calls to faith in His Son has nothing whatsoever to do with their own works, and therefore no man can boast that he obtained God’s favor by his own actions (Ephesians 2:9-8, 1 Corinthians 4:7). The fact remains, as Paul taught in Romans 9:18, that God has mercy upon whom He wants to have mercy, and He hardens those whom He wants to harden.

Continuing with verse 19 we read: “You will say to me then, ‘Why does He still find fault? *For who resists His will?*’ On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, ‘Why did you make me like this,’ will it? Or does not the potter have a right over the clay, to make from the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for common use?” (Romans 9:19-21, emphasis added).

In these verses we see that Paul again expected that some would object to what he was teaching and would question how God could find fault and condemn someone whom He has chosen to harden against His will. The hard truth that Paul is teaching here, is that regarding salvation, *no one resists God’s will* (Romans 9:19).

Those to whom God shows mercy are called to faith in Christ, and none refuse that call. Whereas those to whom God does not show mercy are not called by Him; they are left in their sins. These are not able to come to

faith in Christ by their own innate desire or decision (John 1:13, Romans 8:7, Romans 9:16), because no man has the ability to come to Christ unless God the Father draws him (John 6:44). Paul answered these anticipated objections by saying that it is not for man to question his Maker regarding His sovereign decisions about those whom He has created and how He decides to use them, whether “for honorable use” or “for common use” (Romans 9:21).

Paul concluded his teaching in Romans 9 regarding God’s sovereign choice of a people for Himself when he put forward these questions: “What if God, although willing to demonstrate His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction? And He did so to make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory, even us, whom He also called, not from among Jews only, but also from among Gentiles.” (Romans 9:22-24).

We see here in these final verses of Romans 9:6-24, that there are those who are “vessels of wrath prepared for destruction”. In contrast there are those who are “vessels of mercy, *which He prepared beforehand for glory, even us, whom He also called*” (emphasis added), and these He called from among the Jews and from among the Gentiles also, Gentiles being categorically all of those who are not Jews. Those who are vessels of His wrath, prepared for destruction, are those to whom God did not want to show mercy. These He hardened, as Paul said in verse 18.

John’s Teaching Agrees with Paul’s

In Romans 9:16, Paul taught that a man’s salvation does not depend upon his own will or choice in the matter, or upon any effort of his own, but upon God’s will and choice as to whether He will show mercy to him. The Apostle John also emphasized that man’s own will is not involved in his salvation when he wrote: “But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name, who were born, not of blood *nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man*, but of God.” (John 1:12-13, emphasis added). For one to assert that man’s own will and decision as to whether or not he will receive Christ is the determining factor in his salvation would contradict not only Paul’s

teaching of God's sovereign choice in Romans 9 but would also contradict John's teaching here in verse 13 of this passage where he clearly stated that the children of God are not born by way of their own will.

All who come to faith in Christ do receive Him, and they do believe in Him (John 1:12), but the receiving of Christ and the believing in Him are not the means by which unregenerate man avails himself of God's "offer" of salvation, as some would say. Rather the receiving of Christ and the believing in Him are *evidence* in an individual's life that they have already been called by God to faith in Christ; they have already been born again.

In God's time, His elect are born into the world, and again in His time they are all called by Him to faith in Christ. Those who are called by God, He also justifies, and those whom He justifies, He also glorifies together with Christ in Heaven, all according to the order Paul described in Romans 8:29-30.

God Himself brings about an individual's salvation from beginning to end, and He does this only for those whom He foreknew from before the creation of the world (Ephesians 1:4-5), and according to Romans 9:16 and John 1:13 their own will or decision has absolutely nothing to do with their salvation. If we are still not convinced, and we still insist that a man's own cooperation and willful agreement to believe in Christ is the determining factor in his salvation, then let us once again recall the conversion of Saul on the Damascus Road, which occurred apart from his own will or decision in the matter, and in fact contrary to his own will at the time (Acts 9:1).

Jesus said: "All that the Father gives Me will come to Me..." (John 6:37). Those whom the Father has given to His Son Jesus Christ are those who were foreknown by God and chosen by Him before the creation of the world to be brought to faith in Christ. In God's time He calls them to faith in His Son, and none refuse His calling; they all come. God's word does not return to Him void, but always accomplishes the purpose for which He sent it (Isaiah 55:10-11).

Peter Teaches of Those Destined to Disobey

The Apostle Peter also spoke of those individuals whom Paul described in Romans 9:22 as vessels of God's wrath, "prepared for destruction". Peter described them as those who were ***appointed*** or destined to the doom which comes to those who are disobedient to the word. Peter wrote:

This precious value, then, is for you who believe; but for those who disbelieve

"The Stone which the builders rejected,

This became the very corner stone

And "A Stone of stumbling and a Rock of offense";

for they stumble because they are disobedient to the word, and ***to this doom they were also appointed.***

But you are chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light. (1 Peter 2:7-9, emphasis added)

Peter referred to those who stumble because they are disobedient to the word, saying that they were "appointed" to this doom. As we consider Peter's teaching about those who were appointed to disobedience, let us also call to mind Acts 13:48 and the fact that others have been appointed to eternal life. God chose these individuals and appointed them to eternal life that they would be a royal priesthood, a holy nation, and a people for His own possession.

In contrast, those who were appointed to disobey the word are those whom God has hardened against Himself and His word, and He has willed not to show them mercy (Romans 9:18). So we see that God's chosen people were predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son (Romans 8:29), and they are all "called...out of darkness into His marvelous light" (1 Peter 2:9), whereas all of the others did not receive God's mercy, but were destined to disobey the word, and as Peter said, "to this doom they were also appointed".

23.

Predestination – Part 4

The subject of predestination is an often times divisive issue among genuine believers endeavoring to the best of their ability understand the truths of God's word. This teaching is also one that can be hard to grasp because of the presence of some Scriptures which would at first glance seem to indicate that man does have a say in the matter of his own salvation.

Therefore, in the interest of a thorough examination of the Scriptures on this subject, we will consider several Bible verses that have been used by some to insist that man's own decision either to accept Christ or reject Him is the ultimate factor in determining his salvation. In studying these verses, we will consider them within the context of the passages in which they are found, and we will also consider them within the context of the Scriptures as a whole, in order to make sure that the apparent meaning of these verses is not contradicted by other Scriptures. This is to say that we will let Scripture interpret Scripture.

As believers with a heart to understand and obey God's word, let us once again recall how the Bereans in Paul's day "...received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so." (Acts 17:11). In the same way, let us all prayerfully search the Scriptures ourselves in an effort to understand what is taught in God's word, and let us receive and embrace that truth as it is written in the Bible, even if it should challenge our own ideas about the way we think God should be, or if it should challenge things that we have heard declared with great confidence many times before.

The Difficulty of Paul's Teaching in Romans 9

Paul's teaching in Romans 9 gets right to the heart of the disagreement between those who embrace the free will doctrine of salvation,

and those who say the Bible teaches that it is ultimately God's election and calling of an individual that determines whether they will be saved. Romans 9:6-24 is probably the most difficult passage to explain for those who adhere to the belief that a man's salvation rests ultimately with his own decision to either accept or reject Christ.

Despite the clarity of Paul's language in this passage, and the scriptural examples that he used to communicate his point, some will still object to the teaching found here, and in numerous other passages of Scripture. As we discussed previously, within the context of this passage itself, Paul anticipated and fully expected that many would object to what he was teaching as being unjust and unreasonable.

The objection was then, and is still today, to Paul's teaching of God's sovereign choice of a particular people who receive His mercy and are called to faith in Christ, while others do not receive God's mercy, but are hardened by God Himself (Romans 9:18). In an effort to make objections to this teaching valid, an attempt must be made to interpret certain Scripture passages, especially Romans 9:6-24, in such a way as to support the free will doctrine of salvation.

Did God Really Hate Esau?

Within this controversial passage of Romans 9, we read these words:

For though the twins were not yet born and had not done anything good or bad, so that God's purpose according to His choice would stand, not because of works but because of Him who calls, it was said to her, "The older will serve the younger." Just as it is written, "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated." (Romans 9:11-13)

One objection that has been put forward by those who say that man's own decision either to accept Christ or reject Him is ultimately the determining factor in his own salvation, is an assertion that Romans 9:13 actually says something different than what the text itself would indicate. In this verse, Paul quoted from Malachi 1:2-3 to clarify the point that he intended to communicate. Romans 9:13 reads: "Just as it is written, 'Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.'"

Those who object to the doctrine of predestination as God's choice alone will assert that God really did not "hate" Esau, but that He only loved Esau "less" than He loved Jacob. The Greek word from the original text, which is translated as "hated" in Romans 9:13, could be interpreted as "hated" in the sense that we all understand hatred, which is to detest someone, or it could be interpreted as "loved less".

Those who adhere to the free will doctrine of salvation must insist that the Greek word which is translated as "hated" in this passage, should actually have been translated as "loved less". Without taking this position, their doctrine would clearly be shown to be contradicted by Paul's teaching in Romans 9:6-24. The question that we must ask ourselves is this: What is the correct interpretation of the Greek word that is translated as "hated" in the text of Romans 9:13?

As with any interpretation of Scripture, we must consider the context of the passage from which the Scripture is taken. With an examination of the context of this passage in Romans 9:6-24, we see that Paul referred to vessels of God's wrath, who are prepared for destruction (Romans 9:22). We also see reference to vessels of God's mercy, "which He prepared beforehand for glory, even us, whom He also called, not from among Jews only, but also from among Gentiles." (Romans 9:23-24). We also see in Romans 9:18 that God has mercy upon those whom He wants to have mercy, and He hardens those whom He wants to harden.

Words like the ones Paul used in verse 22 of this passage, "vessels of wrath prepared for destruction", do indeed imply hatred as we all understand hatred, which is to detest someone, and they do imply rejection by God. These words do not imply "loving less" as some would say.

Therefore, the context of this passage within which Romans 9:13 is found does not support the assertion that God loved Esau "less" than Jacob. Rather, it supports exactly what the text reads literally, which is that God did in fact hate or detest Esau. This is why Paul used this Scripture from Malachi to support his teaching here. He used God's love of Jacob and His hatred of Esau as demonstrated in Malachi 1:2-5, in order to illustrate God's sovereign choice or election of a people for Himself who are recipients of His mercy, while the rest receive no such mercy.

To carry our examination of the context of this passage further, we can look at the context of the passage in Malachi from which Paul takes this verse, to see if the context there supports the assertion that God really did not hate Esau, but only loved him less than Jacob. Romans 9:13 contains a quotation taken from a passage in Malachi 1 which reads:

“I have loved you,” says the Lord. But you say, “How have You loved us?” “Was not Esau Jacob’s brother?” declares the Lord. “Yet I have loved Jacob; but I have hated Esau, and I have made his mountains a desolation and appointed his inheritance for the jackals of the wilderness.” Though Edom says, “We have been beaten down, but we will return and build up the ruins”; thus says the Lord of hosts, “They may build, but I will tear down; and men will call them the wicked territory, and the people toward whom the Lord is indignant forever.” Your eyes will see this and you will say, “The Lord be magnified beyond the border of Israel!” (Malachi 1:2-5)

In verse 3 of this passage, God spoke of His hatred for Esau (the descendants of Esau are the people of Edom) by saying that “I have made his mountains a desolation and appointed his inheritance for the jackals of the wilderness.” Further, God said in verse 4 that they would be called: “the wicked territory, and the people toward whom the Lord is indignant forever.”

These words and their meaning are clear and can be interpreted in no other way. The words, “the wicked territory, and the people toward whom the Lord is indignant forever” make it clear that God did indeed hate or detest Esau. ***So from the context of Romans 9:6-24, and also from the context of Malachi 1:2-5, we see that God did not love Esau less than He loved Jacob, but He did indeed hate Esau in the sense that all of us understand the word hatred.***

The teaching that Paul intended to communicate by way of scriptural reference to Jacob and Esau, is that there are individuals whom God has decided to love, before they are even born, and before they have done anything at all either good or bad, as was the case with Jacob. These individuals receive His mercy. Likewise, there are also individuals whom God has decided not to love, but to hate, before they are even born, as was the case with Esau. These individuals do not receive His mercy.

The assertion that many have made in an attempt to support the free will doctrine of salvation, which is that God did not really hate Esau, but only loved him less than Jacob, is actually contradicted by the context of both Romans 9 and Malachi 1. Therefore, this assertion is invalid and fails to challenge the apparent meaning of Paul's teaching in Romans 9:6-24. So we see that the meaning intended by Paul is exactly what is indicated in the language of the text.

What Paul intended to communicate is that God chooses some people to receive His mercy, while others do not receive His mercy; rather they are left in their sins. Those whom God chooses to receive His mercy Paul described as “vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory, even us, whom He also called, not only from among Jews only, but also from among Gentiles” (Romans 9:23b-24). Those who do not receive God’s mercy but are left in their sins, Paul described as “vessels of wrath prepared for destruction” (Romans 9:22b).

Further, Paul emphasized in this passage of Romans 9 that man’s own will or desire or decision is not the determining factor in his salvation, but his salvation depends solely upon whether he is one to whom God has decided to show mercy. This teaching is given to us clearly in Romans 9:16 where Paul said: “***So then it does not depend on the man who wills*** or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy” (emphasis added).

Paul also said in Romans 9:18: “So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires.” Once again, the very fact that Paul anticipated objections and protests to what he was teaching (Romans 9:14, 19) tells us that he was indeed teaching what many would consider to be hard, unfair, and unjust.

Doesn't the Bible Say that God Wants All Men to be Saved?

Another objection that is often raised by those who say that man’s own decision either to accept Christ or reject Him is the determining factor in his salvation is the use of the phrase “all men” which occurs in several Bible passages. One such example is found in John 12 where Jesus said: “And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself” (John 12:32). Some interpret the “all men” in this verse as meaning that God has

offered salvation to each and every individual who has ever been born, and all they have to do to take advantage of this offer is to make the decision to accept Christ.

As always when we are interpreting Scripture, we must consider the context of the passage within which the particular verse or verses is found, and we must also consider if our interpretation is contradicted by any other passage of Scripture. John 12:32 referenced above is found within a passage that begins in John 12:20. So we must consider the context of the entire passage in our interpretation of what Jesus was saying in John 12:32. In John 12:20-22, we find that there were Greeks present who were interested in what Jesus had to say, and they came to Philip asking to see Jesus. Philip told Andrew of their request, and the two of them told Jesus.

Jesus, being the Son of God, already knew that there were Greeks (who are Gentiles) present who were interested in what He would say. However, in order to emphasize this to those who would later read his account of the Gospel, John stated very clearly that Andrew and Philip told Jesus that some Greeks were there and wanted to see Him. After this, Jesus then began speaking to all of those present with His teaching about the fruitful grain of wheat starting in John 12:23. Later in the passage, He said that when He was “lifted up from the earth” (which everyone in those days understood to be a reference to crucifixion), He would draw “all men” to Himself.

Jesus, knowing that there were Greek Gentiles present who wanted to see Him, was communicating to the crowd that He would draw not only those from among the Jews to Himself, but also Gentiles as well. A Gentile is anyone who is not of the Jewish race. So when we consider those who are of the Jewish race, along with those who are not of the Jewish race (Gentiles), then we are considering all races of men, which is to say that we are considering “all men” categorically. This is not to say that we are considering all men individually, or each and every individual who has ever been born.

It was widely understood by both Jews and Gentiles in Jesus’ day that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob was the God of the Jews, and that all of His promises applied only to the Jews, who were God’s chosen people. However, contrary to this widely held view at the time, Jesus was communicating to all who were in the crowd, both Jews and Gentiles, that

the Gentiles were also included in God's plan of redemption and salvation. This was also prophesied by Isaiah (Isaiah 49:6 and 65:1), and affirmed again in the Book of Revelation where we read:

"...Worthy are You to take the book and to break its seals; for You were slain, and purchased for God with Your blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation." (Revelation 5:9)

When Jesus said in John 12:32 that when He was "lifted up from the earth" He would draw "all men" to Himself, He was saying that He would draw not only men from among the Jewish race, but also men from among the Gentile races as well. To interpret the phrase "all men" in this passage as meaning each and every individual who ever lived would be an interpretation that is contradicted in passages such as Romans 9:6-24, which we have considered in depth previously. Again, since the context of the passage mentions that Jesus was aware there were Greek Gentiles present who wanted to see Him, we have more confirmation that the "all men" Jesus referred to here, indeed refers to "all races of men", which is to say both the Jewish race and the non-Jewish (or Gentile) races, or those "from every tribe and tongue and people and nation".

Another reference to the phrase "all men", which some claim to be evidence that God's salvation through faith in Jesus Christ is available to each and every individual who has ever lived, is found in Paul's first letter to Timothy. The passage reads:

This is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself as a ransom for all, the testimony given at the proper time. For this I was appointed a preacher and an apostle (I am telling the truth, I am not lying) as a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth. (1 Timothy 2:3-7).

Here again we must consider the context of the passage, and also who is being addressed in the passage, for a proper interpretation and understanding of whom Paul referred to when he spoke of "all men". Paul was writing to Timothy, whom he had charged with caring for the church at Ephesus (1 Timothy 1:3). Ephesus was located in what today is the nation of Turkey. All native Ephesians would therefore be Gentiles. Timothy himself

was the son of a Greek Gentile father and a Jewish Christian mother (Acts 16:1).

The purpose of Paul's letter to Timothy was to instruct Timothy on how to care for the church at Ephesus. One of the fundamental truths that Paul wanted to communicate to the Gentile churches was that they too were included in God's plan of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ, and not only the Jews. This is emphasized in verse 7 of this passage of 1 Timothy 2, where Paul described himself as "a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth". The message that the Gentiles races were also included in God's plan of salvation is the same truth that Jesus made clear as He spoke to the crowd as recorded in John 12:20-33, when it was known that Gentiles were present who were interested in His message.

Paul was saying in 1 Timothy 2:3-7 the same thing that Jesus said in John 12:32, which is that God's salvation through faith in Jesus Christ includes not only the Jews, but also the Gentiles. A Gentile is anyone who is not directly descended from the twelve tribes of Israel. Once again, when we include Jews, and all of those who are not Jews, then we have "all men" categorically, or all races of men, or those "from every tribe and tongue and people and nation", as John wrote in Revelation 5:9.

To interpret the phrase "all men" found in either 1 Timothy 2:4-5 or John 12:32 as meaning each and every person who has ever lived would be to insist on an interpretation that is not born out in the context of the passages in which these verses are found. Such an interpretation would also be contradicted by other passages of Scripture that we have considered previously, which teach that God chooses some to receive His mercy and be saved, while others are hardened, being left in their sins, with no desire or ability to come to Christ at all.

In Acts 2, the Apostle Peter also taught that the promise of salvation through faith in Christ is extended to all races of men, or "all men" categorically. Speaking to a crowd in Jerusalem, Peter called upon them to repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of their sins.

Peter's exhortation to the crowd again illustrates the outward call of the proclamation of the Gospel message spoken in the hearing of men, calling upon them to put their faith in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of

their sins and reconciliation to God. Though many hear this outward call, only few are chosen by God (Matthew 22:14), and these few are called to faith in Christ with the inward, effectual calling of God that Jesus spoke about in John 6:44 and John 6:63-65.

Immediately after Peter called upon those in this crowd in Jerusalem to put their faith in Christ, he said to them: “For the promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself.” (Acts 2:39). When Peter said that the promise is for “you and your children”, he was speaking to the Jews. When he then said that the promise is also for “all who are far off”, he was speaking of Gentiles. So Peter was teaching that the promise is for Jews and also for those who are not Jews, and so we see that the promise is for not only for the Jewish race, but for all races of men.

Peter then qualified his statement by saying that the promise is for “as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself”, not only from among the Jews but also from among the Gentiles as well, just as Paul also taught in Romans 9:22-24. Therefore, we see that the promise of salvation through faith in Christ *is for all races of men, for as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself from among them all*. The determining factor mentioned here by Peter is God’s calling, which is consistent with many other passages of Scripture that we have considered previously.

From an examination of the context of the broader passages within which John 12:32 and 1 Timothy 2:4-5 are found, we see that the reference to “all men” in both of these passages refers to “all races of men”, or all men categorically, and not to all men individually, as in the sense of each and every person who has ever been born. These verses cannot be interpreted as meaning that an “offer” of salvation is “available” to each and every person who has ever been born. Rather these passages mean that God’s plan of salvation through Jesus Christ includes all races of men, as many individuals as the Lord our God will call from among them all, as Peter also taught in Acts 2:39.

Doesn't the Bible Say that God Does Not Want Anyone to Perish?

Another Scripture verse used by some to say that God desires everyone would be saved is 2 Peter 3:9. Peter began in 2 Peter 3:3 by warning us about scoffers who will question why Jesus has delayed His second coming, implying that He will never return at all. Then in verse 8, Peter said we should not forget that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years and a thousand years as one day. Immediately following, we read: “The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance.” (2 Peter 3:9).

Some interpret this verse as saying that God is not willing that anyone ever born should perish, but that all of them should come to repentance. Such an interpretation would contradict many Scriptures that we have already examined, which teach that God chooses some, His elect, to come to faith in Christ, while others He hardens. Contradiction is confusing, but when we interpret this verse in the light of the context of 2 Peter, and in the light of the rest of the Bible as a whole, the meaning becomes clear, and the apparent contradiction is resolved.

When Peter said that God “is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance” we must ask ourselves to whom Peter referred. Is he referring to each and every person who has ever lived, or does the “you” in this verse refer to a particular group of people? The letter of 2 Peter is addressed to believers (2 Peter 1:1). Therefore the “you” in 2 Peter 3:9 refers collectively to all believers.

Further, when we consider the context of 2 Peter 3:3-15, within which 2 Peter 3:9 is found, we see that Peter referred to the span of time between when Jesus ascended into Heaven, and His second coming (2 Peter 3:3-4, 10). So when he wrote in verse 9 that the Lord is patient toward “you”, and “not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance”, Peter was teaching that God is patient with His elect, and not willing that anyone among them should perish, but that all of them will come to repentance (see also verse 15). This was the reason that he gave to believers as to why Christ’s second coming had not yet occurred. When all of God’s elect are in His time brought to faith, then Christ’s second coming will occur.

Jesus taught in John 6:37-39 that there are a certain number of people whom the Father has given to Him. These are God's elect, and He is not willing that any of these will be lost. Paul taught that there are a certain number of Jews who will be numbered with spiritual Israel, or those who will be brought to faith in Christ (Romans 9:6-8, 11:1-5). These have or will receive God's mercy, in that they are chosen by grace (Romans 11:5), whereas the others are hardened and unable to come to Christ, being blinded by God Himself (Romans 11:7-8). Paul also spoke of a certain number of Gentiles who will be brought to faith in Christ (Romans 11:25-26).

If Jesus had hastened His second coming and returned the day after He ascended into Heaven, the Apostle Paul would not yet have been brought to faith, as he was sometime later on the Damascus Road, in God's time. Likewise, many of us who have been brought to faith in Christ over the succeeding centuries would never have been born into the world and brought to faith, also in God's time. The message of 2 Peter 3:3-15 is that Christ's second coming will occur as all things do, in God's time and according to His plan and purpose for His creation.

Some of God's elect are still hostile to the Gospel message, having not yet been brought to faith, just as Saul himself was also hostile to the Gospel message until God intervened in his life to bring him to faith on the Damascus Road. Also, some of God's elect have not yet even been born into the world. In God's time these will be born into the world, and again in God's time, they will be brought to faith in His Son Jesus Christ.

The message of 2 Peter 3:9 is that God is not willing that any of His elect will perish, and some of His elect have not yet been brought to faith. When all of those whom the Father has given to Jesus finally do come to Him (John 6:37), He will return the second time. At that time: "the day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up." (2 Peter 3:10).

Therefore, once again we see that a Scripture verse which some would say teaches that salvation through faith in Jesus Christ is "available" to each and every individual who has ever been born, does not teach that at all. Rather, when we interpret 2 Peter 3:9 in the context in which it appears in the Bible, and in the light of all the rest of the Scriptures as a whole, we see

a different meaning than what the verse would suggest if it were isolated by itself. 2 Peter 3:9 teaches us that God is not willing that any of His elect will be lost, but that all of them will come to repentance (Ephesians 1:4-5, 1 Peter 1:1-2).

What about John 3:16?

In the Gospel of John, we read: “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.” (John 3:16). Many of us will read John 3:16 and in our own minds we will add the thought that everyone is free and able to believe the Gospel message as they choose. However, the text of John 3:16 says nothing about a man’s freedom or his ability to believe the message.

It is fine to add thoughts and conditions to a passage of Scripture, as long as those thoughts and conditions are stated elsewhere in the Bible. However, the thought or the idea that everyone who hears the Gospel message is free and able to believe the message is stated nowhere in the Bible. What is clearly stated in the Bible is that unregenerate men are indeed not free or even able to believe the message at all, unless and until God intervenes in their lives to call them to faith in Christ.

By way of a brief review, we will consider just a few Scriptures that challenge the interpretation of John 3:16 as teaching that everyone is free and able to come to Christ if they should choose to do so. These Scriptures are John 6:44, 6:65, and Romans 8:7.

In John 6:44 and 6:65 Jesus taught about the inability of man to believe in Him apart from God’s intervention in his life. In John 6:44 He taught that no one can come to Him unless they are drawn by the Father. In John 6:65 He taught that no one can come to Him unless it has been granted to them by the Father to do so. Jesus also taught in John 6:44 that whoever is drawn to Him by the Father will be raised up at the last day.

In Romans 8:7 Paul taught that “the mind set on the flesh”, or the mind of unregenerate man, is hostile toward God; it will not submit to God’s law, ***nor is it even able to do so***. Therefore, if unregenerate man who cannot submit to God’s law is to be saved, then God Himself must intervene in his

life to forcefully overcome his hostile will and bring him to faith. We can see this reality demonstrated in the life of Paul himself as we read in the Scriptures of his conversion on the Damascus Road, even while he was still intent on persecuting the church.

Believing in Christ is not an act of our own will or volition that we choose to do when we are still dead in our sins, whereby we take advantage of a perceived “offer of salvation that is available to every individual”, as some would say. Rather our believing in Christ is *evidence* that we have already been called by God to faith in His Beloved Son.

The Scriptures teach us that when anyone believes in Christ, it is not because they chose to believe; it is because God has chosen to intervene in their lives to cause them to believe. The Scriptures teach that man cannot, and therefore he does not, choose to believe the Gospel message. Rather God chooses certain men, His elect, and these He brings to faith in Christ.

In Conclusion

The Bible teaches us that “faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ.” (Romans 10:17). Many receive the proclamation of the Gospel message in their hearing, but again as Jesus taught in the Parable of the Wedding Banquet, though many are called outwardly when they hear the message, only few are chosen to come to faith (Matthew 22:14).

Once again as Jesus taught in the Parable of the Sower: in the same way that the seed sown by the farmer yielded a crop only where it fell upon the “good soil”, so also the seed of the Gospel message produces a harvest only where it is received in the hearing of God’s elect. His elect not only hear the word, but they also understand it, and they bear fruit: some thirty, some sixty, and some a hundred times what was sown (Matthew 13:1-23). By this bearing of fruit, we demonstrate that we are indeed Jesus’ disciples (John 15:8).

Jesus also said: “It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing...” (John 6:63). If man were able to come to Christ while he was still unregenerate and dead in his sins, or still in the flesh, then a decision made while in the flesh could potentially profit him everything. But Jesus

said that the flesh profits nothing; rather it is the Spirit who gives life. Further, the Apostles John and Paul both taught clearly that a man's salvation does not come about by way of his own will or decision (John 1:13, Romans 9:16).

In addition to being incapable of coming to Christ without being drawn by the God the Father, the unregenerate man has no desire to come to Christ, because as Paul taught, all unregenerate men are hostile toward God (Romans 8:7). Paul also wrote: "***There is no one who seeks for God... not even one***" (Romans 3:10-11). Since no man seeks God, God must seek men and Himself bring them to faith if any are to be saved.

When anyone has a genuine desire to come to Christ for the forgiveness of their sins and reconciliation to God the Father, they can be assured that this desire is evidence of a work of regeneration that God has already done in their life. They are one of God's elect, and they have already been called to faith in Christ. As a result of this work that God has wrought within them, they now believe in Christ. Unless and until an individual is called by God to faith in Christ, they will not come to Christ; they will refuse to believe, because they are in fact not even able to believe (again, Romans 8:7).

God's calling of an individual is effectual, meaning that all of those who receive God's calling to faith in Christ do indeed come to Christ, and none refuse. Once again, this effectual calling of God is demonstrated clearly and powerfully in the life of Saul of Tarsus, as recorded three times in the Bible (Acts 9:1-19, Acts 22:1-16, and Acts 26:9-18).

In reading these passages, we find that Saul, who would later become the Apostle Paul, remained hostile toward the Gospel message right up until the moment in time when God intervened in his life to forcefully overcome his own stubborn will and bring him to faith in Christ. ***Saul was brought to faith contrary to his own will and apart from his own decision*** (Acts 9:1-4, Acts 22:4-7 and Acts 26:9-15). In the same way, we will all remain hostile toward God unless and until He forcefully intervenes in our lives to bring us to faith in His Son Jesus Christ.

Our believing in Christ is evidence that we have already been called to faith. It is evidence that we have already received Christ and have therefore crossed over from death to eternal life (John 5:24). God chose to bring us to

faith in His Son, apart from our own will and apart from any decision of our own, and as a result of His calling we believe in His Son, Jesus Christ.

Our believing is not a choice or decision that we made whereby we took advantage of an “offer” of salvation, as some would say. If a man believes in Christ, it is not because he thoughtfully considered the Gospel message and decided that he would believe, when he just as easily could have decided that he would continue not to believe. The Bible teaches that God has already made that decision for him, and God Himself brings each of His elect to faith in His time.

This is the lesson given to us from Saul’s conversion, and this is the teaching given to us through many other passages of Scripture as well. When a man is called to faith in Christ, he comes to Christ, and he will be raised up at the last day (John 6:37, 6:44). Man does not choose to believe in Christ, rather God chooses certain men; God decides who will be brought to faith in Christ, and who will be left in their sins (John 15:16, Romans 9:6-24).

Those who desire to come to Christ can also be sure that God does not give that desire to everyone, but only to His elect, His chosen people whom Jesus referred to as His “sheep” in John 10:1-30. These and only these will hear His voice; others will not be able to hear (John 6:63-65, 8:43, 8:47, 10:24-26). These and only these are the ones foreknown by God from before the foundation of the world (Ephesians 1:4-5) and predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son Jesus Christ (Romans 8:29). These and only these are then called by God to salvation and redemption through Christ, and we know that those whom God calls He also justifies, and those He justifies He also glorifies (Romans 8:30).

Our salvation as God’s elect who have been brought to faith in Jesus Christ is the work of God from beginning to end. He calls us to faith in His Son, and He brings our faith to its completion, as all of us who are called are then justified and finally glorified together with Christ for eternity. Let us therefore rejoice and give thanks to God our Father, together with all of His saints, for His grace and mercy which He showed to us when He chose to call us to faith in His Son.

24.

The Eternal Security of the Believer – Part 1

The question sometimes arises as to whether someone who has come to faith in Christ can lose their salvation. As with any question we may have regarding our faith and the Christian life, we always go to the word of God to find our answers. There are several passages in the Bible that speak to the degree of certainty we have regarding our salvation, and to what extent our perseverance or continuance in this state of grace depends upon our own actions after we are saved.

We may have some questions for which there are no direct answers in the Scriptures; there are some things that we will not understand until we are finally together with the Lord in Heaven. However, the issue of our eternal security and perseverance in the faith is not one of those things that we will have to wait to understand, because the Bible speaks to this issue extensively in several passages. Let us now look at what God reveals through His word about the eternal certainty and security of the salvation that He has provided for us as His people through the atoning death of His Son, Jesus Christ.

The Teaching of Jesus

There can be no better place to begin than to look first at the words of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Recorded in John 6, Jesus said:

“All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will ***certainly not cast out***. For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me. ***This is the will of Him who sent Me, that of all that He has given Me I lose nothing, but raise it up on the last day***. For this is the will of My Father, that everyone who beholds the Son and believes in Him will have eternal life, and I Myself will raise him up on the last day.” (John 6:37-40, emphasis added).

This passage speaks very clearly to the issue of the eternal security of the believer. Jesus said that **all** of those who have been given to Him by the Father, or God's elect, **will** in fact come to Him. Then in this same verse Jesus said regarding those who do come to Him, that He will **certainly not cast them out**, and He said this with no mention of any added conditions whatsoever, or any mention of their performance after they are saved.

Jesus emphasized the same point again in the following two verses when He said that He had come down from Heaven not to do His own will, but the will of His Father who had sent Him. Jesus then revealed that it is the will of His Father that He would lose **none** of those who had been given to Him, but He would raise them up at the last day. So here is the same teaching of the eternal security of the believer given again in this same passage, in clear language, in order to make sure that His message was fully understood.

In the final verse of this passage Jesus reiterates this same message of the eternal security of the believer yet a third time, when He said that **everyone** who looks to Him and believes in Him **will** have eternal life together with Him in Heaven. Let us notice in this verse that Jesus did not say that some of those who to look to Him and believe in Him will have eternal life, depending on what they may do after they are saved. However He did say clearly, and with no added conditions or any mention of a believer's performance after they are saved, that **everyone** who looks to Him and believes in Him **will** have eternal life; He **will** raise them up at the last day. So we see that **three times** in this passage of John 6:37-40, Jesus emphasized that our salvation in Him is an eternal certainty.

Going just a few verses further in John 6, we will consider once again a teaching that we studied previously when discussing predestination and the effectual calling of God. Here Jesus said: "No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day." (John 6:44).

In the first part of this verse, Jesus taught that no one is able to come to Him unless the Father draws them, or calls them. Then in the second part of the verse, Jesus taught that those individuals whom God does call **will** be raised up at the last day. There is no condition at all attached to His statement. Jesus stated clearly that those whom God draws, or calls, will be raised up at the last day, meaning that all who receive God's calling to faith

in His Son will be saved, and none will be lost. Jesus also communicated this same truth in clear, unambiguous language in John 6:39.

In John 10, Jesus again spoke of the eternal certainty and security of our salvation when He said: “My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand. I and the Father are one.” (John 10:27-30).

Those whom Jesus referred to as His sheep are those whom the Father has given to Him. These are the elect, whom God foreknew from before the creation of the world. God’s elect have already, or will at some point in time, be called by Him to faith in Christ, and they manifest in their lives the calling of God by their belief in Christ and their love for other believers. Speaking of these, Jesus said that they will *never* perish. Jesus did not say that they will never perish unless they disobey to some degree after they are saved, but He did say succinctly, and without any added conditions at all, that they will *never* perish.

Jesus then continued in this passage to teach that *no one* is able to snatch one of His sheep out of His hand, or His Father’s hand. *Neither we ourselves, by our own actions or failings, nor any other created being, is able to snatch any believer out of God’s hand.*

The Teaching of the Apostles Paul and Peter

In Romans 8:29-30, we see the same teaching of the eternal certainty and security of God’s salvation. In these verses Paul described a definite sequence, or order of salvation, beginning with those whom God foreknew. (See also Ephesians 1:4-5). Paul taught that those whom God foreknew have all been predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, Jesus Christ. Then in His time, God calls those whom He foreknew to faith in His Son. Paul then said further that those who are called are also justified. Finally in this sequence or order of salvation, Paul said clearly, succinctly, and with no added conditions whatsoever, that *those who are justified are also glorified* (verse 30).

In this passage Paul taught that all of those who are called by God to faith in His Son Jesus Christ are justified, and all of those who are justified are ultimately glorified. The certainty of the sequence of events is clear in Paul's language. None fall away, and again, Paul makes no mention of man's performance or actions as having any effect in this process whatsoever.

The entirety of the actions in effecting the salvation of God's elect described in this passage are God's actions, and only His actions. Nowhere is any condition regarding man's performance made mention of at all, either before or after he has been saved.

A believer's performance or obedience to God's word definitely has an effect on his eternal reward, as Paul taught in his letter to the Corinthians: "Now if any man builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each man's work will become evident; for the day will show it because it is to be revealed with fire, and the fire itself will test the quality of each man's work. If any man's work which he has built on it remains, he will receive a reward. If any man's work is burned up, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire." (1 Corinthians 3:12-15).

The "foundation" that Paul mentioned in this passage is Jesus Christ Himself, and the salvation that God has provided for His people through the blood of Jesus shed on Calvary's cross. Paul then taught that the quality of each believer's work will be tested by fire. If his work withstands this test, he will receive a reward from God.

Now let us notice what Paul taught in verse 15. He said that if the believer's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, but "he himself will be saved", only as one escaping through the fire. Here Paul again emphasized that disobedience and failure to obey God will not affect the salvation of the believer, that salvation being eternally secure. However, disobedience will result in a loss of rewards that one may have received if he had been obedient, and his work had withstood the test of fire. Regardless of a believer's failings in life, even after he is saved, his salvation itself is eternally secure.

Paul also taught in Romans: “for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.” (Romans 11:29). God does not change His mind concerning those whom He calls to faith in His Son.

Though a believer’s salvation itself is eternally secure, there is yet another very sobering teaching in the Bible that we must consider. There is reference made in John’s first letter to sin that results in the physical death of a believer. John wrote: “If anyone sees his brother committing a sin not leading to death, he shall ask, and God will for him give life to those who commit sin not leading to death. There is a sin leading to death; I do not say that he should make request for this.” (1 John 5:16).

Hebrews 12:1-13 also speaks of God’s discipline of His sons, saying that God disciplines every son whom He receives. We as believers must all take this matter of obedience very seriously. God will separate us from our sins. Even though our salvation itself is eternally secure, our future reward in Heaven, and according to 1 John 5:16, maybe even our physical lives here on earth, are at stake.

Paul taught again in his letter to the Romans of the eternal certainty and security of our salvation when he said there is no power in all of creation that is able to separate us as believers from the love of God. Paul wrote:

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? Just as it is written, “For Your sake we are being put to death all day long; We were considered as sheep to be slaughtered.”

But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. ***For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*** (Romans 8:35-39)

No power in all of creation, including demonic power, is able to separate us from the love of God that has been given to us in Christ Jesus our Lord, and this includes our own miniscule power to disobey, or to rail angrily against God for the troubles that come upon us during the course of our lives. Though we may fail miserably, God’s word does not fail.

Once again, we consider the words of Jesus Himself when He said: “All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out.” (John 6:37). **No one** who has come to Christ will **ever** be driven away from Him. None of God’s elect will ever be cast out from His presence; our salvation is eternally secure. The One whose name is “Faithful and True” (Revelation 19:11) has Himself said it.

We are not saved by grace, and then kept in this state of grace by our own good works; rather we are kept by the power God. Peter wrote in his first letter: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, who are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.” (1 Peter 1:3-5).

In this passage, Peter taught us that we as believers have “an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away”, and he taught that we are protected or kept safe by the power of God until the time when we are finally together with the Lord in Heaven. Though our future reward in Heaven depends upon our obedience to God’s word, our salvation itself is eternally secure, and entirely God’s own doing from beginning to end.

If our salvation in any way depended on our own works, then we would be able to boast that our works were good enough to keep us saved. If our salvation depended upon us making the “right decision” to accept Christ, then we would be able to boast that we made that “right decision” when others did not. However, the Scriptures teach that no man can boast that he had anything to do with his salvation. Paul wrote: “For by grace you have been saved through faith; **and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.**” (Ephesians 2:8-9, emphasis added).

Our faith in Christ is a gift that was given to us by God; it did not come about through any work of our own whatsoever. Through this gift of faith, we are protected not by our own power, but we are “protected by the power of God” until our salvation is revealed (1 Peter 1:5).

Paul also emphasized that we are kept by God's power and not our own, when he wrote to the Corinthians teaching that it is God Himself who "will also confirm you to the end, blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, through whom you were called into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord." (1 Corinthians 1:8-9).

Paul wrote to the Thessalonians with this same message regarding the eternal certainty and security of our salvation when he said: "Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Faithful is He who calls you, and ***He also will bring it to pass.***" (1 Thessalonians 5:23-24, emphasis added). So Paul emphasized yet again that God has called us into fellowship with His Son, and God is faithful; He will preserve us and keep us blameless all the way through to the coming of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Paul also wrote to the Philippians with the same message when he said: "For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus." (Philippians 1:6). The Scriptures teach us that God Himself began the work of salvation in us, and He is the One who will carry our salvation through to completion.

25.

The Eternal Security of the Believer – Part 2

In Part 1 of our study, we examined several Scripture references regarding the eternal security of the believer. Despite these teachings, which clearly reveal that our salvation in Christ is eternally secure and certain, there are some who say there is evidence from the Scriptures that a believer can lose their salvation. Those who hold this view will often refer to Hebrews 6:4-9, Hebrews 10:26-29, and 2 Peter 2:20-22 to support their doctrine. We will now look carefully at each of these passages to see if there is any validity to the assertion that these Scriptures teach that a believer can lose their salvation.

In order to accurately interpret Scripture, we must consider the context of the passage from which the Scripture is taken. We must also consider whom the author is addressing in the passage, and we must interpret the passage under consideration in the light of all the rest of the Scriptures as a whole, which is to say that we must let Scripture interpret Scripture. If we derive an interpretation of a Scripture passage that is contradicted by other passages in the Scriptures, then we can be sure that we have derived an erroneous interpretation.

We have already examined several passages containing very clear and unambiguous language, which state that a believer cannot lose their salvation. These passages reveal that every believer is kept safe by the power of God, who Himself carries our salvation through to completion, from beginning to end.

Now, in the interest of a complete consideration of what the Bible teaches about the eternal certainty and security of our salvation in Christ, let us consider several of the passages which are most often cited by some as evidence that a believer can lose their salvation. Let us carefully examine these Scriptures to arrive at a correct and biblically sound interpretation, so that any confusion we may have on this issue may be resolved.

The Meaning of Hebrews 6:4-8

We should begin our study of this passage by understanding that the letter to the Hebrews is addressed to Jews who had become professing Christians. As we will see when we consider Hebrews 10:26-29, some of these professing Hebrew believers were not continuing in the faith, but they were leaving the congregations of believers to return to the way of Judaism.

The main purpose of the letter to the Hebrews was to emphasize to everyone in these congregations the preeminence of Christ, and to admonish them that there is no other way to God the Father than through Jesus Christ. The writer of Hebrews warned that for those who ultimately reject Christ, there is nothing left for them “but a terrifying expectation of judgment and the fury of a fire which will consume the adversaries.” (Hebrews 10:27). They would not be saved simply because they were descended from Jacob.

As we begin our study of Hebrews 6:4-8, let us consider as well that this passage is prefaced by Hebrews 5:11- 6:3. In these verses, the writer of Hebrews comments on the fact that though the congregation had heard the fundamental truths of the word of God preached, some did not seem to be growing in the faith, and it appeared that these individuals needed someone to teach them the elementary truths of God’s word all over again (Hebrews 5:12). This apparent failure to grow in the faith and bear fruit is an indication that some in the congregation had never come to faith in Christ, though they had heard the words of the Gospel message. With this preface in mind, we will now consider Hebrews 6:4-8.

Looking at the first part of the passage, we read:

For in the case of those who have once been enlightened and have tasted of the heavenly gift and have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, it is impossible to renew them again to repentance, since they again crucify to themselves the Son of God and put Him to open shame. (Hebrews 6:4-6)

And then immediately following in verses 7-8, we see reference to “ground” receiving “rain” that often comes upon it. If the ground “brings

forth vegetation useful to those for whose sake it is also tilled” then it receives blessing from God. But if it bears “thorns and thistles” it is worthless, and in the end it will be burned. In these verses, the author employed a method of communicating his message that was similar to a method that Jesus often used in His teaching, which was to teach a spiritual principle by means of an analogy or comparison to something in the natural world.

In Hebrews 6:7-8, the “ground” is symbolic of people. The “rain”, which often falls upon the ground, is symbolic of the word of God, the Gospel message which is preached in the hearing of men. The “vegetation” or harvest that is useful to those for whom the ground is farmed is symbolic of the good fruit born by those who hear the word of God and do indeed come to faith in Christ. As a result of their genuine faith, they will indeed bear fruit in their lives, showing that they are in truth Jesus’ disciples (John 15:8).

In contrast to the ground that bears a useful harvest of good fruit, other ground receives the same “rain” of the word of God, but it bears only thorns and thistles. This ground is symbolic of those people who hear the same Gospel message, but they do not come to faith in Christ, and therefore they cannot produce a useful harvest of good fruit.

There are three teachings of Jesus that are in complete agreement with the analogy and teaching of Hebrews 6:4-8. The first is the Parable of the Sower given in Matthew 13:1-23. The second is Jesus’ teaching on false prophets given in Matthew 7:15-23. The third is Jesus’ Parable of the Wheat and the Tares recorded in Matthew 13:24-30 and 13:36-43. By considering Hebrews 6:4-8 in the light of all three of these passages, we will let “Scripture interpret Scripture”, and in doing so we will gain an understanding of this teaching given to us by the author of Hebrews.

First, let us begin by comparing the Parable of the Sower in Matthew 13 to Hebrews 6:4-8. In this parable, the “seed” sown by the farmer is symbolic of the word of God. The seed falls upon different types of “ground” or “soil”, and again, just as in Hebrews 6:7-8, the soil symbolizes men, who receive the word of God in their hearing. Jesus taught that the only place where the seed of the word of God will bear a useful harvest is where it falls upon “good soil” (Matthew 13:8, 23). The good soil symbolizes God’s elect, who hear the word of God, and who do indeed come

to faith in Christ. Only those who come to faith will be able to bear a useful harvest of good fruit.

Second, let us compare Jesus' teaching about false prophets in Matthew 7 to Hebrews 6:4-8. In His teaching here, Jesus warned us to watch out for false prophets who come to us "in sheep's clothing", or claiming to be Christians, but, they are not. He symbolized these individuals as bad trees, which cannot produce good fruit (Matthew 7:18b). He said that these "bad trees" will be cut down and thrown onto the fire (Matthew 7:19. Compare with Hebrews 6:8.). By contrast, Jesus symbolized those whose faith is genuine as "good trees", which produce good fruit and cannot produce bad fruit (Matthew 7:18a. Compare with Hebrews 6:7).

Third, let us compare Jesus' teaching in the Parable of the Wheat and the Tares in Matthew 13 to Hebrews 6:4-8. In this parable Jesus spoke of tares or weeds, which bear no good fruit, being mixed in among the wheat, which does indeed bear a useful harvest of good fruit. The tares, which are often hard to distinguish from the wheat, symbolize the unregenerate among true believers, and they bear no good fruit. In contrast to the tares, the wheat symbolizes genuine believers, and these do indeed bear good fruit, bearing a harvest "useful to those for whom it is tilled", as the writer of Hebrews said (Hebrews 6:7).

The one consistent theme in each of these three teachings of Jesus, and also in Hebrews 6:4-8, is that professing believers will demonstrate or give evidence that their faith is genuine by the fact they do indeed bear good fruit. Only genuine believers are able to bear good fruit; the unregenerate are not able to do so.

The individuals in Hebrews 6:4-8 who receive the "rain" of the word of God, but they bear no useful harvest of good fruit, are the same individuals that we see in the Parable of the Sower who receive the "seed" of the word of God, but they never come to faith in Christ. Because they did not in fact come to faith, they can bear no good fruit.

Again, the individuals in Hebrews 6:4-8 who receive the "rain" of the word of God, but they bear no useful harvest of good fruit, are the false prophets about whom Jesus spoke in Matthew 7. They are false prophets in that their profession of faith in Christ is false. Though they may claim to be Christians, and they may claim to have repented, they are not in fact genuine

believers. Jesus characterized them as bad trees that can produce only bad fruit.

Once again, the individuals in Hebrews 6:4-8 who receive the “rain” of the word of God, but they bear no useful harvest of good fruit, are the tares in Jesus’ Parable of the Wheat and the Tares. The tares symbolize the unregenerate, who are mixed in among genuine believers. Unlike genuine believers who are symbolized as wheat, which does produce a useful harvest of good fruit, the tares cannot bear good fruit.

To summarize, when we compare the teaching in Hebrews 6:4-8 with Jesus’ teaching in the Parable of the Sower in Matthew 13, His teaching about false prophets in Matthew 7, and His teaching in the Parable of the Wheat and the Tares in Matthew 13, we find that ***in all four of these passages the individuals who bear no good fruit are those who receive the word of God in their hearing, but they never come to faith in Christ as God’s elect do. As a result, they can bear no good fruit.***

The individuals referred to in Hebrews 6:4-8 who receive the “rain” of the word of God, but they bear no useful harvest of good fruit, are individuals who will be present in most every congregation of professing Christians, who are in fact unregenerate. ***They will claim to have repented, and they will claim to be believers,*** when in fact they have never come to faith in Christ.

When the writer of Hebrews said that they “have once been enlightened”, “have tasted the heavenly gift”, “have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit”, and “have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come”, he was saying that these unregenerate individuals, who claimed to be believers but were not, were present in the congregation and ***shared in the hearing of the preaching and teaching of the word of God*** with others who were in fact genuine believers. These unregenerate individuals are symbolized as ground that “drinks the rain which often falls on it” (Hebrews 6:7), and again this rain is symbolic of the word of God, but they produce only “thorns and thistles” (Hebrews 6:8), or bad fruit as Jesus taught in Matthew 7:15-23.

In John 6 we see that Jesus spoke to a crowd saying: “...***the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and are life.*** But there are some of you who do not believe.” ... “For this reason I have said to you, that no one can come

to Me unless it has been granted him from the Father.” (John 6:63-65, emphasis added). ***For any man to read or to hear the word of God is for him to partake in spirit and life, but not all of those who partake in God’s word believe.*** Many hear the word of God, but it has not been granted to them by the Father to believe in Christ, or to come to Him, even though they hear the spoken Gospel message.

To hear the word of God preached is to be “enlightened” (Hebrews 6:4) as to God’s only plan of salvation for man. It is also to “have tasted the heavenly gift” (Hebrews 6:4), and to “have been made partakers in the Holy Spirit” (Hebrews 6:4), because once again, Jesus said that ***His words*** “are spirit and are life” (John 6:63). It is also to “have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come” (Hebrews 6:5).

These unregenerate individuals were present in the congregations of professing Jewish believers, and they heard the word of God preached. However, as the writer of Hebrews also said, “the word they heard did not profit them, because it was not united by faith in those who heard.” (Hebrews 4:2).

The word they heard did not profit them because, unlike the true believers in the congregation who heard the word of God and came to faith in Christ, these professing but unregenerate individuals heard the same Gospel message but did not come to faith. As we have seen from the Scriptures before, a genuine faith in Christ is itself the gift of God, and a gift that He does not give to everyone, but only to those whom He has chosen to show mercy in calling them to faith in His Son (Ephesians 2:8-9, Romans 9:15-18, 1 Thessalonians 1:4-5).

The individuals to whom the writer of Hebrews referred in this passage of Hebrews 6:4-8 are ***not*** believers who have lost their salvation, or who are in danger of losing their salvation. Rather, ***they are those individuals among professing Christians who have never in fact come to faith in Christ in the first place.***

The individuals spoken of in Hebrews 6:4-8 are not those whom Jesus once knew; rather they are those whom Jesus ***never knew*** (Matthew 7:23). They are those who heard the word of God, but they never came to faith in Christ because it had not been granted to them by the Father (John 6:65, 8:43, 8:47). ***As a result, they did not continue in the faith that they claimed***

to have but were ultimately numbered among those “who have fallen away” (Hebrews 6:6. Consider also Matthew 13:20-21 and 1 John 2:19).

These individuals are not trees that were once “good trees”, but because they produced bad fruit they lost their salvation and became “bad trees”, because Jesus taught that “A good tree *cannot* produce bad fruit...” (Matthew 7:18, emphasis added). Rather, they were “bad trees” all along, and because of this they produced no good fruit (Compare Matthew 7:16-19 and Hebrews 6:7-8).

When we interpret Hebrews 6:4-8 in the light of other similar teachings in the Bible, we gain an understanding of what the author intended to communicate. However, if we were to isolate this passage from the rest of the Scriptures, we might arrive at an altogether different and erroneous understanding.

To interpret this passage as saying that a believer can lose their salvation would be in stark contradiction to numerous passages we have already studied, which state clearly that a believer cannot lose their salvation. According to the word of God, our salvation does not depend upon our own power and ability to obey God, but we are kept safe by His power (1 Peter 1:4-5). Our salvation is both initiated and carried through to completion by God Himself (Philippians 1:6).

The Meaning of Hebrews 10:26-29

Another Scripture passage that some will say teaches that a believer can lose their salvation is found in Hebrews 10. This passage reads:

For if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a terrifying expectation of judgment and the fury of a fire which will consume the adversaries. Anyone who has set aside the Law of Moses dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much severer punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled under foot the Son of God, and has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has insulted the Spirit of grace? (Hebrews 10:26-29)

Some would say this passage teaches that if a believer were to deliberately continue to engage in sinful practices after “receiving the knowledge of the truth” and having been saved, then they would lose their salvation. First, we need to look no further than the context of this passage to know that such an interpretation is invalid. In verses 28 and 29, we see that the writer of Hebrews was referring to the sin of apostasy, or the sin of ultimately rejecting Christ and the sacrifice He made of Himself for the sins of mankind, which is the *only* provision that God has made for the sins of mankind (John 14:6, Acts 4:12).

The “we” in verse 26 refers to professing Hebrew or Jewish believers, who are the individuals to whom the letter to the Hebrews is addressed. As with most any group or congregation of professing believers, some are genuine believers, and some are not.

The writer of Hebrews was communicating that if professing Jewish believers received “the knowledge of the truth”, which is to say that they received the proclamation of the Gospel message in their hearing, and they “go on sinning willfully” in that they ultimately rejected the message, then there remained for them no sacrifice for their sins, but only a fearful expectation of the judgment of God which will come upon all unbelievers. They would not be saved simply because they were descended from the twelve tribes of Israel, as Paul also taught in Romans 9:1-8 and 11:1-8.

The entire passage from which Hebrews 10:26-29 is taken is Hebrews 10:19-39, which is a call for professing Jewish believers to persevere in their faith, and not to return to the way of Judaism. It is apparent from this passage that there were some who were not continuing in the faith but had apparently parted company with true believers (verse 25). In verse 39 of this passage, we see that the writer of Hebrews is contrasting those who “shrink back to destruction”, or those who do not continue in the faith, with those who “have faith to the preserving of the soul.”

Those who did ultimately depart from the faith showed themselves to be those who had never been saved in the first place. The Apostle John described these same individuals when he wrote: “They went out from us, but they were not really of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us; but they went out, so that it would be shown that they all are not of us.” (1 John 2:19).

Though they had professed a faith in Christ, and they were associated for a time with others who were genuine believers, they had never been saved. As a result, they did not continue in the faith with those who were true believers.

By their departing they showed themselves to be the false prophets that Jesus warned us about in Matthew 7:15-23, who claimed to be Christians, but were not. They were “bad trees” that could not produce good fruit.

They are also the same individuals whom Jesus characterized as “rocky places” without much soil that had received the seed of the word of God, as we read in the Parable of the Sower. These rocky places received the seed of the Gospel message, and the seeds immediately sprang up, symbolizing an apparent conversion, but ultimately the heat of the sun withered the plants because they had “no firm root” in themselves, as Jesus described them, and therefore they bore no fruit (Matthew 13:5-6, 20-21).

The sin referred to in this passage of Hebrews 10:26-29 is the sin of unbelief, or ultimately rejecting Christ after having heard the Gospel message, after “receiving the knowledge of the truth”. This sin of unbelief or apostasy will be committed by all of those who are not called to faith as Jesus taught in John 6:44 and 6:65.

The individuals in Hebrews 10:26-29 are *not* true believers who “go on sinning willfully” in that they continued to participate in sinful behavior after they were saved and therefore lost their salvation. Rather, these individuals were in fact unregenerate. Though they had heard the outward proclamation of the Gospel message, they had never been inwardly called by God to faith in Christ. Therefore, they were still dead in their sins.

These individuals, if they are never called to faith in Christ, will persist in their unbelief and rejection of Him. They will ultimately be shown to be among those who do not receive God’s mercy (Romans 9:18), but who are “vessels of wrath prepared for destruction” (Romans 9:22).

The writer of Hebrews himself attested to the fact that salvation through Jesus Christ is only for those who are called by God when he wrote: “For this reason He is the mediator of a new covenant, so that, since a death has taken place for the redemption of the transgressions that were committed

under the first covenant, *those who have been called* may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance.” (Hebrews 9:15, emphasis added).

Peter also taught that salvation is only for those who are called by God to faith in Christ. Peter spoke to a crowd in Jerusalem, saying: “For the promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off, *as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself.*” (Acts 2:39, emphasis added).

We know from Romans 8:30 that all of those whom God calls, He also justifies and ultimately glorifies. *None* of those who are called to faith in Christ are lost (John 6:37-40). To interpret Hebrews 10:26-29 or any other passage of Scripture as saying that a believer could lose their salvation would be clearly contradicted by several passages of Scripture that we have already studied.

Hebrews 10:26-29 and Hebrews 6:4-8 both speak of the same group of people. These passages speak of those individuals among professing Christians who, though they have heard the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and they claim to be believers, and they claim to have repented, they have never in fact come to faith in Him. Though they appeared for a time to be genuine believers because of their association with others who were, they were in fact not. As a result, the time came when they no longer continued in the faith but fell away (See Hebrews 6:6).

Those who have heard the word of God and claim to be believers, but ultimately they fall away and do not continue in the faith, are those who have “trampled under foot the Son of God”, and “regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant” by which they at one time claimed to have been sanctified. In doing so, they have “insulted the Spirit of grace.” (See Hebrews 10:29). They are not among “those who have faith to the preserving of the soul”, rather they are among “those who shrink back to destruction” (See Hebrews 10:39).

They heard the word of God, words that “are spirit and are life” as Jesus said, but they did not believe *because it had not been granted to them by the Father to come to faith in Christ* (John 6:63-65). They did not in reality ever come to faith in Christ, though they will claim to be Christians (Matthew 7:22-23).

Jesus again spoke of these unregenerate individuals and their inability to come to Him when He told His disciples the reason that He spoke to the crowds in parables. Jesus said: “To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, ***but to them it has not been granted.***” (Matthew 13:11, emphasis added).

Even though many “receive the knowledge of the truth” in that they hear the spoken proclamation of the Gospel message, which is the outward call to men to put their faith in Christ for the forgiveness of their sins, only God’s elect will be called to faith through the word of God with the inward, effectual calling of God that Jesus taught about in John 6:44. The rest are unable to come to Christ. Unless and until God intervenes in an individual’s life and effectually calls them to faith in His Son as we have discussed previously, they will “go on sinning willfully” (Hebrews 10:26) by persisting in their unbelief, because they can do nothing else. (Consider also 1 Peter 2:7-8).

The Meaning of 2 Peter 2:20-22

Another passage that some refer to as teaching that a genuine believer can lose their salvation is found in 2 Peter. This passage reads:

For if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world by the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and are overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first. For it would be better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn away from the holy commandment handed on to them. It has happened to them according to the true proverb, “A dog returns to its own vomit,” and, “A sow, after washing, returns to wallowing in the mire.” (2 Peter 2:20-22)

To begin with, this passage is taken from a larger passage which consists of 2 Peter 2 in its entirety. The subject of the passage is false teachers and their impending doom and judgment by God (2 Peter 2:17). So immediately we see that those under consideration in the context of this passage are not true believers, but false teachers.

In verse 20, Peter said that these individuals “have escaped the defilements of the world by the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ”. These again are those individuals who heard the proclamation of the Gospel message. They had received “knowledge” of Jesus Christ and had “escaped the defilements of the world”, in that they were present in the congregations of the early churches and partakers with genuine believers in hearing the preaching and teaching of the word of God (Compare Hebrews 6:4-8). However, they were not changed by the Gospel message; they never came to faith in Christ. They were in fact unregenerate and bore only bad fruit, as is abundantly clear from the context of 2 Peter 2.

When Peter spoke of these individuals as being “again entangled” and “overcome” by the defilements of the world, we know that he is not speaking of believers, because as John taught: “for *whatever is born of God overcomes the world...*” (1 John 5:4, emphasis added). No genuine believer is overcome by the pollutions of the world. Rather, everyone who has been born of God will overcome the world and all of the defilements in the world by the power of the One living within them, Jesus Christ Himself.

The unregenerate condition of the individuals to whom Peter referred in 2 Peter 2:20-22 becomes even clearer when we look at verse 22, where he wrote: “It has happened to them according to the true proverb, ‘A dog returns to its own vomit,’ and, ‘A sow, after washing, returns to wallowing in the mire.’” A dog and a pig were both considered unclean animals, according to the Old Testament dietary laws.

The point to be made when looking at verse 22 is that though these individuals may have professed a faith in Christ, they were in fact unregenerate, or unclean. They did not persevere in the faith, but *they went back to the unclean ways they had known before because there had never been any change in their lives; they had never come to faith in Christ*. Just as the unclean dog and pig both go back to the uncleanness to which they have always been accustomed, so also these professing but unregenerate individuals went back to the defilements of the world.

In Conclusion

Hebrews 6:4-9, Hebrews 10:26-29 and 2 Peter 2:20-22 have been used by some to say the Scriptures teach that one can lose their salvation after they have been saved as result of returning to a life of sinful practices. Though a believer will sin at times after he is saved (Romans 7:7-25), no genuine believer will ever return to a life that is characterized by sin, as is clearly taught in 1 John where we read: “No one who is born of God practices sin, because His seed abides in him; and he cannot sin, because he is born of God.” (1 John 3:9).

The only way that any of these three passages could be made to say that a believer can lose their salvation would be to ignore the context of the broader passages from which they are taken, and to isolate them from the rest of the Scriptures a whole. In each of these three passages, the individuals under consideration are ***not*** those who are genuine believers and are in danger of losing their salvation. Rather, they are in fact the unregenerate who, though they had heard the Gospel message, and had shared with true believers in the preaching and teaching of the word of God, ***they had never been saved***. Consequently, they could bear no good fruit.

These unregenerate individuals are the false prophets about whom Jesus warned us in Matthew 7:15-23, who come to us “in sheep’s clothing”, claiming to be Christians. They will acknowledge Jesus as Lord, and even claim to have prophesied, worked miracles, and cast out demons in His name, but they will one day here from Him the words: “...***I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.***” (Matthew 7:23, emphasis added).

26.

The Eternal Security of the Believer – Part 3

Previously, we considered passages from Hebrews 6, Hebrews 10, and 2 Peter 2, which some have used to say that the Bible teaches that a believer can lose their salvation. However, when we examined each of these Scriptures in the light of the context in which they appear in the Bible, and in the light of the rest of the Scriptures as a whole, we saw that these passages refer to those individuals among professing Christians who will claim to be believers, but who in fact have never been saved.

In Matthew 7 Jesus described these individuals as false prophets. They are those whose profession or claim that they are believers is false. In this same passage Jesus also described them as ravenous wolves among His sheep, and as bad trees that cannot bear good fruit. In Matthew 13 He described them again as tares among the wheat, which can bear no good fruit.

There is another passage of Scripture that some have used to say that a believer could lose their salvation for failing to diligently maintain good works after they are saved. This passage is found in 2 Peter 1:10-11. Let us now look carefully at this passage, and let us consider it in the context of both 2 Peter and 1 Peter. Let us also consider it in the light of the Scriptures as a whole, so that we can understand what Peter intended to communicate to God's people.

The Meaning of 2 Peter 1:10-11

Peter wrote: “Therefore, brethren, be all the more diligent to make certain about His calling and choosing you; for as long as you practice these things, you will never stumble; for in this way the entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will be abundantly supplied to you.” (2 Peter 1:10-11).

In verse 10, “these things”, which the believer is exhorted to practice in order “to make certain about His calling and choosing you”, are the things discussed in verses 5-8. Peter urged believers to be diligent in cultivating in their lives, in ever increasing measure: goodness, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, brotherly kindness, and love. Some would say this is evidence that diligent effort in cultivating these qualities is required if a believer is to not “stumble” or fall away from the faith.

Let us recall what Paul taught clearly in Ephesians 2: “For by grace you have been saved through faith; ***and that not of yourselves***, it is the gift of God; ***not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.***” (Ephesians 2:8-9, emphasis added). If we were saved by grace but kept in this state of grace by our diligent pursuit of good works, then we would be able to boast that our works were good enough to keep us saved. However, Paul taught that our salvation is not the result of any works of our own, so no one may boast that he had anything to do with his salvation.

Therefore, when Peter spoke of “making certain” about God’s calling and choosing of us, he was not speaking of ensuring our own salvation by way of our diligence in the pursuit of the good works mentioned in verses 5-8. ***What Peter spoke of in this passage of 2 Peter 1:10-11 is “making certain” in our own hearts and minds that we are indeed among those whom God has chosen and called; he was speaking about our personal confidence or assurance concerning our own salvation.***

As we have mentioned previously, the Scriptures teach us that a genuine believer will always bear good fruit as a result of his conversion to faith in Christ (Matthew 7:17-20, 13:1-23, John 15:8). Therefore, the qualities mentioned in 2 Peter 1:5-8 will be manifested in the life of every believer to some degree (Matthew 13:23, Galatians 5:22-23). This bearing of good fruit is evidence of our genuine faith.

However, as a result of our own disobedience at times, we will find ourselves building upon the foundation of our faith not with the “gold, silver, and precious stones” of obedience to God’s word, but with “wood, hay, and straw”, which will not stand the test of fire that is to try all of our works, as Paul taught in 1 Corinthians 3:12-15. This disobedience will not result in the loss of our salvation as we see from verse 15, but it will result in the loss of rewards, both now and in eternity.

As a result of some particularly grievous sins, we might lose our confidence or assurance about our own salvation. This loss of confidence in our salvation can manifest itself at other times as well, especially in the lives of young believers who may not yet be grounded in the truth of the word of God as taught in the Scriptures.

If we have been involved in very grievous sin, Satan, the “accuser” of God’s people (Revelation 12:10, Zechariah 3:1-2), will do the accusing in our own minds, suggesting to us that surely we could not be saved in view of the sins we have committed, and he may be allowed to accuse us forcefully enough for us to wonder if in fact this could be the case. However, even the accusation of Satan will be made to serve God, in that the fears that will come upon us as a result of having fallen from our once secure position of assurance will send every genuine believer running back to His Savior for forgiveness and restoration.

In order to better understand the exhortation given to us in 2 Peter 1:10-11, let us consider the life and experience of the one who wrote this exhortation, the Apostle Peter. Jesus predicted that Peter would deny Him, and this prediction is recorded in all four Gospels. Also recorded in all four Gospels is an account of Peter’s denial following Jesus’ prediction.

Peter’s assurance about his own salvation must have been shaken severely after his grievous sin of having denied that he even knew Jesus, not once, but on three occasions. After all, he was with Jesus and heard His teaching when He said that whoever denied Him before men, He would deny before His Father in Heaven (Matthew 10:32-33).

Given his own dreadful failure during a time of testing in his life, Peter surely understood better than most of us the torment that goes with one believing they may have fallen from grace. This is why he exhorted us to be diligent in the pursuit of the qualities he mentioned in 2 Peter 1:5-8, always striving to move forward living our lives in love and in obedience to God’s word. If we do these things, then we will not experience the torment of believing that we might not be saved in view of our own failures.

In John 21, we see a lesson given to us through the failure and the subsequent restoration of Peter, even after he had denied His Lord and

Savior three times. In this passage, Jesus appeared to His disciples after He had been resurrected.

The disciples had been fishing all night but had caught nothing. Jesus was standing on the shore, and at first the disciples did not recognize Him. He called out to them asking if they had any fish. They replied saying that they did not. Then Jesus told them to cast the net on the right side of the boat, and they would find some fish there. When they did so, they caught so many fish that they were not able to haul the net into the boat.

At this point John recognized that it was the Lord who had called to them, and he told Peter. As soon as Peter heard that it was Jesus, he could not wait to get to Him, and he jumped into the water and swam toward Jesus ahead of the others, who followed behind in the boat, dragging the net full of fish.

Paul taught us that no one will seek God if left to themselves (Romans 3:10-11). However, God had determined before the world began that He would bring Peter to faith in Christ (Ephesians 1:4-5). God Himself had caused Peter to follow hard after His Lord and Savior (Psalm 63:1, 8). Just as it happened in the life of Peter, when we experience the accusation of the devil that we have lost our salvation because of some grievous sin in our lives, every true believer will run toward their Savior for forgiveness and restoration, so that they may once again experience the joy of their salvation that comes from fellowship with their Lord.

In John 21, we read of Jesus' restoration of Peter, even after he had failed Him so miserably. Just as Jesus restored Peter, so also will He restore every one of us as His sheep if we should fail Him.

Through his own experience of a grievous and severe failure in his walk with the Lord, and his subsequent restoration, Peter came to understand the unchanging, irrevocable decision of God to preserve everyone whom He has called to faith in His Son Jesus Christ, regardless of how badly we may fail Him. This is why he wrote in his first letter that every one of God's elect has been given an inheritance in Heaven "which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away", and that we are "protected by the power of God", through the faith in Christ which we have been given (1 Peter 1:1-6). Our powers may fail; God does not fail.

In summary, 2 Peter 1:10-11 speaks of our assurance and certainty about our own salvation, and not the issue of losing our salvation as a result of our own failings after we are saved. Later in 2 Peter, he warned believers to be on their guard, so they would not be led astray by the “error of unprincipled men and fall from your own steadfastness” (2 Peter 3:17). Once again, Peter was not referring to the possibility of a believer losing their salvation. Rather, he was warning of the deception and error that can be planted in the minds of believers (especially those who are young in the faith) by false teachers.

Though the false teacher may lead a believer astray for a time, perhaps causing them to sin and to fall from the once steadfast position of assurance they held regarding their own salvation, *only* their assurance will be shaken. Their salvation itself, on the authority of the word of God, is eternally secure. Even if only one is straying and all the rest are safe, *Jesus is coming for His straying sheep. God our Father is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost* (Matthew 18:10-14).

In Conclusion

Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ Himself told us in clear language that all of those whom the Father has given to Him (His sheep, or the elect) will come to Him. He also said that whoever comes to Him He will *never* drive away. Jesus said He did come not to do His own will, but His Father’s will, and then He said it was His Father’s will that He should lose *none* of those who had been given to Him, but that they would *all* be raised up at the last day (John 6:37-40).

Jesus also taught us that as His sheep, we are known by Him. He said that He gives us eternal life, and we will *never* perish. Jesus said further that *no one* can snatch us out of His hand or His Father’s hand (John 10:27-30). And *no one* means that not even we are able to snatch ourselves out of God’s hand through any transgression of our own.

Paul taught us that *there is no power in all of creation that is able to separate believers from the love of God, which is ours in Christ Jesus our Lord* (Romans 8:31-39). Paul taught us again in Romans 8 that our salvation is God’s own doing from beginning to end (Romans 8:29-30). He also

taught us clearly that the gifts and the calling of God are *irrevocable* (Romans 11:29).

We also see from the Scriptures that we are not kept safe by our own power and ability to obey God, but we are kept safe by the power of God, and He is the One who will preserve us in our faith to the end (1 Peter 1:4-5, 1 Corinthians 1:8-9, 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24). Let us therefore be fully and completely confident, as Paul was when he assured us: “He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 1:6).

God Himself began the work of salvation within us, and God Himself will carry our salvation through to its completion. Let us rejoice and give thanks to God the Father of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, because He has guaranteed our salvation from beginning to end, and He has left none of it in our own hands.

27.

Sharing Our Faith

Previously, we learned from various passages of Scripture of the totality of man's depravity and his inability to come to Christ without being drawn by God the Father. We looked at what the Bible teaches about predestination and the calling of God, and we learned that the calling of God is always effectual in those who receive it, meaning that all of those whom God calls to faith in His Son do in fact come to Him, and none refuse or resist this calling.

We have also studied several passages that teach us there are individuals whom God has foreknown from before the creation of the world, and these, His elect, He has predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son. In God's time, these individuals are born into the world, and then again in His time, He calls them to faith in Christ. It is these and only these to whom He shows mercy, while all of the others are left in their sins. Those who are left in their sins are hardened by God Himself, as Paul taught in Romans 9:18.

Further, we saw that the Bible teaches that those individuals whom God calls, He also justifies, and those He justifies, He also glorifies, which makes the salvation of man through faith in Christ God's choice and God's own doing from beginning to end. Considering all of this we may ask ourselves why we should even bother to share our faith at all. Since God is going to bring to faith in Christ those whom He has chosen, while hardening the rest, then why do we need to be involved? The answer to this question is very simple. We are to share our faith with others because Jesus Himself has commanded us to do so.

In Matthew 28:16-20 we find what is known as the Great Commission, where Jesus commanded His disciples to go into the all the world and make known the Gospel. This Gospel is the Good News of God's provision for the forgiveness of man's sins, which comes only through faith

in Jesus Christ. His blood shed on Calvary's cross was the atoning sacrifice that purchased reconciliation to God for everyone who believes in Him.

Jesus commanded the eleven apostles (at this point in time the Apostle Paul had not yet been brought to faith) to preach the Gospel, making disciples of all nations, not only from among the Jews, but also from among the Gentile races as well. This command to make disciples applied not only to the eleven apostles whom Jesus addressed at that time; it applies to all believers.

Our Personal Witness

The Apostle Peter exhorted us to be ready to share our faith when anyone asked us to do so. He wrote in his first letter: "but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence; and keep a good conscience so that in the thing in which you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ will be put to shame." (1 Peter 3:15-16).

Unbelievers who are aware of our Christian faith may be curious, and they may ask us to share our experience with them. They may notice some things that are different about us, maybe some ways of reacting to certain situations that may cause them to be curious as to why we are different. Could it be our Christian faith?

Peter exhorted us to share our faith with "gentleness and reverence" toward those with whom we share. Those who do not know Christ are spiritually adrift in the world. Many are completely unconcerned with spiritual matters on any level. These would consider themselves to be atheists or agnostics. Others may be aware of a void in their lives, which they may be trying to fill with some form of religion or spirituality. Still others may adhere to certain pagan belief systems that are prevalent in the cultures in which they were raised.

The atheist or agnostic will likely show little interest in Christianity most times, but on occasion they may see something in us that sparks some questions as to why we do things and approach certain situations and

circumstances the way we do. They may notice that we are not out to get all we can get for ourselves, and we are not concerned only for our own benefit like the rest of the world, and they may want to know why. They may wonder why we were looking out for someone else's interests or well-being in a certain situation, instead of just looking to our own self-interest. They may also see us experience trouble and difficulties in our lives and notice in us a measure of peace or contentment in the midst of our troubles, which in their understanding should not be there considering our circumstances, and they may wonder if this contentment has something to do with our Christian faith.

When opportunities do present themselves for us to share our faith with unbelievers, we should be aware that they will have no wisdom, insight, or understanding of the word of God whatsoever unless and until God calls them to faith in Christ. We see that this will be the case, because as Paul taught: "But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised." (1 Corinthians 2:14).

All that unbelievers are able to discern or understand is whatever traits of character they may see in us as a result of our actions. This is why Peter exhorted us to "keep a good conscience" (1 Peter 3:15-16), which means that we should make every effort to order our conduct according to all that the word of God teaches.

We should show gentleness and respect to others when we have the opportunity to speak to them about our faith in Christ, so that those in the world who observe our lives and our actions will not be able to find fault with what we say or do. They should find no reason to see our conduct as hypocritical or contrary to what is considered to be good, kind, upright, and just behavior.

When we share our faith, we are as the sower who sows the seed of the word of God, the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Some of the seed that we sow will fall upon "good soil", which is to say in the sight or hearing of God's elect, and in His time, God will cause this seed to spring up and bear a harvest of fruit born His glory (Matthew 13:1-23).

Jesus' Admonition in Matthew 7

When we are considering sharing our faith with others, we should be very careful and discerning, as Jesus taught us in the Sermon on the Mount when He said: "Do not give what is holy to dogs, and do not throw your pearls before swine, or they will trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you to pieces." (Matthew 7:6).

To be obedient to our Lord's command here, we are going to have to make some assessments as to where the "dogs" and "swine" are, and where they are not. We should not approach just anyone to share our faith, because if we do, we may be approaching one of those whom Jesus referred to as dogs or swine, and they may indeed "turn and tear us to pieces". Instead, let us look for an open door of opportunity to share our faith as God provides such opportunities.

As we have discussed before, and as we should understand when sharing our faith, the Bible teaches that God has mercy on some, and the rest He hardens (Romans 9:18). We should also understand that unregenerate man does not have the capacity or ability to receive the Gospel message unless it has been granted to Him by God to do so (John 6:65).

The ones to whom God shows mercy are called to faith in Christ and they receive the Gospel message. One evidence of their calling by God is that they believe in Christ. Other evidence is that they will have a genuine love for other believers, which will be demonstrated by their actions. The others, whom the Scripture says that God hardens, are left in their sins and have no hope of understanding or receiving the Gospel message (Matthew 13:11, John 8:42-47, 10:22-26).

We should not volunteer to share our faith with anyone who is a member of a pagan faith, unless they show a sincere interest in the Gospel message, and because they are aware that we are Christians, they approach us with questions about our faith. Those who display an open hostility toward the Gospel we should avoid, and not give them what is sacred or cast our pearls to them, while at the same time understanding that they may not always remain hostile to the Gospel of Christ. We should also avoid sharing our faith with those who are atheistic and display a callous indifference to the Gospel message.

This is not to say that someone who is indifferent or even overtly hostile toward the Gospel will not at some point in the future come to faith in Christ. Once again we recall that Saul, who would later become the Apostle Paul, was travelling on the Damascus Road on his way to continue his efforts to persecute the Church when he was struck down and called to faith in Christ apart from any decision of his own, even while he was still intent on opposing the Gospel (Acts 9:1-9, Acts 22:1-10). Sometimes those who are openly hostile toward the Gospel message are indeed numbered among God's elect. In His time, God will call these individuals to faith in His Son, just as was the case with the Saul.

Every believer is given one or more spiritual gifts to use in God's service to build up the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:7-11, Ephesians 4:11-13). Some are given the gift of evangelism. Those with this gift will go forth with the spoken or printed Gospel message, or both, outwardly calling men to faith in Christ.

Some evangelists operate from the pulpit in a church, and others will work through various other media. Some even have street ministries where they will sing hymns and spiritual songs on the streets, while those working with them will hand out small, printed booklets with various presentations of the Gospel message to those who want to take them. Even these street evangelists will not try to force the Gospel message on anyone, but they make themselves available to those who show an interest in the message of God's salvation, which is obtained only through faith in Jesus Christ.

God's "Severe" Mercy in Bringing Some to Faith

Many times, God will work to bring one of His elect to faith through troubles or hardships that reveal one's own inadequacy to face the circumstances with which they are confronted. In His time, God mercifully reveals to one whom He has foreknown since before the creation of the world that Jesus Christ is their only source of strength and hope. Their own strength and resources, which may have served them well in managing life before, will no longer be adequate to sustain them through their present troubles. As Jesus said: "Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I

am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.” (Matthew 11:28-30).

It is an act of divine mercy for God to bring one of His elect to faith in Christ through adversity and need, revealing to them that the grace of Jesus Christ is sufficient for their every need (2 Corinthians 12:7-10, Philippians 4:11-13), because God does not do this for everyone. Many are left in their sins and find themselves to be among the wicked as Job described them in Job 21:7-16, and as Asaph described them in Psalm 73:1-9.

They are not afflicted like others, but everything seems to go their way in life, and therefore pride, arrogance, callousness, conceits, scoffing, and malice characterize their lives. They find that they can get all they need and more by their own strength, and they either see no need of God in their lives, or they imagine that God must be pleased with them since they have been blessed with so many benefits in life.

Such thoughts and reasoning are a deception, and for God to allow these individuals to continue in this deception is one way in which He hardens those to whom He shows no mercy but leaves them in their sin. They seem to do well for themselves in this life, but ultimately and eternally their fate is a tragic one, and they will one day find themselves not among those who are blessed, but among those upon whom Jesus pronounces woes, as He tells them that they have already received their consolation in full (Luke 6:20-26).

Open Doors of Opportunity

If an unbeliever approaches us with some burden they are carrying, knowing that we are Christians and perhaps hoping we will have some word of encouragement for them, this could very well be an open door of opportunity that God is providing for us to share our faith in Christ. Perhaps we can share with them how we take all of our burdens to the Lord in prayer, and that we rely upon Him to sustain us through the troubles that we face in this life.

We will have to use wisdom as to how much detail of our personal lives that we share with them. However, to communicate that we face life

with the strength of the Lord and not with our own strength can plant a seed that God may use in bringing this person to faith, if indeed he is one of those who has been appointed to eternal life (Acts 13:48).

Once again let us recall Peter's exhortation to each of us as believers: "sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you." While we should always be ready to share our faith, giving an answer to those who see the hope that we have, we should never worry about our presentation or about how awkward we may be in sharing with them.

Our own eloquence, presentation skills, or persuasiveness has nothing at all to do with whether someone will be saved. If those with whom we are sharing our faith are numbered among God's elect, they will be brought to faith in Christ, in God's time. If we have shared our faith with them, then we have been given the privilege of being used by God to help bring the Gospel message to them, and we will have helped to fulfill the Great Commission.

Whether those with whom we share our faith ever come to believe in Christ or not, the sharing of our faith brings the outward call of the Gospel message to those who hear it. The results, however, are entirely up to God, and His word, as it has gone out through us as we share our faith, will not return to Him void but will accomplish the purpose which He intends (Isaiah 55:10-11). In sharing our faith, not giving what is sacred to dogs or casting our pearls before swine as Jesus said in Matthew 7:6, but as God opens doors of opportunity, we are obedient to the Great Commission.

The Parable of the Sower

The Parable of the Sower taught by Jesus in Matthew 13 illustrates the results of the Gospel of Christ being preached among men in the world. We have touched upon this passage before, but let us now look at it in greater detail because there are several interesting points to be made about sharing our faith in Christ, and what we can expect to see as a result.

Jesus first gave this teaching to a crowd that had gathered to hear what He had to say, as we read in Matthew 13:1-9. He gave the teaching in the form of a parable, using analogies or metaphors to convey His message, and

then later we see that He explained the meaning of the parable to His disciples in Matthew 13:18-23. Between these two passages, Jesus revealed to His disciples that the understanding of His teachings has been hidden from many (Matthew 13:10-17).

Speaking to the crowd as recorded in Matthew 13:1-9, Jesus taught using the analogy of a farmer sowing or spreading seed over the ground, expecting to later reap a harvest from the plants that spring up from the seeds. The sowing of the seed is the metaphor that Jesus used to symbolize the proclaiming of the Gospel message, which is the outward call for men to repent and put their faith in Him for the forgiveness of their sins and reconciliation to God. Many hear this proclamation of the Gospel, or this outward call, but it has only been given to God's elect to be able to come to Christ (Matthew 22:14), and only these will bear spiritual fruit to the glory of God.

Jesus said that as the farmer went out to spread the seed, it fell upon different types of soil. Some of the seed fell beside the road, and the seed that fell there was eaten by birds. Some of the seed fell in places where the soil was rocky, and the seeds sprang up quickly but were scorched by the sun because the soil they had fallen upon was shallow. Other seed fell among thorns, which choked the plants. However some seed fell upon good soil where it produced a harvest, yielding thirty, sixty, or even a hundred times what was originally sown. Jesus ended His parable by exhorting whoever in the crowd had ears to hear, meaning whoever was able to hear, let them hear and understand the lesson that He taught.

After Jesus had given this teaching, His disciples asked Him why He spoke to the people in parables (Matthew 13:10). Jesus' parables used metaphors and analogies to convey spiritual truths, and they were often not easily understood. His disciples were likely curious as to why He chose to use this method in His teaching, and why He did not communicate to the crowds in terms that they could more readily understand. Jesus explained why He spoke to the people in parables when He answered His disciples: "...To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted." (Matthew 13:11).

Jesus' reply is very revealing, and it is in complete agreement with several Scriptures that we have considered previously regarding God's sovereign choice of those to whom He shows mercy, while others are left in

their sins. The ability to come to Christ and to understand God's word is given only to God's elect, to those whom the Father has given to Jesus (John 6:37). These are the ones whom God foreknew from before the foundation of the world (Ephesians 1:3-11). In His time, God calls all of His elect to faith in Christ, justifies them, and will ultimately glorify them (Romans 8:29-30). For all the rest, Jesus taught that it has not been granted to them to understand the Gospel message and the word of God as revealed in the Scriptures, which He referred to as "the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven".

Continuing in this passage of Matthew 13, after Jesus answered His disciples as to why He spoke to the people in parables, He then quoted from a passage in Isaiah 6:9-10, which speaks of God's hardening of some individuals. Though they hear the words of the Gospel message, they do not understand, and though they see, they do not perceive. This is the way it is with those to whom it has not been granted to understand the Gospel message from the Scriptures. These are the same individuals whom Paul spoke about in Romans 9:18. God has willed not to show mercy to them, but to harden them.

Those whom God has decided to harden are not among those who are appointed to eternal life (Acts 13:48). Rather, they are among those who are appointed to disobey the Gospel message, as Peter taught (1 Peter 2:8). Their own will, desire, or decision in the matter has nothing at all to do with their salvation (John 1:13, Romans 9:16). They do not believe because God has not granted to them to come to faith in Christ (John 6:65). As Jesus said, it has not been granted to them to understand the mysteries of the kingdom of Heaven (Matthew 13:11).

After Jesus gave His parable to the crowds, He then explained the parable to His disciples, as we read in Matthew 13:18-23. Let us now look closely at each of the four cases in this parable of an individual hearing the Gospel message, and let us consider the results in each of their lives.

In the first case the seed fell beside the road where it was devoured by birds. Jesus said that this represents one who hears the Gospel message, but he does not understand it. In this case the devil comes and steals the word that was sown in his heart. This individual was unable to understand the word of God and is not saved, and he was therefore unable to bear any good fruit.

In the second case, the seed fell upon rocky places. Jesus taught that this symbolizes the man who hears the word, and he immediately receives it with joy. However, he has “no firm root in himself”, as Jesus said, and he only perseveres in his faith a short time, quickly falling away when troubles or persecutions come into his life because of the word.

We can interpret this second case as an individual who is not saved because God’s elect always persevere in their faith, and they never fall away, as we learned previously when we discussed the eternal security of the believer. Our perseverance in our faith is brought about by God Himself (John 6:37-40, 1 Corinthians 1:8-9, Philippians 1:6, 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24, others).

This second case also illustrates that there can be an apparent conversion in the lives of some people; they and others may believe that they are saved, when in fact they are not. Jesus taught about these individuals in His warning about false prophets in Matthew 7:15-23. In this second case, just as in the first, the seed that was sown bore no fruit, because the individual who received the seed of the message did not in fact come to faith in Christ.

In the third case the seed fell among the thorns. Jesus said that this symbolizes those who hear the word, but the worries and concerns of this life and the deceitfulness of worldly riches choke the word, and it bears no fruit in their lives either. We can interpret this third case also as an individual who is not saved because a genuine faith in Christ will always be manifested by good works, and these good works are themselves fruit born to the glory of God.

As we consider this third case, let us remember that James taught: “...faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself.” (James 2:17. See also the entire passage of James 2:14-26). This is to say that a genuine faith in Christ is always accompanied by good works done in obedience to God’s word. These good works are spiritual fruit born to the glory of God, and they will always be manifested in the life of a believer. Conversely, works themselves do not earn salvation for an individual, but a genuine faith in Christ will always be accompanied by good works. As James said, if someone claims to have faith but has no good works, his faith is dead; it does not exist.

Finally, in the fourth case the seed fell upon what Jesus described as “good soil”. The good soil symbolizes the man who hears the word *and understands it* (again, consider Matthew 13:11), bearing a harvest of good fruit, producing a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.

In each of the first three cases, no fruit was born; no harvest was produced. However in the fourth case where the seed fell upon the good soil, fruit was born and a harvest was realized. The “good soil”, as Jesus used the analogy, symbolizes God’s elect. God’s elect are those who hear and are able to understand the Gospel message, which is symbolized by the seed being sown, and they are those who do indeed come to faith in Christ and bear fruit. Their genuine faith will always be accompanied by good works, or a love that manifests itself by its actions, and these good works are themselves fruit born to the glory of God.

Jesus said: “My Father is glorified by this, *that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples.*” (John 15:8). We show ourselves to be Jesus’ disciples by the fact that we bear fruit. We demonstrate that we have indeed been called to faith in Christ and are in truth His disciples by bearing spiritual fruit to the glory of God, whereas all the others bear no fruit.

Therefore, when we share our faith with others, the “seed” of the Gospel message that we share with them will fall upon different types of soil, so to speak. However, the only place where individuals will in God’s time be brought to faith in Christ is where the seed falls upon the “good soil”, which is to say where the seed of the Gospel message is proclaimed in the hearing of God’s elect.

In Conclusion

Jesus said to His disciples: “...The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Therefore beseech the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into His harvest.” (Matthew 9:37-38). With the Great Commission, Jesus commanded all of us who are brought to faith in Him to be involved as workers in His harvest field, sharing our faith. We can share our faith in different ways, and at times we may not even be aware that through our actions which others observe, we are bearing witness to our faith in Christ.

We can share our faith one-on-one with someone who shows an interest, someone who may perceive something different and good in us. These, knowing that we are Christians, may want to know more about our faith in Christ.

We can share our faith with others when they see us “taking the high road” so to speak, being obedient to the principles in Scripture when it would be so easy for us to realize some personal benefit by doing otherwise, as all the rest of the world would do. When unbelievers who know us to be Christians see this, they may wonder if it is not our faith in Christ that causes us to act differently, doing what many would consider to be “the right thing to do”, when doing something else would be much more expedient and personally profitable. We can also be obedient to the Great Commission by financially supporting those who preach and teach the Gospel message of the forgiveness of sins and salvation through Jesus Christ and through Him alone.

Even though the Gospel is proclaimed widely in the world today, and many hear the message outwardly, only God’s elect will be effectually drawn to Christ, as we have discussed in detail previously. These elect, these chosen by God, are symbolized by the “good soil” in Jesus’ Parable of the Sower. When the seed of the word of God is sown in their hearts, these and only these are the ones who are able to hear the word and understand it. Having received God’s call to faith in Christ, we will always manifest our genuine faith by good works done in obedience to the word of God, and these good works are themselves fruit born to His glory.

God is going to save those whom He has foreknown from before the foundation of the world (Ephesians 1:4), and there is nothing anyone can do to change that (Romans 8:28-39). Jesus has, with His command to go and make disciples of all nations, given to us as His people the privilege of working in His harvest field to bring the Gospel message to His elect, who will themselves as we have done before them, hear the word, understand it, and yield a harvest, bearing spiritual fruit to the glory of God our Father.

28.

The Sovereignty of God in the Lives of Men

Though men may think they make their own choices in life and choose the paths they will take, it is ultimately God who plans the course that a man will take, and it is ultimately God's purpose for his life that will prevail. Whatever a man may do, whether he does good or evil, God's plan and purpose for His creation will be realized. The course of action that a man takes and the path that he follows are but a part of the larger will, plan, and purpose of our all-powerful, all-knowing, and sovereign God.

In his prayer the prophet Jeremiah said: "I know, O Lord, that a man's way is not in himself, nor is it in a man who walks to direct his steps." (Jeremiah 10:23). Another similar verse is found in Proverbs: "The mind of man plans his way, but the Lord directs his steps." (Proverbs 16:9). The Scriptures teach that a man's life is not his own, and regardless of whatever plans he may map out for his life, ultimately it will be the Lord who directs his steps and determines the paths he will take, and it is ultimately the Lord's purpose for his life that will prevail.

Two more verses from Proverbs also emphasize the sovereignty of God in the lives of men. In Proverbs 19 we read: "Many plans are in a man's heart, but the counsel of the Lord will stand." (Proverbs 19:21). In Proverbs 20, we read: "Man's steps are ordained by the Lord; how then can man understand his way?" (Proverbs 20:24).

A man may be convinced that he chooses his own course of action for his own purposes and benefit. However, the Bible reveals that a man's steps are ordained by the Lord, and ultimately God's purpose will be realized as a result of the things that he does. With the question, "How then can man understand his way", the Scripture is teaching us that men cannot fully understand the paths they travel during the course of their lives, or the things that happen to them along the way.

As believers, our loving and sovereign God determined long ago His plan and purpose for our lives, and the paths that we would travel. These are paths that He has chosen for us and paths in which He directs us, through the circumstances that unfold during the course of our lives, and as a result of the limitations He has placed upon us. All of the events of our lives were decided long ago by God Himself, who foreknew all of His people from before the creation of the world. The psalmist wrote: “And in Your book were all written the days that were ordained for me, when as yet there was not one of them.” (Psalm 139:16).

The Sovereignty of God in the Lives of Unbelievers

Just as God’s sovereign purpose is accomplished in our lives as believers for our good and future glory together with His Son Jesus Christ in Heaven, so also God’s sovereign purpose is accomplished in the lives of those who do not know Him. In 2 Kings 19, we read that Sennacherib, king of Assyria, had conquered many nations, and he was at this point in time coming to make war against Jerusalem. God spoke through the prophet Isaiah about him saying:

“Have you not heard?
Long ago I did it;
From ancient times I planned it.
Now I have brought it to pass,
That you should turn fortified cities into ruinous heaps.”
(2 Kings 19:25, Isaiah 37:26)

God ordained that Sennacherib would conquer nations, but then the time came when God also brought about his downfall. In response to Sennacherib’s threat to invade and conquer Israel just as he had done to other nations, Hezekiah, king of Judah, prayed to the Lord for deliverance and received his answer through the prophet Isaiah: the Assyrians would not enter Jerusalem.

As they were encamped and preparing to attack Israel, an angel of the Lord went out and put to death a hundred and eighty-five thousand men in the Assyrian camp. Sennacherib withdrew, and sometime later as he was worshipping in the temple of one of his gods, he was killed by two of his

own sons (2 Kings 19:35-37). God ordained that he would conquer nations, and God ordained his downfall.

In Exodus 4-14, there are several references to God having hardened Pharaoh's heart against Himself and the demands of Moses to let His people go. The Scriptures tell us that God hardened Pharaoh's heart in order that He might display His power in delivering His people from Pharaoh's hand (Romans 9:17). Another similar example of God hardening the heart of a ruler against Himself and His purpose is recorded in Deuteronomy 2.

As the people of Israel were moving toward the Jordan River to cross over into the land that the Lord was giving to them, they had to first pass through the land of Heshbon. Moses sent messengers to the king of Heshbon, asking that they be allowed to pass through and to buy food.

However the Lord hardened the heart of the king of Heshbon against the request of Moses, so that He might deliver the king, his army, and the land of Heshbon into the hands of the Israelites through victory in battle, as we read in Deuteronomy: "But Sihon king of Heshbon was not willing for us to pass through his land; for the Lord your God hardened his spirit and made his heart obstinate, in order to deliver him into your hand, as he is today." (Deuteronomy 2:30). So yet again we see from the Scriptures that God hardened the spirit of a pagan king against Himself and His people Israel, so that He might demonstrate His power in delivering His people.

Our sovereign God controls the thoughts and the actions of the rulers of the earth. God raises them up and gives them power, and He determines the course of action they take while they are in power. In Proverbs 21 we read: "The king's heart is like channels of water in the hand of the Lord; He turns it wherever He wishes." (Proverbs 21:1).

It is clear from the instruction given to us in the Scriptures that our sovereign God controls the thoughts and the actions of the rulers of the earth, and that it is He who has raised them up and put them into power. At this point, considering the atrocities and sufferings that are brought about in the lives of thousands or even millions when these rulers embark upon a course of war or other policies that cause harm in the lives of many, we may question why God would allow such things to happen, when He surely could have prevented them.

As we seek answers from the Scriptures, we recall that Isaiah 55:8-9 teaches that God's ways and thoughts are above the ways and thoughts of men. Paul also taught in Romans 11:33 that God's judgments are unsearchable, and that His ways are beyond man's ability to understand. In Ecclesiastes we also receive this insight: "and I saw every work of God, I concluded that man cannot discover the work which has been done under the sun. Even though man should seek laboriously, he will not discover; and though the wise man should say, 'I know,' he cannot discover." (Ecclesiastes 8:17). With these teachings in mind, we know that man will never be able to understand all that God does.

The Scriptures do, however, provide some insights into the ways of God. For example, it is clear throughout the Bible that God punishes sin. It is also clear that God limits the actions taken by all men, and He also limits the actions taken by Satan (Job 1:6-2:8). However, there are times when God allows suffering to affect the lives of His people through evil that is perpetrated by others, or through evil that is perpetrated directly by Satan himself.

When we as believers are caught up in events brought about by the evil doing of others, and we suffer unjustly, we are enduring a share in the sufferings of Christ, who also suffered unjustly as a result of the wrongdoing of others. His sufferings happened according to the predetermined plan, purpose, and foreknowledge of God (Acts 2:23), as do ours.

When we consider our own sufferings, let us recall once again Jesus' teaching in Matthew 10:29-31, where He revealed that God is intimately familiar with every detail of His creation, even down to the number of hairs on our head. Nothing, not even an event as small as the death of a sparrow, happens in God's creation apart from His knowledge and His sovereign will.

For everyone who has been called to faith in Christ, God has ordained that the unjust sufferings which He has allowed to affect our lives will be for us a share in Christ's sufferings, whether these sufferings are brought about directly by Satan himself or through the actions of men. These sufferings have been allowed to touch our lives by our sovereign God, because as He has also ordained, it will be through our sharing in the sufferings of His Son that we will realize a share in His eternal glory (Romans 8:17-18, Philippians 1:29, others). Unbelievers may also suffer as a result of the evil

doing of others, but unlike the believer, they have been granted no share in Christ's sufferings and no share in His eternal glory.

The Sovereignty of God in the Salvation of Men

The Scriptures provide abundant evidence of the sovereignty of God in the salvation of men, teaching us that God Himself determines who will come to faith in His Son Jesus Christ. In other words, God chooses those who will receive His mercy and be saved, and God also decides who will not receive His mercy and will therefore be lost. As we have seen previously, Romans 9:6-24 is one passage that teaches clearly on this subject. In particular, Paul spoke of God's sovereign choice concerning the salvation of men beginning in verse 16:

So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy. For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, "For this very purpose I raised you up, to demonstrate My power in you, and that My name might be proclaimed throughout the whole earth." So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires. You will say to me then, "Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?" On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, "Why did you make me like this," will it? Or does not the potter have a right over the clay, to make from the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for common use? (Romans 9:16-21, emphasis added)

Paul taught in this passage that salvation through faith in Jesus Christ does not depend upon man's own will or decision to come to Christ while he is still dead in his sins, or upon any effort of his own, but solely upon God's sovereign decision as to whether He will show mercy to him. As we have also seen previously, all who do come to faith in Christ are called by God, and at the point of this effectual calling an individual is regenerated; his conversion has occurred. As a result of his calling and conversion, he believes in Christ and has a desire to follow Him. From that time on, there will be no turning back; God Himself will see to it.

Just as God controls the thoughts and intents of even the rulers of the earth, so also in the lives His elect, those to whom He has decided to show

mercy by calling them to faith in His Son Jesus Christ, we see God prevailing against their own wills to bring them to faith in Christ, *making* them willing to do His will.

The Apostle Paul, who was known as Saul before his conversion, was given an understanding of the sovereignty of God in the salvation of men through the working of God in his own life. Saul's conversion on the Damascus Road stands as an example of God prevailing against man's will, according to His own sovereign will and decision.

The account of Saul's conversion is recorded in Acts 9, Acts 22, and again in Acts 26. By studying these passages, we can see that Saul was clearly unregenerate and hostile toward the Gospel message. He was actively threatening the Lord's disciples and endeavoring to imprison them for their faith, right up until the moment in time when a light from Heaven flashed around him, and he was confronted by Jesus Christ Himself. We read in Acts 9: "and he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" And he said, "Who are You, Lord?" And He said, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting." (Acts 9:4-5)

In verse 5, Saul replied acknowledging that whoever had just intervened in his life was indeed Lord. At this point, Saul's conversion had occurred, and his conversion had occurred contrary to his own will up to that point. He was prevailed upon by God, and his own will to continue to breathe out "threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord" (Acts 9:1) was abruptly interrupted and forever turned in exactly the opposite direction.

Saul had received mercy from God. His own will had been forcefully overcome, and the destructive path that he had chosen for himself was forever changed, according to the will, plan, and purpose of our sovereign God. God had made the decision before the world was created to bring Saul to faith, and in His time, He accomplished what He had decided to do in his life, and so it is with all of us who come to faith in Christ (Ephesians 1:4-5).

In the Book of Acts, we again read of God's sovereign choice in the salvation of man. Beginning in Acts 13:44, we read that Paul and Barnabas addressed a crowd in Antioch which included both Jews and Gentiles. When the Jews saw the large crowds that had gathered to hear what they had to say, they became jealous and spoke against the Gospel message.

In response, Paul and Barnabas answered their Jewish opponents saying that it was their responsibility to bring the Gospel to them first. But since they had rejected the message, they would now bring the Gospel to the Gentiles. Then they quoted from Isaiah 49:6 in the presence of everyone, saying that God had commanded them to be a light to the Gentiles, and to proclaim His salvation to the ends of the earth.

After this proclamation we read: “When the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord; and as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed.” (Acts 13:48). Who were those who believed the Gospel message? It was those who were ***appointed*** by our sovereign God to eternal life who believed the Gospel message of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ.

Paul taught in Romans 9:6-24 about God’s sovereign choice of those individuals who will receive His mercy, in that He has decided to call them to faith in His Son. In contrast to those who receive God’s mercy, Paul taught that God chose to harden all the rest. The Apostle Peter also taught about God’s sovereign choice in the eternal destinies of men when he wrote:

“...they stumble because they are disobedient to the word, ***and to this doom they were also appointed.***

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.” (1 Peter 2:8-9, emphasis added).

Peter taught that those who stumble do so because they disobey the word of God, and then he revealed that they had been ***appointed*** to this doom. In contrast to those who have been appointed to doom, Peter described those whom God has chosen and called out of darkness, as “a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession.”

Peter taught in this passage that some were chosen by God and appointed to come to faith in Christ (consider also Acts 13:48), but all the rest were appointed for disobedience and doom. The choice for both groups has been made by our sovereign God.

The Sovereignty of God in the Lives of His People

We have seen from Proverbs 21:1 that God controls the intents and actions of men, even the rulers of the earth. We have considered a few examples from the Scriptures, as God intervened in the lives of Pharaoh, Sennacherib, and Sihon to accomplish His sovereign purpose through them. These men were kings of the ancient world whom God hardened against His will so that He might display His power in prevailing against them.

Just as God intervenes in the lives of unbelievers in order to accomplish His plan and purpose, He also works in the lives of His people in order to accomplish His sovereign plan and purpose. His purpose for our lives always includes conforming us to the likeness of His Son Jesus Christ (Romans 8:29), and it also includes a particular place of service that He has ordained for each of us individually.

Paul exhorted us in Philippians: “So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling; ***for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.***” (Philippians 2:12-13, emphasis added).

When Paul exhorted us to continue to “work out” our salvation in a reverential fear of God, he was not implying that our salvation is in any way earned by works that we do. Because as we recall once again from Ephesians 2, Paul taught: “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.” (Ephesians 2:8-10).

Rather, the message from Philippians 2:13 and Ephesians 2:10 is that each of us as believers was created in Christ Jesus to do good works, and God Himself has decided in advance just what those good works and places of service will be in each of our lives individually. As God fulfills His plan for each of us, He works in our lives to motivate us “to will and to work for His good pleasure”.

According to Philippians 2:13, God is working in our lives *to make us willing, and to indeed make us act* in accordance with His plan and purpose for each of us individually, as it fits into His sovereign will, plan, and purpose for His creation as a whole. The good works that we will do in His service, which God has prepared beforehand for each of us, will bear fruit to His glory.

The good works which God has ordained for each of us always include obedience to His word as revealed in the Scriptures, and obedience to His directive when the time comes that He reveals to us some special work or place of service that He has assigned for us. These special works, tasks, or places of service will most likely be consistent with a spiritual gift that He has given to us in order to edify the body of Christ (Romans 12:6-8, 1 Corinthians 12:7-11). As we have seen before, preparation for a special work or task that God has assigned for us may take years, or even decades, as is evident from the lives and experiences of both Joseph and Moses as recorded in the Scriptures.

Believers who are young in the faith and have no idea if God has any special work for them to do or not should not be too concerned about these things. God will reveal to all of us in His time what gifts He has given to us, and how we are to serve Him. Instead, those who are young in the faith should focus their efforts as Peter taught when he said: “Therefore, putting aside all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander, like newborn babies, long for the pure milk of the word, so that by it you may grow in respect to salvation, if you have tasted the kindness of the Lord.” (1 Peter 2:1-3).

Teaching along these same lines in Romans 12:1-2, Paul wrote that we should offer ourselves as a “living and holy sacrifice” to God. Practically speaking, this means that we are to yield ourselves in obedience to all that we know God requires of us.

Paul then continued in this passage, teaching that we should no longer be conformed to the ways of the world and the thinking of unregenerate men, but we should be “transformed” by renewing our minds. This transformation is a process that moves forward as we learn more of the word of God through our study of the Bible, and as we are obedient to what we have learned. Through this process of transformation, we grow in our faith, and we will be able to understand what God’s will is.

God's will is revealed to all believers through His word, and His will for each of us individually is revealed as the events and circumstances of our lives unfold. All of the events and circumstances in each of our lives have been ordained for us by our sovereign God.

Abstaining from evil and renewing our minds by being actively involved in the study of God's word is something that all of us as believers should be endeavoring to do throughout our lives, but we should also understand that the time will come when we are no longer "newborn babies", as Peter said. In God's time we will all be called upon to exercise our spiritual gifts for the benefit of the body of Christ, serving God in the place and capacity that He has assigned for us.

A Lesson from the Life of Jonah

God not only prevails over the wills of His elect in bringing them to faith in Christ, as we saw demonstrated in the conversion of the Apostle Paul, but He will also prevail over the will of one of His own people in order to accomplish a particular task that He is determined to accomplish through them. God had chosen the prophet Jonah for just such a task. In the opening verses of the Book of Jonah, we read:

The word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai saying, "Arise, go to Nineveh the great city and cry against it, for their wickedness has come up before Me." But Jonah rose up to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. So he went down to Joppa, found a ship which was going to Tarshish, paid the fare and went down into it to go with them to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. (Jonah 1:1-3)

God had a specific task that He wanted Jonah to accomplish, which was to go through the city of Nineveh and preach that His judgment was coming upon them because of their wickedness, unless the people repented. Nineveh was a large city in Assyria, which was a Gentile nation and an enemy of Israel. Jonah did not want to go there as the Lord had commanded him, because he knew that God was "a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, and one who relents concerning calamity" (Jonah 4:2). Therefore he was afraid that the Ninevites

would indeed repent of their wickedness, and that God would then relent from sending the calamity of His judgment upon them.

Jonah did not want to see Israel's Gentile enemies receive God's mercy, but he wanted to see His judgment fall upon them. So he rebelled against God's command to go to Nineveh, and he actually headed in the opposite direction.

Jonah headed toward Tarshish, an ancient city believed to be in what is today Spain, which would have been one of the most remote locations in the known world at that time. He must have thought that by running away in the opposite direction to the furthest place he knew about that he could escape the command of the Lord to do what would be for him a very undesirable and distasteful task. Jonah probably reasoned that if he did not go as he was told, the Ninevites would continue in their wickedness, resulting in God's judgment falling upon them, which was exactly what he wanted to see.

The problem with Jonah's plan was that his sovereign God was determined to use him for this task, and of course He knew exactly how much pressure to apply and how to apply it in order to force Jonah to comply with His will. God intervened in the life of Jonah to prevail upon him and to force Jonah's will into compliance with His own will, ***to make Jonah will and act in order to fulfill His plan and purpose.*** (Again consider Philippians 2:13).

God could have chosen someone else to preach to the Ninevites, but He did not. He was determined to use Jonah for this task, which became a very big problem for Jonah, and one that would be resolved in no other way except for him to obey God and do as he was commanded.

As Jonah was sailing to Tarshish, going in the opposite direction that God had told him to go, the Lord sent a storm that threatened the safety of the ship and all who were aboard. The men on the ship, who were apparently Gentiles from various nations, cast lots to see who was responsible for the calamity they were facing, and the lot fell to Jonah. Then they questioned Jonah about the matter, and he answered them saying: "... 'I am a Hebrew, and I fear the Lord God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land.' Then the men became extremely frightened and they said to him, 'How could you

do this?’ For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the Lord, because he had told them.” (Jonah 1:9-10).

Jonah then told the men to throw him overboard, and the sea would become calm again. So great was his disdain for the task that God had given to him that he would rather drown in the sea than have to do as God had commanded him.

At first the men did not want to throw Jonah into the sea, but the storm became worse, and they had to save themselves and the ship. After they threw him overboard, the sea became calm again. At this point we read: “Then the men feared the Lord greatly, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows. And the Lord appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the stomach of the fish three days and three nights.” (Jonah 1:16-17).

The great fish that swallowed Jonah was the pressure that God applied to make Jonah willing to do what He wanted him to do. At this point we as God’s people might wonder what form the “great fish” might take in our own lives if we decided to embark on a course that would take us in the opposite direction from obedience to the word of God. Is there any doubt that in the end, obedience to God would prove to be much better than the belly of that fish? Jonah found out that obedience to God was by far a better thing, and this is one of the lessons here for all of us as God’s people.

From the belly of the great fish Jonah cried out to God for deliverance, after which God commanded the fish to vomit Jonah out onto dry land. Then we see from Jonah 3:1-3 that God commanded Jonah a second time to go to Nineveh and preach the message He gave to him. This time Jonah obeyed the Lord, and he went to Nineveh to proclaim God’s message to them. As distasteful as the task was to him, Jonah was made to see that it was far better than the belly of the great fish.

As it turned out, the Ninevites did repent when they heard Jonah’s preaching, and God did relent from sending the judgment that He had planned for them. We might think that Jonah should have felt honored to have been used by the Lord in such a way, but Jonah was angry that he had been used as an instrument of God’s mercy shown to one of Israel’s Gentile enemies (Jonah 4:1-4). However, the decision to show mercy to Jew or to

Gentile belongs to our sovereign God alone, as Paul taught in Romans 9, and as we see from several other passages of Scripture.

In Conclusion

Discussions of the sovereignty of God in the lives of men and looking into the Scriptures to see how God hardens some men against Himself as part of His overall will and plan for His creation, will generate questions regarding just to what extent man possesses a free will. To be sure, no man has ever prevailed against God. God's sovereign plan for His creation goes forward exactly as He intends, and that sovereign plan centers on the life, death, and resurrection from the dead of His Son Jesus Christ.

Some refer to God's allowing suffering and destruction to occur in the lives of men as His "permissive" will, meaning that God knew these things would happen, and He did not stop them from happening, though He could have. However as we have seen from the Scriptures before, when suffering and tragedy come into our lives as believers, God's word promises that these things are working together along with everything that comes into our lives for our ultimate good and for our future glory together with Christ in Heaven (Romans 8:28). For believers, and only for believers, the troubles and sufferings that we endure, all of which have been allowed to affect our lives by our sovereign God, will all be made to achieve for us an eternal measure of glory that far outweighs the grief and burden of the troubles themselves (2 Corinthians 4:16-18).

When we consider the idea of man's free will and just to what extent man has a free will, let us consider the many Scripture passages that clearly demonstrate that our sovereign God does indeed intervene in the lives of men to make them conform to His overall plan and purpose for His creation. Some He hardens against Himself (Romans 9:18). Paul spoke of these individuals as "vessels of wrath prepared for destruction" (Romans 9:22). We have seen examples from the Old Testament in the lives of several kings of the ancient world where God hardened these kings, making them oppose His will, so that He could demonstrate His power and His Name would become known by prevailing against them.

In contrast to those whom God hardens against Himself, He chooses to show mercy to others. Paul spoke of those who receive God's mercy as "vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory, even us, whom He also called, not from among Jews only, but also from among Gentiles." (Romans 9:23-24).

Also in the lives of those of us who receive His mercy, God may at times bring about circumstances that will force us, against our own wills, to comply with His sovereign will. We have seen this clearly demonstrated in the life of Jonah. Everything that is recorded in the Scriptures is recorded to reveal to us as God's people something of the ways of our sovereign God, including the ways that He works in the lives of His servants to accomplish His will through them.

Our God is sovereign over all of His creation, and He has a plan for every individual, whether they are among those of us who receive His mercy, or they are among those whom He hardens. We have seen from the Scriptures that God motivates men, even forcefully overcoming their own wills, in order to bring them, their thoughts, their intents, and their actions into conformity with His own sovereign will, plan and purpose.

29.

God's Answers to Our Prayers

God has ordained a plan and place of service for each of us individually as believers, and He answers our prayers according to His will for our lives. Prayer is simply talking with God, and it comes very naturally to all of us, even from the beginning of our Christian walk as we ask God to help us with the troubles that we face.

In the book of Acts, we read that Paul and Barnabas strengthened the disciples, encouraging them to remain true to the faith, and they taught that we must go through “many tribulations” to enter the kingdom of God (Acts 14:22). These many tribulations or hardships that God has ordained for our lives will drive us to Him in prayer, and they are one way in which He draws us close to Himself for fellowship.

Prayer with Thanksgiving

Knowing that we would face many tribulations, Paul encouraged believers when he wrote: “Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 4:6-7).

This peace that Paul mentioned is the kind of peace that only God can give. It is a peace that transcends human reasoning and understanding in that it is not dependent upon the presence of favorable circumstances in our lives. Rather, it is a peace and contentment that God promises to us even in the midst of our troubles, as we bring our requests to Him in prayer, with thanksgiving.

In 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18, Paul gave us three exhortations. He said that we are to always be joyful; we are to pray continually, and we are to give thanks to God in all the circumstances of our lives. Our circumstances

themselves, and also the giving of thanks in the midst of these circumstances, are both God's will for us. The Scriptures teach us that God is working for our eternal good and glory together with His Son through everything He allows to affect our lives (Romans 8:28-29), and this is the reason that we are exhorted to be joyful, and thankful, in every circumstance and condition of our lives.

Bringing our prayers to God with thanksgiving is something that can be very difficult for us when we are confronted with trouble and suffering, because we know that our sovereign and omnipotent God could easily have spared us from these painful things, but He has not. Neither did He spare His own Son from the sufferings that He endured (Romans 8:32).

Many of us will question why we should be thankful when we know that God could have prevented our suffering from occurring in the first place. We will also question why we should be thankful when we know that God could remove our burden at any time, and yet He chooses not to do so.

The reason given to us in the Bible as to why God allows these "many tribulations" to affect our lives (again, Acts 14:22), even as we walk in obedience to His word, is perhaps best summarized by Paul's teaching in Romans 8:17-18. In this passage, Paul revealed that we as the children of God must share in the sufferings of His Son, in order that we may also share in His eternal glory. God has ordained that we as believers will all experience reflections of Jesus' sufferings in their own lives, becoming in some measure as He was: "A man of sorrows and acquainted with grief" (Isaiah 53:3, John 12:24-26, John 16:20-22). Through this share in His sufferings, we will bear fruit to the glory of God and receive a share in Christ's eternal glory.

When we begin to understand these truths from the word of God, we can begin to understand why we are exhorted to present our requests to Him with thanksgiving for all that He is accomplishing for us, even though our losses, troubles, and hardships. For eternity, we have God's promise of a share in the glory of His Son. For the days of our hard service now, we have His many promises given to us throughout the Scriptures, promises of His peace, help, sustenance, and His all-sufficient grace for our every weakness and need. All of these promises give us hope, comfort, a sure and certain future, and reason for thanksgiving to God.

Jesus Taught His Disciples How to Pray

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus instructed His disciples about prayer. He began His teaching saying:

“When you pray, you are not to be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners so that they may be seen by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. But you, when you pray, go into your inner room, close your door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.

“And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words. So do not be like them; for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him.” (Matthew 6:5-8)

In this first part of His teaching on prayer, Jesus told us that we are not to make showy public prayers to be seen by men. Such praying tends to exalt the one praying as one who is very “spiritual” and tends to shift the focus toward the one who is praying instead of where the focus of prayer should be, which is upon God.

There may be times when we are called upon to lead a prayer among a group of people. At such times, let our prayers emphasize God’s power, love, and mercy, as well as our dependence upon Him for every need of our lives. This was the kind of prayer that Jehoshaphat brought before the Lord in 2 Chronicles 20:6-12, and his prayer was heard.

Jesus also taught us that we should not keep babbling repetitively in our prayers like pagans do, because God our Father knows what we need before we even ask it. Our Father is aware of the smallest details of our lives, even down to the number of hairs on our head (Matthew 10:30). He knows what is best for us as He fulfills His purpose for our lives, and that purpose is revealed to us through His answers to our prayers, and through the circumstances and events of our lives, which unfold as He has ordained them.

In this passage of Matthew 6, Jesus first taught His disciples how not to pray. As He continued, He then taught them how they should pray, using an example or model prayer, which we all know as the Lord's Prayer. His prayer is recorded in Matthew 6:9-13. A line-by-line examination of the Lord's Prayer shows us what elements should be included in our prayers to God.

In the first line of the prayer, Jesus taught that we are to pray bringing our requests to God, "Our Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 6:9). In John 16, Jesus also taught us that we are to bring our requests to the Father, asking "in His name". Jesus said that we would receive whatever we asked in His name (John 16:23-24).

Praying in Jesus' name means that we are to pray in accordance with the word of God as revealed in the Scriptures, in complete obedience and submission to all that is taught in His word. We are to submit our own will to His will, as His sovereign plan and will for each of us is revealed through the circumstances, conditions and limitations of our lives (Luke 14:27, 33, Philippians 2:5-8, others).

Continuing in Jesus' model prayer, the words "Hallowed be Your name" (Matthew 6:9) show us that praise should be given to God the Father in our prayers. Praise is due Him, as is thanksgiving, for the gift that He gave to us when He called us to faith in His Son, whereby we have been given the privilege of praying to Him as "Our Father".

The following lines of Jesus' model prayer read: "Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." (Matthew 6:10). These words again instruct us that our prayers should include an attitude of submission to, and acceptance of, God's will for our lives.

Jesus demonstrated His acceptance of God's will for His life, even when faced with the burden of overwhelming sorrow to the point of death. Once again we recall that in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prayed to His Father knowing that everything was possible for Him, and asking Him to take away the cup of suffering and death that He knew He was about to drink at Calvary. But above all else, Jesus yielded Himself to His Father's will, even when His Father's will for Him was a painful and humiliating death on a cross (Mark 14:32-36).

Continuing with Jesus' model prayer we read: "Give us this day our daily bread" (Matthew 6:11). These words teach us that we should ask God for the things that we need in life, the things that are necessary to sustain our lives such as food, clothing, a place to live, etc. Notice that Jesus taught we are to ask for our "daily bread". We are not to project far out into the future with what we think we might face at that time.

God does not want us to be burdened by the worry of what we imagine might come about in our tomorrows. Therefore, Jesus gave us this promise: if we will seek the kingdom of God and His righteousness as the priority of our lives, then God will give to us all the things that we need to sustain our lives. With this promise, we are told not to worry about our tomorrows or what troubles our tomorrows may bring (Matthew 6:33-34). When we make it our priority to obey God's word and submit ourselves to the place of service in life that He has ordained for us, then He promises that He will provide for the needs of all our tomorrows, as many tomorrows as He has allotted to us.

Continuing in the Lord's Prayer we read: "And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors." (Matthew 6:12). Forgiveness is necessary and vital in the Christian life. We have sinned against God, and by the wounds of His Son Jesus Christ we are healed (Isaiah 53:5). Our sins made necessary in the sight of God our Father the painful and humiliating death that Jesus suffered in His crucifixion. His sacrifice was the propitiation, or payment that restores favor, for our sins. Just as God forgives our sins, He requires of us that we forgive the transgressions of those who sin against us.

In the last verse of Jesus' model prayer, we read: "And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen." (Matthew 6:13). In this verse Jesus taught us that we are to ask God for His help in the ongoing struggle with temptation and sin that we will experience as long as we live on the earth.

When Jesus taught His disciples how to pray by the example of this "Model Prayer", He taught them that they should pray to God their Father. He also taught them that their prayers should include praise to God, and He taught them that their prayers should include submission to the will of God. This submission means praying with an attitude and an understanding that the answers to our prayers, whether they are answered "yes" or "no", should

be accepted as the answer given by our loving Father, who gives “what is good to those who ask him” (Matthew 7:11).

If some burden is not lifted as we have asked, it is because God has willed that we should endure it, at least for a time, for our eternal good and glory. When God’s answer to our prayers to have some burden lifted from our lives is “no”, we have the assurance that the grace and the strength of Christ will be provided to us in sufficient measure to meet our need. The Scriptures reveal to us that His power at work in our lives is made perfect in our own weakness. This is to say that the power of Christ at work in our lives is at its greatest at the point of our own greatest weakness and need.

This realization resulted in the joy that Paul expressed in 2 Corinthians 12:7-10. He did not have his “thorn” in the flesh removed as he had requested in prayer. (The Greek word in the original text that is translated as “thorn” could also be translated as “painful physical ailment”). However, with the Lord’s answer of “no” to his prayer, Paul did receive sustaining grace sufficient for his need, and he received further insight into the ways of God so that he could comfort and encourage us with the encouragement that God had given to him. (Consider 2 Corinthians 1:5).

With this understanding of God’s provision for our weakness and need, Paul came to understand that when he was weak, then he was strong. It was revealed to Paul that when his own strength faltered, Christ’s power and grace given to him to meet his need grew greater, and so it is with us.

Persistence in Prayer

Even though God will answer our prayers according to His sovereign plan for our lives, Jesus taught that we are to be persistent in our prayers. In Luke’s account of the Gospel, right after Jesus instructed His disciples using the Lord’s Prayer as an example, He then continued His teaching:

Then He said to them, “Suppose one of you has a friend, and goes to him at midnight and says to him, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves; for a friend of mine has come to me from a journey, and I have nothing to set before him’; and from inside he answers and says, ‘Do not bother me; the door has already been shut and my children and I are in bed; I cannot get up and give you

anything.’ I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his persistence he will get up and give him as much as he needs. (Luke 11:5-8)

Jesus used this parable to teach His disciples another lesson about prayer, and that is the need to persist in our requests to God until we get an answer from Him. In the following verses Jesus said: “So I say to you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives; and he who seeks, finds; and to him who knocks, it will be opened.” (Luke 11:9-10).

It is interesting to note that in the original Greek text, the words translated as “ask”, “seek”, and “find” all have a continuing action to them. A more complete translation to the English language would be “ask and keep on asking”, “seek and keep on seeking”, and “knock and keep on knocking”.

Jesus concluded His teaching by saying: “If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him?” (Luke 11:13). The Holy Spirit is referred to as the Comforter or Counselor in several passages of John’s Gospel (John 14:16, 14:26, 15:26, 16:7). In Matthew’s account of this same teaching, we read: “If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him!” (Matthew 7:11).

From these passages we learn that when we persevere in prayer to God our Father, we are promised the Holy Spirit, who is our Comforter and Counselor. We are also promised “what is good” for us and planned for us according to God’s sovereign purpose for each of our lives.

The need for persistence in prayer is also illustrated in the Parable of the Persistent Widow in Luke 18. Jesus gave this parable to teach His disciples that they should always pray and not give up hope of receiving an answer from God.

Jesus began the parable saying that there was an unrighteous judge who did not fear God, and who had no regard for men. There was a widow who kept coming to this judge, asking for justice against an adversary of hers. The judge at first kept putting her off, but she kept returning to him,

persisting with her request. Finally, the unrighteous judge said to himself that he would grant this widow the justice she sought, so she would not keep troubling him with her continual returning and pleas.

Jesus ended the parable with a lesson for His disciples about persistence in prayer when He said: "...Hear what the unrighteous judge said; now, will not God bring about justice for His elect who cry to Him day and night, and will He delay long over them? I tell you that He will bring about justice for them quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?" (Luke 18:6-8).

So again in the Parable of the Persistent Widow, as in the Parable of the Friend Who Comes at Midnight, Jesus taught about the necessity of persevering in prayer as we bring our requests to God, and He assured us that we will receive God's answer to our prayers. Jesus' final words in the passage are: "However, when the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?" (Luke 18:8). This question that Jesus put forward indicates that at times, some of God's answers to our prayers may challenge our faith.

When the answer to our prayer is "no", our faith may indeed be challenged. We may wonder why our God, who can do all things, and who said that He loves His children, will not grant us our request to be freed from some burden that we have brought to Him in prayer.

If God's answer to our prayer is "no", then He calls upon us to submit to His answer as part of His will and plan for our life, at least for the present time (again consider Matthew 26:36-46). If our burden is not lifted, and we find that we must continue to suffer with it for a while longer, then we can take comfort in seeing and understanding the troubles which God has allowed to touch our lives in the light of the teachings that we have seen from the Scriptures before.

These teachings reveal to us that a share in the sufferings of Christ will be experienced in the life of every believer. Just as Jesus bore fruit through the sufferings that the Father had ordained for His life, we must follow Him in that we will bear fruit through sharing in His sufferings, in some measure, as God has ordained for each of us. As we have seen from the Scriptures, the fruit born through these sufferings will achieve for us a share in Christ's eternal glory (John 12:24-26, Mark 10:36-39, Romans 8:17).

Once again let us consider the encouragement that Paul gave to us in 2 Corinthians 4:16-18, where he taught that our troubles are only for a short time when considered in the context of eternity, and they are achieving for us an eternal measure of glory that will far exceed the weight and burden of the troubles themselves. Even though we must endure these things for a time as part of God's plan for our lives, we can take comfort in knowing that we have been promised the all-sufficient grace and strength of Christ for our every weakness and need, as Paul learned through his own experience (2 Corinthians 12:1-10, Philippians 4:11-13).

In Conclusion

When we bring our requests to God in prayer, how can we be sure that He hears us, and how can we have the assurance that we will receive what we have asked of Him? In 1 John 5 we find the answer to this question. John wrote: "This is the confidence which we have before Him, that, if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests which we have asked from Him." (1 John 5:14-15).

So when we ask for anything that is "according to His will", we can be assured that God hears us; we can be sure that our prayers will be answered and that we will have what we have asked of Him. If we ask anything in accordance with the principles taught in God's word as set forth in the Scriptures, then we can be sure that we will receive what we have requested of Him, and this is exactly what it means to pray in Jesus' name (John 1:1, John 16:23-24). God will also answer our prayers according to His will for each of our lives individually, or according to the plan, purpose, and place of service that He has ordained for each of us.

There are many prayers of God's people recorded in the Scriptures. The Psalms contain many prayers asking for God's forgiveness, mercy, and deliverance, and many of these prayers praise Him for His love and mercy, which endure forever. There is great blessing for us as believers in reading the Psalms because they give us insights into the struggles of the saints who have gone before us, and they tell us of the help and comfort that God provided for them in their time of need.

In 1 Samuel 2:1-10, Hannah prayed expressing the sovereignty of God and the help that He provides for His saints. Toward the end of her prayer, we read: “He keeps the feet of His godly ones, But the wicked ones are silenced in darkness; For not by might shall a man prevail” (1 Samuel 2:9).

Recorded in Isaiah 38 is Hezekiah’s prayer, where we gain more insight from the lives of the Old Testament saints into the struggles that we as God’s people will face in life and bring to Him in prayer. Beginning in verse 1, we read:

In those days Hezekiah became mortally ill. And Isaiah the prophet the son of Amoz came to him and said to him: “Thus says the Lord, ‘Set your house in order, for you shall die and not live.’” Then Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and prayed to the Lord, and said, “Remember now, O Lord, I beseech You, how I have walked before You in truth and with a whole heart, and have done what is good in Your sight.” And Hezekiah wept bitterly. (Isaiah 38:1-3)

Hezekiah prayed earnestly to the Lord, reminding Him of the devotion that he had shown to Him during his life. His prayer was heard, and God’s answer was to grant him an extra fifteen years of life. But the day inevitably came when he died, as all will. Whether we are granted our request to be freed from our burden or not, the day will come for all of us as believers when will be made whole again, and that for eternity.

God’s answers to the prayers of His people are all in accordance with His word as revealed to us through the Scriptures, and in accordance with His will for each of our lives, as He has planned for each of us individually. We have the assurance from God’s word that all things will be made to work together for our eternal good and glory together with His Son, and all things include every burden that He has allowed to touch our lives and every burden that He allows to persist in our lives.

God will bring forth life and good through the deaths that our sufferings have wrought in our lives. We have been given many assurances and comforts through God’s word, both for this present life and for life eternal with Him in Heaven. Therefore we are exhorted to bring all of our requests to God in prayer, with thanksgiving for all that He has promised

and for all that He is accomplishing for us, even through the many troubles of this present life.

30.

When the Race Has Been Run

In Hebrews 12 we read: “Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.” (Hebrews 12:1-2).

As believers, the lives that we live can be compared to running a race. This race requires perseverance, and we have our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and the life that He lived here on earth as our ultimate example of how this race should be run. Then one day, in God’s time and according to His will, plan, and purpose, the race will come to an end for each of us. When that day comes for us, we will be with Him in Heaven, sharing in the glory in His Son Jesus Christ for eternity.

As we have seen from John 12:24-26, Jesus compared His life, and the lives of all who would follow Him, to an individual grain of wheat, which must fall to the earth and “die” in order to bear fruit. The “death” of the grain of wheat, as Jesus used the metaphor, means that we will be called upon to “die” to, or relinquish, our own will and what we would choose for ourselves in this life, and submit to God’s will and His plan for our lives. This “death” involves not only our turning away from sin, but it could also include our being called upon to give up many, or even all, of the things that we hoped to achieve, or experience, or have for ourselves in this life, if God should require it of us.

As we consider these things, we recall that in Luke 14:27 Jesus said: “Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple.” In Luke 14:33 Jesus also said: “none of you can be My disciple who does not give up all his own possessions”. In place of all that we have or hope to have for ourselves in this life, we are called upon to accept the life and the place of service that our sovereign God has ordained for us, which

will be revealed through the circumstances, conditions, and limitations of our lives.

In John 12:24-26 Jesus revealed that all of us who serve Him must follow Him, experiencing a share in His sufferings as we also submit to our Father's will and plan for our lives, just as He did. He also revealed that through this share in His sufferings, we will bear fruit, which will bring about for us a share in His eternal glory (Romans 8:17).

The sufferings that Jesus endured took many forms, as we can see from the Scriptures. He endured all of the sufferings mentioned in Isaiah 53. He was despised and rejected by men. He was a man of sorrows who was familiar with grief. He suffered unjustly at the hands of evil men. He endured false accusations, betrayal, and persecutions.

He suffered abandonment by those closest to Him (Matthew 26:56). He had no place to lay His head, no place on this earth to call home (Matthew 8:20). He bore the punishment due for the sins of others. He became poor for the sake of others so that they through His poverty might become rich (2 Corinthians 8:9). He also endured the desolation of feeling that He had been abandoned by His Father God in the depths of His sufferings (Matthew 27:46).

Jesus also endured physical pain and suffering in His body. He suffered great pain as He was scourged and then crucified on Calvary's cross. Peter wrote of this physical aspect of the sufferings of Christ in 1 Peter 4:1-2. In Isaiah 52:14, we also read that Jesus' form and appearance was disfigured beyond that of any man, and many were appalled at Him.

Jesus' sufferings came about through no fault or wrongdoing of His own, and as believers, we share in His sufferings when we endure suffering that God allows to touch our lives apart from wrongdoing of our own. All of the undeserved sufferings that we experience, whatever form they may take, will bring grief and sorrow into our lives as all suffering does, and in this experience of grief and sorrow, we as believers share in the sufferings of the Man of Sorrows (Isaiah 53:3), in order that we may also share in His glory.

If, however, we should find ourselves suffering as a consequence of sin in our lives, then we can take comfort in knowing that God's discipline in our lives is itself a sign that we are indeed His. Those who are able to

continue in their sin without God's discipline are illegitimate and not true believers (Hebrews 12:5-8).

If we are being disciplined by the Lord, then let us give thanks to God, knowing that we are among those who have received His mercy and forgiveness. Let us forsake our disobedience and leave it in our past, moving forward with the same mindset and attitude that the Apostle Paul had in his own life: "...forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus." (Philippians 3:13-14).

The writer of Hebrews encouraged us again when he wrote: "For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin. Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need." (Hebrews 4:15-16). Our Lord and Savior, our faithful high priest Jesus Christ sympathizes with our weakness, and He has mercy and compassion for us.

With our God nothing shall be impossible (Luke 1:37), and He promises restoration for His people. In the book of Joel, after Israel had heeded God's call to forsake their sinful ways and return to Him, He promised to bless them, saying that He would repay them for the years of their lives that the devouring locusts had eaten (Joel 2:12-13, 18-27).

Now is Our Time of Grief...

In John 16:20-22, Jesus said that now is our time of grief. He said that during this present life we will weep and mourn while the world rejoices, but then He encouraged us when He said that the day will come when we will see Him, and no one will ever take away our joy again.

Though now is our time of grief as we share in the sufferings of Christ according to God's will for our lives, we are not left without help and comfort. Paul encouraged us when he wrote: "For just as the sufferings of Christ are ours in abundance, so also our comfort is abundant through Christ." (2 Corinthians 1:5). Through Christ, the living Word of God, we have been given many promises of God's mercy, help, and provision for our

lives as recorded in the Scriptures. We have also been promised the grace and strength of Christ, which will be given to us in a measure sufficient to sustain us in our weakness and need (2 Corinthians 12:9-10, Philippians 4:13).

In Philippians 4:6-7 Paul encouraged us again when he assured us that God will give us His peace, which “surpasses all understanding”, as we bring our requests to Him in prayer, with thanksgiving. God’s peace transcends all human reasoning and understanding in that it is not a fragile peace that depends upon the continuance of favorable circumstances in our lives. Rather, it is a peace that will guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus even through times of trouble and hardship.

If we should find ourselves in a hard place in life, or if we look back over the years lamenting of all the “good things” that we wanted for ourselves, but these things were withheld from us by our loving and sovereign God, then let us take comfort in knowing that we are among the few whom God has chosen and brought to faith in His Son Jesus Christ (Matthew 7:13-14, 22:14, Luke 13:23-30). We are among the few who have been given an eternal inheritance “which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away” (1 Peter 1:4).

Let us also understand that for all of us who are called to faith in Christ, God has ordained that we must share in the sufferings of His Son, in order that we may also share in His eternal glory (John 12:24-26, Mark 10:35-40, Romans 8:17). When we consider the sufferings, losses, and hardships of our lives, let us call to mind once again Paul’s encouragement when he said: “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us.” (Romans 8:18).

As believers we can be thankful in all of the circumstances of our lives, because God has ordained that all things will be made to work together for our eternal good, even the troubles and hardships that He allows to touch our lives. We have been promised in God’s word that all of our troubles will achieve for us an eternal weight of glory that far exceeds the weight and burden of the troubles themselves. Therefore, Paul exhorted us to fix our eyes not upon the things of this world which are seen and are only temporal, but upon the things of God which are unseen and eternal (1 Thessalonians 5:18, Romans 8:28, 2 Corinthians 4:16-18).

Our portion is not in this life; rather our citizenship and our reward are in Heaven. By God's grace we are no longer numbered with those of the world, upon whom Jesus pronounced woes. He characterized their lives in Luke 6:24-26 as those who have their comfort, consolation, and reward now, during this present life. By contrast, we are those who are blessed by God in that He has called us to faith in His Son. Jesus characterized our lives in Luke 6:20-23 as those who are poor, who hunger, and who weep now. We are excluded, insulted, and rejected because we belong to Christ, and the world hates us, just as Cain hated Abel (1 John 3:11-15).

In God's time, the day will come for every believer when our race has been run, and this present life will be over. At that time all of the days that God has ordained for our sorrows and our share in the sufferings of Christ will come to an end. As God's people, we can look forward to the day when "He will swallow up death for all time, and the Lord God will wipe tears away from all faces, and He will remove the reproach of His people from all the earth...." (Isaiah 25:8). The time will come for each of God's people when "He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away" (Revelation 21:4).

God spoke through the prophet Isaiah saying: "For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth; And the former things will not be remembered or come to mind." (Isaiah 65:17). The time will come for us when all of the "former things": the pain, the rejections, the betrayals, the afflictions, the hostility and harsh treatment, the losses of every kind, the struggles and threatening circumstances, the unfulfilled desires and longings, the suffering and sorrow of every kind, will come to an end and will come to mind no more.

... But Then We Shall See Him Face to Face

Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians: "For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I will know fully just as I also have been fully known." (1 Corinthians 13:12). In Paul's day, mirrors were pieces of polished metal, which gave only a poor or dim reflection of one's actual image. By way of comparison to this dim reflection, we cannot see or

understand all that God is accomplishing through the sufferings and difficulties of our present life, because God requires of His people that we walk by faith and not by sight. It has been given to us to walk through this present life not by what we can see and understand, but by what God has said about Himself as revealed in His word (Isaiah 55:8-9, 2 Corinthians 5:7).

From reading the Book of Job, we find that it was not revealed to Job the reason that all of his sufferings and losses had come upon him. In the same way, many of us as God's people will never fully understand in this life what God was accomplishing through our sufferings until we are finally together with Him in Heaven. At that time, as Paul encouraged us: "then I will know fully just as I also have been fully known".

As God's people we have been chosen from before the creation of the world to be brought to faith in His Son Jesus Christ (Romans 8:29-30, Ephesians 1:4-5). We are those who have been appointed to eternal life (Acts 13:48), and it has been granted to us not only to believe in Christ, but also to share in His sufferings, becoming like Him in His death (Philippians 1:29, 3:10).

We share in the sufferings of Christ during our lives here on earth, and after this life is over, we will receive the end of our faith, the salvation of our souls, and we will share in His glory in Heaven as the children of God. God began the work of salvation within us, and God Himself will carry this work through to completion (Philippians 1:6, 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24).

In Revelation 7:9-17, John described the comfort and joy of the great multitude in white robes, the saints of God, who come from "every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues". Within this passage, John wrote: "... they are before the throne of God; and they serve Him day and night in His temple; and He who sits on the throne will spread His tabernacle over them. They will hunger no longer, nor thirst anymore; nor will the sun beat down on them, nor any heat; for the Lamb in the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and will guide them to springs of the water of life; and God will wipe every tear from their eyes." (Revelation 7:15-17).

Paul taught in 1 Corinthians 2:9 that no eye has seen, no ear has heard, nor has it ever entered into the mind of man the things God that has prepared for those who love Him. Since all that we as God's people are able to see

and understand of Him in this present life is but a dim reflection of what we will one day see and know, we will end this work with God's words, and not man's.

From the Apostle John, our "brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus" (Revelation 1:9), we have been given this vision of the risen Christ, the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last. This is our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, whom we shall one day see face to face. Having shared in His sufferings according to the will of God for our lives, we will also one day share in His glory. In Revelation 1:12-16, John wrote:

Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking with me. And having turned I saw seven golden lampstands; and in the middle of the lampstands I saw one like a son of man, clothed in a robe reaching to the feet, and girded across His chest with a golden sash. His head and His hair were white like white wool, like snow; and His eyes were like a flame of fire. His feet were like burnished bronze, when it has been made to glow in a furnace, and His voice was like the sound of many waters. In His right hand He held seven stars, and out of His mouth came a sharp two-edged sword; and His face was like the sun shining in its strength.

