

Bound yet Free

Introduction

The desire for freedom is common to all humanity yet bondage is the reality we all live with. There are all sorts of bondage. Some are negative, others are positive.

Life is a demanding experience. There is a constant need for sustenance and all the other related needs and desires. Fulfillment is a constant pursuit from birth to death. During this time we make many decisions that are life altering or would have been had they been carried out. Many of these decisions are in the form of commitments that result in bondage.

Marriage is a form of bondage but in my case it is a positive bondage. It has resulted in a love that has involved shared dreams and goals, resulting in children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Some people are not so fortunate and for them marriage is a painful experience.

Even among those who are in general, happily married, there are degrees of negative bondage that some people experience, such as, an unreasonable mate that makes demands that are painful to bear, jealousy that results in unreasonable interrogations, or the suppression of desires or ideas.

Another place where bondage is found is in partnerships. When business relationships are based on good sound practices when there is faithfulness to the agreed upon principles with no cheating allowed, and are equal and desirable for both parties, the success of the partnership is the expected result. Any failure along the way in the performance of an agreed upon duty will strain the relationship and may doom it to failure.

Another example of bondage is military duty. When a person enlists, certain rights are forfeited so that the military can take over the decision making processes of one's life. They may allow choices in times of peace, but it is always subject to the final determination of the superiors.

In these sorts of relationships others often dictate just about every aspect of life, yet they are based on a decision we have willingly made, and an agreement we entered into.

There are however, other forms of bondage that we have not agreed to or desired that have been thrust upon us. Accidents, illness, birth defects, the tragic loss of a job or property, all come without any choice on our part.

What we do and how we react in such matters is determined by what we do internally. We don't always have a choice in the outcome of a circumstance, but we always have power over our mental, emotional and spiritual responses.

Chapter One

A Slave Mentality

When the nation of Israel came out of Egypt, they were a band of liberated slaves with a slave mentality that had been molded by years of bondage.

Thinking like freemen doesn't come easy for those who have lived all their lives by the dictates of others. Freemen think differently when confronted with challenges, they look for solutions and reach for the assistance available.

When problems arise for slaves their only recourse is to go to their superiors and complain, thus murmuring and complaining is a part of the lifestyle of a slave or a person in a slave type relationship. When problems arose after leaving Egypt, that is what the Israelites did, they murmured and complained against Moses and in doing so, against God.

Those who see themselves as slaves or victims have developed a way of thinking often referred to as a victim mentality.

They see themselves as victims and blame others or circumstances for their misery.

There are some individuals who desire freedom but they realize that to achieve it they must have help, and seeing God as the source of the sort of help they need, believe in him.

The ability to have faith is a natural quality, however, faith in God is not a natural quality; it is taught and learned. The scriptures say,

How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!"

But not all the Israelites accepted the good news. For Isaiah says, "Lord, who has believed our message?" Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ. (Romans 10:14- 17)

Believing in God or trusting in some other source of help is a choice we make in times of need. Knowing what we can legitimately expect God to do in any given circumstance is the result of what we have been taught.

If we have been taught that God is a detached being who has no interest in the affairs of men, then we will look to other sources of help.

People, on the other hand, that have been taught that God helps those who do what they know to do, believing that God is with them, helping them and will do for them what they cannot do for themselves, will move peacefully through life.

Some people act like there is no God at all, even though God has made himself real to them. They have not comprehended the idea of a loving God wanting to be involved in every aspect of life. Wrong teaching is hard to overcome.

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Jesus came into this world to reveal God to us in a way that was not clearly understood previously. He revealed the Fatherhood of God, teaching us that God is concerned with the minutest details of our lives. He taught us to pray in the simplest form, yet showing the great reverence that we are to hold God in. Though God is Father, he is still the hollowed one and his will is the most vital concern we have.

Our relationship with God differs from a slave relationship because it requires willing obedience at every level. Slaves don't have a choice, but those serving the Lord do.

Those with a slave mentality don't consider themselves worthy of a joyful life on earth. They somehow believe that suffering is what they can expect and may even feel they deserve. This lack of self-esteem stands as a hard taskmaster demanding that they consider themselves unworthy of happiness.

Chapter Two

Selfism or Self-esteem?

There was a time in some Christian circles when a person with a sense of self-worth was considered prideful. This may have been the result of some misconstrued ideas about what it means to deny one's self as a Christian virtue.

In times past, some families thought that too much confidence was dangerous, so it was quickly met with a put down or some word to quickly mellow out the notion. Those around the confident person seemed to fear that he would get an inflated opinion of himself. They made sure this wouldn't happen, but little was done to build a positive self-image.

I don't say that these are always dysfunctional families, not at all, but I can see that even some good people in Christian circles have the idea that a good self-image is in some way dangerous.

Today a good self-image is understood in a better light. We now realize that it isn't dangerous, but rather, it is healthy. It is now understood that the lack of a good self-image is what is dangerous. As is the case with so many changes in realizations; however, we tend to go from one bad realization to another bad, if not worse realization.

Many have made an effort to not repeat the errors of the previous generation, but in that effort have failed to give guidance in teaching a balanced self-image. Those raised in an overly strict environment are often lax in discipline in their effort to not repeat the error with their children.

It is not easy to go from one bad mistake to a balanced approach in one generation, but in matters as important as this, it is vital to try.

When I was growing up it seemed that confident people were ridiculed as being stuck-up and thus alienated from acceptance by those around them. This led the confident to take on a sense of superiority and detachment from others as a defense against this attitude. Many failed to see that confidence was a virtue to be emulated, not a flaw, to be put down. Truly confident people who wear their confidence in true humility are very attractive people.

The Christian goal is to be both confident yet humble, but how can we achieve that balance? Obviously, overconfidence is an enemy to reckon with, however, this doesn't seem to be a problem with too many people; selfism, however, is.

Christian humility is a positive condition in the highest order, rather than negative. Christian humility is a healthy recognition of one's weaknesses and a willingness to acknowledge one's need for divine intervention and sustenance. True humility is not an attitude of personal put down, but rather simply acknowledging our need for God.

There are those today who make the charge that Christians are people who need a crutch and that Christianity is a crutch. Well, if recognizing the truth about one's self is a bad thing, then I admit that I am one of the weak ones. I personally think differently, however, I believe that recognizing that humans were created with limitations that only a relationship with God could fill is wisdom of the highest order.

When Jesus taught us to recognize that without him we can do nothing³, he was not being egotistical, but rather, was speaking the truth in love. Man without a relationship with Jesus Christ is like a car without gas in its tank, we're not going very far. Though we may be the most perfect human specimens, we still lack the spiritual life dimension to our spirit. Spiritual life comes from Jesus Christ alone and is obtained through a relationship with him. Thus, seeking him out in relationship is the manifestation of humility I speak of.

Overconfidence and selfism, though both are offensive, are not the same. Overconfidence comes from an inflated self-image, but even people with terrible self-images can be full of selfism!

Selfism, as I use the term, means being filled with our own desires, faults, problems, needs or wants. In other words, selfism means to be absorbed by self. For such individuals all relationships are for the purpose of serving the needs of self.

Everyone around such an individual is in a state of servitude to the person so afflicted. Even when such a person is in a giving mode, they are looking for the praise or acceptance that their gift could bring. If it doesn't come, they are hurt and offended. They may be very personable and charming, but everything they do has a hook in it. They never get beyond themselves in serving without expecting something in return.

A person afflicted with selfism may be confident or full of self-doubts. They are full of themselves, leaving no room for real love either for God or another human being. Self sits enthroned in the heart. Not everyone afflicted with selfism is totally into himself or herself. There are degrees of affliction, but all cases of selfism, mild or acute, are serious and need to be dealt with.

We have a right to be free. Too long we have lived in bondage to the demands of taskmasters, either of our own making or imposed on us.

There is no taskmaster crueler than self; nevertheless, all taskmasters are cruel because we were not meant to be enslaved, but rather, to live as freemen. Even if you are a "slave" you need not serve because that is the designated title. Those whose hearts are right, serve from love demanding nothing in return. This results in peace, not passivity. It is possible and desirable to seek freedom from negative bondages in our lives, but this can be done without losing one's peace in the process. When evil people impose bondage upon us, the temptation is to take on a warring spirit when desiring to be free. A warring spirit results in conflicts either internally or externally that bring about a negative result. In the short term, victories won as a result of a warring spirit may seem sweet, but in the end they bring poverty and loss.

In the spiritual sense, Satan is the real taskmaster seeking our servitude.

Jesus came to set us free from the domination of sin and Satan and all the pain that results from it. When we see that Jesus has secured our victory; we reach for that victory by reaching for him.

I was once told that Satan is always trying to keep us from receiving from God what we have a right to have; that he stands in our path blocking us from progress toward what is rightfully ours. Sometimes, however, we become so determined to have what we really deserve that Satan has to give up his effort to prevent us from gaining our inheritance. He then changes his tactics and offers his assistance. The illustration given was of a man wanting to ride a horse, but Satan was standing there preventing him from getting on. When the man persisted and Satan saw that he couldn't prevent him from getting on, he offered his help giving his hands to the man to put his foot into for assistance. When he did this he gave a giant push so that the man landed on the other side of the horse!

The same may apply in our struggle to find the proper place in this matter of self-esteem. Everyone is entitled to a sense of well-being based on a good self-image and a proper relationship to God and those around them. This is the last thing Satan wants for us, however. Confident people, content with what they can't change, are a threat to his schemes of destruction. Those who have learned to pray, "not my will but your will be done" without the slightest hint of negativity are dangerous to Satan.

In our pursuit of a balanced life with a good self-image, we also must acknowledge God's will as a part of the equation. The will of God can, at times, involve pain, sometimes physical but more often psychological. The will of God may require that we put the needs of others ahead of ourselves, not because it is demanded, but rather because it is the right thing to do. You see, this subtle difference between what we do as a result of compassion, love, or concern and what we do as a result of intimidation, demands, or guilt is what makes the difference between acting as a free person, or a slave.

When we are in the midst of our lost condition, we are full of selfism, dominated and preoccupied with our own desires, pains, loneliness, anger, bitterness, unforgiveness and hate. We are unable to see the hand that is reaching for us to deliver us because it comes from above and we are looking down. God is longing to lift us out of the pit of despair and to set us upon the road of recovery in our lives, but we must be willing to look up, and seeing a better way, take our eyes off our own pain. We will never be helped in our journey to freedom as long as we can only see our own pain. Once we take our eyes off ourselves, we will be able to focus upon others. This is the beginning of deliverance; it begins with compassion.

Chapter Three

Freedom is an Attitude

Bondage is a condition that is always a part of the human experience. No one is ever totally free, no matter how hard they may try. We may choose one form of liberty but in doing so, we find ourselves in a different form of bondage.

For example, a youth may desire to be free of parental control, so the decision is made to leave home. Now the decision must be made about where to live; on the street, under a bridge, with a friend, or in one's own place of residence. Fear may forbid living on the street or under a bridge, and friends have their set of rules, but living on one's own in a separate residence requires a source of income. The decision may be made to get a job, but then the employer's demands may be even more binding than what parents demanded. The need for sustenance must be met either from the parents he is seeking to break free of, or from savings or employment. No matter which direction he will choose there is a form of bondage connected to it. Sooner or later, as one matures, life demands a choice about which bondage is best suited to one's goals.

We may, however, live without a sense of bondage. Freedom is a state of mind and spirit that is more an attitude than a fact. This sense of freedom comes when the desires that fill our hearts are being fulfilled. The chosen course of life usually has very little bearing upon our sense of fulfillment.

In doing prison work I find that prisoners can live in freedom of spirit even while being confined. Men I meet in the prison chapels often say they are blessed, though the blessing is not their physical environment.

God has created this realm of existence in such a way so as to allow us to make choices based on wisdom. We can live as fools if we want to, squandering our time and energies, living in destructive lifestyles, abusing our bodies with chemicals or harmful activities. These carefree lifestyles are glamorized in our society as living life to the full, but are they? If our idea of life is what adventures or thrills we can get out of it, then such a lifestyle may seem appealing.

I have on occasion thought that if there were no God, and no accountability required at the end of life, then, living selfishly and wildly would be what would make sense.

I was asked one day, "What has gone wrong in our society?" Recent news reports had been full of violence and immorality. Just that day there had been a domestic violence case where a man had killed his estranged wife and her lover, his children, and then himself. These things happen, but in our area there had been three or four such cases in less than a month. My reply was, "People have forgotten there is a God to whom they must give an account and they no longer believe there really is a hell." Without a belief in God and hell we lack any real and meaningful restraints. Law can only do so much, and our system has been weakened by

our protectionist attitude that it has become virtually impotent. There are four restraint systems that work in our lives. When they are strong and healthy we will live our lives within healthy boundaries. These boundaries are, fear of God, love of family, fear of the law, and lastly, self-respect. When these restraints break down, chaos results.

Restraints are a part of a healthy lifestyle. We may refer to them as a set of values, but without them, we are like a ship without a rudder. Many people without a good restraint system in their lives have become victims of alcoholism, drug addiction, gluttony, laziness and other self-indulgences such as pornography and gambling. Still others have become victims of negativity that has caused them to become social outcasts. Their lack of self-confidence causes them to become overly conversant; feeling a need to look good, they tell the same stories over and over. Some feel threatened by those holding a different point of view, thus feeling it is their responsibility to convince anyone who will listen to them. Some, because of their own lack, are like a community garbage dump, collecting all the stories they can about all the difficulties in other people's lives. Still others live lives of overindulgence as a result of the lack they feel internally.

There is a better way to live our lives. Restraints are good and needed but no matter how well conceived, can fail. The better way is for a divine impartation of the Holy Spirit into our lives. There is a place of existence that is not a part of the world system; it is called, "in Christ." When one is in Christ he is in a place of active fellowship with the Lord Jesus and is thus living in love and peace, and is full of contentment and joy. Does that sound too good to be true? It is true and it is attainable.

Any effort to enter into these virtues without a relationship with Jesus is destined to failure. If one is to build an optimistic outlook based on anything other than God's love and provisions, it is like building a structure with a very weak foundation. If one builds, trusting in luck to sustain, what do you do when luck runs out? If it is your good looks, or your education, talent, or ability to manipulate, what do you do when a challenge arises where good looks, talent or education are not able to help you? Without the Lord to place your trust in with a firm acceptance of his will and contentment with his provisions, your optimism is based upon what you view as potential good luck.

Good luck is not enough when disasters strike and they may. One needs someone outside the realm of the material world to call upon. Faith in God doesn't mean that suffering will not come to us. What it means is that God will always be there for us as a source of strength, guidance, provision and encouragement.

There is a law that I have observed, both in the scriptures and in real life situations, which, in effect, state that God doesn't do for us what we are capable of doing ourselves. He has given us strength, intelligence and resources to use in our lives, and he expects us to use them to the best of our ability. There are times when we can't do what the will and purpose of God requires without divine assistance. It is then that we must seek additional divine intervention that goes beyond what is natural.

In studying the life of Jesus as recorded in the gospels, we find that he, as a rule, did things in the natural way when the natural way was reasonable and possible. When they traveled they did so either by walking or by boat even though his divine power could have transported them.

On one occasion, after Jesus, by his divine power, had calmed a storm that threatened to destroy them, while traveling by boat, it is simply stated, "immediately the boat reached the shore where they were heading." (See John 6:11) This seems to suggest that on this occasion they were miraculously transported, rather than they just happened to be there.

Phillip, in the book of Acts, is recorded as having been sent to where a Eunuch who needed to be ministered to was traveling. After he completed his mission the Spirit caught him away and the Eunuch didn't see him again.

I have never experienced this kind of transport, but I have heard of some who claimed they have. Being honest and credible people and knowing the power of God, I don't doubt their stories.

Without the presence and power of God in one's life, optimism is without any real foundation. Some people have optimism based upon their belief in the human spirit, in a form of government, or an evolutionary process, but these are all subject to the ebbs and flows of conditions we either can't foresee or control. How foolish it is to cut God out of our thoughts, beliefs, and experiences of life.

God can't be caused to not exist just because someone doesn't like believing in him. If God is indeed the creator of all that exists, then our very life is his creation, and therefore he has a right to demand an accounting of it. The Biblical revelation certainly states that it is that way. We can't wish it away any more than we can wish away our problems.

When we come to the end of self-will, self-reliance, and unbelief, we are ready to experience the reality of divine intervention. Once entered into experientially, we are able to appreciate how possible it is to live in constant love, joy, peace and contentment along with all the other attributes that come from a relationship with Christ Jesus. The intervention of the Lord Jesus is not a fantasy but trying to live our lives without him as the foundation, is a foolish thing to do.

Freedom is an attitude but real freedom is the result of the life of our Lord Jesus within us. Those who have experienced Jesus as the resident of their hearts are able to maintain an attitude of freedom in any circumstance of life.

I visited our motorcycle missionary one day while he was in critical condition physically. He had hepatitis C and his liver was almost non-functional. He just returned from a motorcycle ride to Sturgis South Dakota, where they go to take the gospel to the motorcycle people who gather there each year. Mike has been very ill for some time now, yet each time there is an event involving motorcycles, he goes. Since the first onset of the disease that hospitalized him, he has made almost all the rides! Between events he is often very sick and has to maintain a very limited activity schedule, but when its time to ride again, the Lord gives him the strength to go. As we talked about his circumstance, he made the statement that he wants time on earth because there still is a job to do, but that he is in a win/win situation. If he lives it is by God's will, and if he dies, he goes to be with the Lord.

Looking at Mike, I realized how true it is that we are free; free that is, from fear, unbelief, bitterness, and even questionings. We went to minister to him, but he ministered to us in the obvious joy, love and peace that emanated from him. This was not an act on his part; it is the everyday experience of his life, a truth testified to by his wife and all that know him.

Chapter Four

Walking in the Spirit is not an Act

In Christian circles we often speak of walking in the Spirit, but to those who are not taught in the meaning of such expressions, this may not be readily understood.

The expression is based on the command in the Bible to “Walk in the Spirit.” “Walk” refers to our daily life activities. Walking in the Spirit means to walk in fellowship with the Holy Spirit, agreeing with his mind and attitudes. The mind of the Spirit is also referred to as the mind of Christ.

There are those who try to walk in the Spirit, and yes, it is a decision we make and it does take some effort, but you can't walk in something that doesn't exist.

Before you can walk in the Spirit, you must have the Spirit. The Holy Spirit is a gift that Jesus said the Father was going to give. The disciples were instructed to ask for the gift, and to wait in Jerusalem until it was given. When it was given they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke in tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance. Prophesying was also frequently mentioned as a sign of the indwelling Holy Spirit. Unless we are filled with the Spirit, we can't walk in the Spirit.

The experience of walking in the Spirit is somewhat “other worldly”. That is to say, those who walk in the Spirit are walking in the atmosphere of Heaven while still walking upon the earth. It is the presence of this heavenly atmosphere that allows for communion with God and communication between God and us.

What is given is called power, but is the result of the Holy Spirit within. It is called power because it is energy and it is the presence of God. Jesus said, “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” This power, when manifest, is power to witness, heal, cleanse, deliver, and live a godly life.

Power is the essence of what is given, but it can be separated in our thoughts from the qualities of character that this power produces. This power is what produces signs and wonders, but the greatest signs are those that appear in the daily life of a believer.

It is easy to get fixated upon the working of miracles as though it is the “miracles” that are what God does exclusively. Miracles, though a part of the work of God, are not all that God does. It is the Holy Spirit who enables us to experience the presence of evidences of the life of Christ within. These evidences are manifest in acts and attitudes of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

The problem we are confronted with is that it is entirely possible for the flesh (the fallen sinful nature) to mimic the fruit of the Spirit. There is a natural love and there is a supernatural love. There is a natural joy, and there is a supernatural joy. There is a natural peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control and there is also the supernatural. That which is produced by the Spirit's presence in our lives enables us to have these qualities flowing from the inner reservoir of power that is of God, rather than a reservoir of human spirit qualities.

The difference is one is inferior to the other. The natural is inferior both in quality and in staying power. Both may appear as similar and to an untrained eye even look alike, but they are vastly different. That which is natural is to a great extent learned, but that which is supernatural is the result of the life of Jesus within.

The parts that choice plays are whether to act out what that new life dictates or to revert to what the old nature wants to do. The Holy Spirit's presence within is often evidenced by the prompting he gives in situations where choice must be exercised. In such situations, obedience to the Spirit's prompting is vital to the sense of peace we experience. Obedience to that prompting can also be vitally important to our lives, and can even mean life or death in some situations.

The purposes of God are real and he watches over the performance of his will in the vessels of his call. One Sunday morning when my youngest daughter was a teenager, a young man who was staying with us needed to go to the store before going to church. I had to leave a little earlier, so we were both leaving the house about the same time. My daughter was going to go to the store with him but I told her to come with me instead. I didn't know there was an important reason for making that request and had she insisted upon wanting to go with him, I might have allowed it. She was immediately submissive to my request, and was spared an accident that would have taken her life.

Often the prompting of the Spirit is given in very subtle ways; so subtle that one might not even recognize them as God given until later. One such occurrence happened to me.

Earlier in my life I had to drive older cars that had tires that were well worn. This resulted in frequent flats and blowouts. I was experienced in handling such situations and knew to never put my foot on the hydraulic brakes because that will cause the car to go out of control. One day, for a reason I was unconscious of, I started pondering this. I reasoned that, if using the compression in the engine could slow a car without losing control, why couldn't the mechanical brake, or emergency brake, work the same?

A few days later I was returning from a speaking engagement when, while descending a somewhat steep grade, I blew a rear tire. I did what I had always done, took my foot off the gas to let the compression slow the car, but this time due to the steep grade, the car wasn't slowing. All at once the back of the car started moving sideways and I instantly knew I was in trouble. If something didn't happen fast I was going to start rolling. The thought of the unanswered question came to my mind and I thought, "Now is the time to find out." I put my foot on the emergency brake and pushed as hard as I could, and to my amazement the car straightened out and coasted to a place where I could turn off the road. I didn't recognize that thought process as being Holy Spirit inspired until after the fact, but I am grateful it took place.

This was an isolated occurrence, but having the Holy Spirit minister to me in this manner is not. God deals with me more in this way than any other. Just because thought processes don't come with some kind of divine label, doesn't mean they are not springing from the presence of the Holy Spirit. We don't always know whether a thought is of God or our own thought processes. Learning to know the difference is difficult but important.

I have at times wondered if a thought had divine origin when, in fact, it was the product of an overly zealous imagination. At other times thoughts have come to me that I didn't recognize as divine, but later knew they were. Experiencing this sort of difficulty keeps us from going off the deep end, so to speak. It is knowing that we are somewhat fallible that gives us a sense of humility and keeps us from becoming over confident and cocky.

There are times when the voice of the Lord is very strong and is not easily confused with any natural thought process. It is at such times that we know that we know, and there is no question about it. Knowledge of something important is solidly given and we must obey it. At other times it is an understanding of a circumstance that brings us peace, when without it there would be inner turmoil.

A prisoner who had been a minister prior to the crime he committed in a momentary act of violence, carried such a sense of guilt that, even though he experienced repentance, and by faith was going on in his Christian life, still struggled. One day at the prison where he is now an inmate pastor, he was going to the podium to preach when all at once the Spirit spoke to him that he was forgiven and that Jesus loved him. He knew this as a matter of faith, but to have the Spirit speak it to him was powerful. He said that he doesn't remember the content of the message that morning, but that it was supernatural, and afterward the altar was filled with seeking men. The anointing he received that morning is still going on in his ministry to the men.

I am afraid that there are people who believe that they are living in the Spirit but are actually living in the human spirit. Their behaviors and thoughts are learned from what they have been taught and not from what the Spirit is doing in their hearts.

There are still others who think they are living in the Spirit, but it is not the Holy Spirit. It is entirely possible to be spoken to by an evil spirit who is trying to impersonate the Holy Spirit. Peter had this experience on the occasion when Jesus said to him, "Get behind me Satan."

Peter was caused to think that he should give counsel to Jesus not to go to the cross. He was vulnerable to such a suggestion for two reasons. One was he loved the Lord and didn't want him to die; the other was that he didn't understand the purpose of God. Jesus had come to die, but the scriptures weren't understood concerning the suffering Savior at that time. Lack of understanding of the purposes of God, coupled with human emotion, led to the acceptance of Satanic prompting that caused Jesus to have to speak harshly to him.

Understanding of the Word of God is vital to maintaining a proper life in the Spirit. This understanding comes from study of the Word of God under the tutelage of the Holy Spirit himself. He often uses Spirit anointed teachers to help us gain spiritual understanding, but unless that understanding is received through the filter of a discerning heart it can lead to errors.

It is difficult to explain the difference between words that come from a counterfeiter and words that are Holy Spirit anointed. The words may be the same but the source is different and therefore, the conclusion may also be different. When you are in fellowship with Jesus recognizing the real from the counterfeit is not difficult.

There are those who can do a wonderful job as a performer, and often in Christian circles performances are confused with an anointed ministry. Jesus warned us about such ministers, teaching us that it is by their fruit that we tell the real from the false.

Sometimes we meet people who are deeply in love with the Lord and are Spirit filled, but despite this we have differences of opinions.

We may still have good fellowship in what we agree upon, but because they have been exposed to some teaching that is a mix of some truth and some error, their conversations are laced with rhetoric that is readily recognizable as coming from doctrinal teachings that are not according to pure truth. Such confusion of doctrine leads to contradictions in life. They will ignore the contradictions by quoting the scripture that says that every man may be a liar but that God is true to justify the resultant contradictions. When a teaching is not applicable to real life, something is usually wrong with the interpretation, but never the truth.

Truth is truth, but not all truth is spiritually life giving. It is when truth is given by the Holy Spirit into a person's spirit, that eternal life results. There is eternal life and there is natural life. There is an application of eternal life into our present life form, and there is a future eternal life.

In the present sense, we need a constant flow of divine energy into our spirit from the only source that is available to man, Jesus Christ. His life flows into our spirits giving us a manifestation of fruit that is in character, his life manifest. Without this we are nothing more than well-developed intellects capable of humanly great endeavors at best. This doesn't make us capable of any accomplishments that have eternal value. It is only when the Holy Spirit is working the work that the work is eternal in nature.

When it comes to our spiritual life, we are capable of making mistakes in matters of doctrinal interpretation, application, and manifestation, but these are what the Holy Spirit will work with us on to bring us to pure truth.

There is another condition that needs to be addressed, however; it is what is called a spirit of error. A spirit of error often associates with certain doctrines whether Christian or non-Christian, giving them a demonic dimension.

This doesn't mean that such a person who is afflicted in this way is demon possessed, quite the contrary, usually they are not. This sort of affliction works upon the mind blocking it from being able to hear or receive pure truth. Oh, they hear it all right, but it doesn't go into their spirit. It is deflected or twisted because a different spirit influences them, thus they can only

receive what is approved by the demonic presence that surrounds them.

I once heard the account a prophetess gave of this condition. She said that there was a teaching in the church that was so close to real truth that it was difficult to know the difference, but that once people partook of this error, they would never be satisfied with anything else. This, I am sure, is because it appeals to the desires of natural man, rather than the spiritual man.

People whose primary desires are to enhance their present life are very susceptible to doctrines that seem to make this possible, especially if the doctrine seems to bring a supernatural dimension to their life. Saying this doesn't mean that I think God is disinterested in making our present life better, quite the contrary, but when this becomes the focus of our spiritual life, we are misdirected.

I have observed that a spirit of error will allow as much truth, and even supernatural manifestation, as is necessary to keep a person in its influence. The reason is that at some critical point that spirit is able to cause untold damage to the person and persons under its influence. This is a spirit that must be cast away, cast out or however you prefer to speak of the process of getting rid of it out of your heart, mind, soul and environment. Spirits don't just leave people unless that person has taken some action against it. This action may be renouncing it, repenting of it or so turning away from it that it has to leave. The process is given to us in James 4:7-10,

“Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.”

I think it is legitimate to say that where there is no resisting of Satan, there is no fleeing. It is equally true that where there is no submitting to God first, there is no fleeing. The process involves moving into a closer posture with God. Getting rid of satanic influence is to clear the hindrances to that process.

There is a lady in our church who was at one time involved in a system of teaching that is quite popular today. She had many tapes and books, had attended conferences and had even gone to a school teaching the doctrines. One day the Lord opened her understanding that this was error and my wife was able to pray with her. She has testified to the difference in her life, thoughts and actions since that day. A cloud had been lifted and as a result she got rid of all that literature because it was coming from an erroneous premise.

What liberty there is in Jesus! There is no need to struggle, except against any effort on Satan's part to take away our joy and peace. There are no obstacles in our path to fellowship with God that comes from God. All hindrances come from a satanic source. When wrestling is going on, we are told it is not with flesh and blood but rather with a satanic presence, or demonic influence. These are called principalities and powers, the authorities of this dark world, the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. (See Eph. 6:12)

If you think that you might have unwittingly fallen into doctrinal error and are afflicted by a spirit of error, my counsel is to renounce it in the name of Jesus, submitting to God and drawing near to him, ask for a clear mind and heart. There is no need for mental gymnastics in our walk with God, only a simple faith that fully trusts in him. God doesn't need us to persuade him to act in our behalf, he loves involvement with us—only he wants to be the one to decide what is best for us. Some people are so busy claiming some area of spiritual blessing or development that God doesn't have a chance to work out "his" plan. Once God is in control, and his will is being clearly revealed, that is the time to believe specifically for the immediate need.

God invites us to ask, seek and knock but this is not to dictate to God or seek to direct him! We command Satan, but ask God. We are his servants; he is not ours! This is a matter of posture on our part. We don't deem him our servant, but serve he does in the sense that he is always doing and acting in our behalf.

God is a serving and giving God, but he doesn't want us to think of him as ours to command. Some have erroneously thought so, but that idea is based on a scripture that was incorrectly punctuated in the

King James Version of the Bible. It was translated as an invitation to command God, but when properly translated it is a question God was putting to Israel, “would you command me?” The whole context of the question had to do with a wrong attitude in Israel that was being corrected by the prophet. They had become arrogant, willful and idolatrous and God is setting the record straight. He is talking about how he is in control and names Cyrus king of Persia as his servant. Cyrus was not born yet, in fact, the prophet is speaking of when God would raise him up to help Israel rebuild its temple several hundred years later.

This is how the passage reads when properly translated.

“Woe to him who quarrels with his Maker, to him who is but a potsherd among the potsherds on the ground. Does the clay say to the potter, ‘What are you making?’ Does your work say, ‘He has no hands?’ Woe to him who says to his father, ‘What have you begotten?’ or to his mother, ‘What have you brought to birth?’ “This is what the LORD says — the Holy One of Israel, and its Maker: Concerning things to come, do you question me about my children, or give me orders about the work of my hands? It is I who made the earth and created mankind upon it. My own hands stretched out the heavens; I marshaled their starry hosts.” (Isaiah 45:9-12 NIV Emphasis mine.)

As we humble our hearts before the Lord and seek to understand his purposes, we are in a position to be filled with mighty Holy Spirit power. As he fills us, we are enabled to live in the Spirit. The promise that was given to believers is that if we ask the Father, he will give us the Holy Spirit. This promise, we are told by Peter on the day of the outpouring of the Spirit, the day of Pentecost, is to all who believe, even as many as are called.

When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?”

Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off — for all whom the Lord our God will call.” (Acts

2:37-39 Emphasis mine.) What we are given to walk in are all the attributes of the person and character of the Lord Christ Jesus. We become a part of the universal church of the Lord Jesus, a part of his body, and a part of his bride. He takes us to himself as a co-inheritor of all things, to share with us all he has planned eternally. The fullness of what this means is not yet revealed, but on the basis of what is revealed, we can only conclude that there is a lot of excitement yet ahead.

The fullness of the Spirit to which we are called is described in many ways. First, we note that there is a difference between the manifestation of spiritual gifts and walking in the Spirit.

Spiritual gifts are given as special enablements for specific occasions, once given they are always there, but the manifestations come and go, as the need requires. These are manifestations of power but walking in the Spirit is a different expression of the same Spirit. Walking in the Spirit is when we are living our lives in love, with the evidence of the fruit of the Spirit in full display.

Living in the Spirit is first a matter of possessing the Spirit to walk in, and secondly, a choice concerning whether to display or allow manifestation of the Spirit’s presence in our daily life. When played out in the real life arena, we will be able to say, “I am patient, kind, generous, loving, full of joy, and happiness. I never think evil of anyone without just cause; I always encourage those around me, speaking words that build them up, never giving in to negativity of any kind. I live with faith in God at all times, and in all ways.”

The heritage of a believer is to always have peace, love and joy in every situation. This requires faith in God because what I speak of here is not dependent upon any physical or earthly condition. These qualities come from God and are manifestations of his Spirit in our hearts. No action, deed, word, or circumstance has the power to remove these manifestations from us, unless we give them the power to do so.

I am amazed at how cleverly Satan has duped Christians into giving up their position of joyful living by empowering circumstances to dictate whether they have peace, love or joy. If these conditions in our lives come from circumstances, then circumstances can take them away. If, however, they are gifts from the Lord, then they have

nothing to do with circumstances. Jesus said to his disciples—and to us, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you.

I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid. (John 14:27)

The Lord Jesus was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. The sorrow the Lord bore never came from a selfish heart that grieved over lack of attention, but rather, his grief and sorrow had to do with the conditions around him of blindness to spiritual understanding and hardness of heart. Even people with the joy of the Lord can be filled with a positive godly sorrow. Christians often feel a sorrow for the lost condition of humanity, and they should. This is what drives us to be witnesses, and to intercede for the lost. Carrying a burden for others is part of the expression of the life of Christ within. This “burden” never takes the joy of the Lord from us, however; we still walk in peace, love and contentment.

In this passage we note that peace is given as a substantive thing, and is left with us. It is not the kind of peace that the world gives, because what the world gives comes from circumstances – peaceful relationships with friends, neighbors, or spouse, and peace among nations. The peace that Jesus was giving, on the other hand, was not based on any of these things. These disciples would face all sorts of difficulties in the time to come, but loss of peace was not one of them. They would have enemies, yet peace was theirs to possess. This peace is spiritual yet tangibly real. It puts a smile on your face and a joy in your heart!

Walking in the Spirit is never an act; it is real. The joy we have is real and the happiness we live in is real.

Chapter Five

Dealing With Stress

Stress is normal to life. Everyone experiences stress every waking hour and to some degree also in sleep. I suppose everyone has had dreams of situations that could not be solved, loved ones who were lost and couldn't be found, or of being lost and not knowing what to do. What a relief it is to awake realizing it was only a dream.

What do you do when it isn't a dream, that there really is a problem that requires a solution that may not be pleasant? Life is not always an ideal existence. In fact, life is seldom a totally ideal existence.

I once read the account of a man who had a near death experience in which he found himself with the Lord in what seemed to be Paradise. One of the observations he made was the total lack of discomfort that he was experiencing. There was no pain, stress or fatigue, nothing of discomfort! This was completely foreign to him because in this world we are always in a state of discomfort in some way.

Efforts to make us comfortable are what keep manufacturers in business. Discomfort is why they make better beds, clothes, shoes, cars, or whatever is deemed good and desirable to us. Discomfort is stress and reducing stress is the goal we all seem to have in life.

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Many people fanaticize about experiences that they feel will reduce stress, even temporarily. This is what vacations are supposed to do, relieve areas of stress that accumulate over a period of time, so that repetition fatigue will be relieved. Even enjoyable repetition can become stressful and relief for a time is needed to restore enjoyment.

What do we do when vacations are not possible, or long enough? What do we do when no bed can give us restful sleep? What do we do when circumstances of difficulty seem to have no end? Is there an answer to the dilemmas of life?

Getting into an altered state of mind seems to some to provide stress relief, but does it really? God doesn't even promise us relief from all of the stresses of life, but he is always with us and will give us help in the form of enabling power, however, he also often provides some relief, a better paying job, or a change of environment.

In addition to whatever help we receive in this life, he has promised us a home in heaven in response to saving faith, and the comfort and power of the Holy Spirit enabling us to cope with our stresses with a happy heart!

I have often said, and will say again and again, "Happiness is a decision we make." In fact, happiness is a life giving decision when it is based on the knowledge of God. The Holy Spirit gives us sustaining power that comforts us in our daily, though often difficult tasks. Stress relief is a gift of God to those who will accept it from him, however; stress relief from God often requires an attitude adjustment. The reason many people continue experiencing excessive stress is because they either have a desire for what is forbidden, or, an unrealistic expectation of what ought to be theirs.

Unfulfilled desires are neither good nor bad in and of themselves, but they are often what drive progress. It is when an unfulfilled desire becomes an obsession, even when the fulfillment is obviously beyond hope, that it becomes unhealthy.

If my desire is to be a professional ball player, even though I can't perform the simplest functions of the game, it is obviously unrealistic to think I could achieve that goal. Likewise, when what we want is outside the plan of God for our life, continuing to desire it is not only wrong, it is even sinful.

When we want the unattainable, we are being distracted from what we could otherwise be accomplishing.

Adversity is never a sign of divine displeasure about a goal when the reason is both good and right for us, therefore, I do not advocate forsaking the pursuit of a goal simply because some adversity has arisen, especially when we have a sense of divine sanction upon it. Adversity is not a sign of divine displeasure about our goals, but a loss of divine peace is. God given goals help relieve negative stress about daily routines that would otherwise become too burdensome to bear.

Adversity is not always negative; it can be what drives us into a closer relationship with God. Not all adversity is from Satan; some is even from God! God uses adversity as a means of steering us toward a more perfect goal. Just as an athlete uses weights to strengthen muscles, so God uses adversity to strengthen our spiritual natures.

It takes stress to cause an increase of strength in the natural, but too much stress can damage and destroy what would otherwise be a blessing. In various issues of life we may experience prolonged periods of stress. It is when one single stress goes uninterrupted that fatigue sets in.

When stressful circumstances are unrelenting and difficult to bear, they can produce a condition that, if allowed to go untreated, can produce negative results.

In the natural, a person under unrelenting pressure over a long period of time may become depressed, even when they are otherwise in a healthy frame of mind and heart. Such pressure as caring for a family member who is disabled or elderly may be acceptable and even enjoyable, but if allowed to go too long without breaks in the routine will eventually become negative stress. Even an enjoyable experience can produce stress if it is unrelenting; it will become pressure-producing stress. A person can be at peace with God, themselves, and those around them, and still be vulnerable to unhealthy stress. Recognizing our limitations is both wise and healthy.

There are times however, when it is not possible to experience relief from some forms of stress due to circumstances that are beyond our control. It is in times like these that God is there for us with the comfort of the presence of the Holy Spirit to strengthen us, enable us, and give us the renewal of spirit that is needed to carry on. Those who learn to allow God into stressful areas of life through prayer, and meditation on scriptures, are truly blessed.

We don't need to carry our burdens alone; he stands ready to enable us with his strength. Jesus said, "For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." (Matt. 11:30)

The yoke spoken of here is a part of a harness placed upon two animals for the purpose of pulling a load. When the yoke is put in place it has a pivot point that is adjusted to the abilities of each animal. A small animal is not required to pull as much as a strong

animal. This is achieved by moving the pivot point so that the weaker animal has a longer end to pull against.

In the scripture mentioned, Jesus is offering to carry the heavy end of our load for us! He does not want us to feel the full load of a heavy burden. When he is by our side, he carries all that is needed so that what is left for us is manageable. We still must carry our part, but with Jesus it is possible.

When the Apostle Paul complained about a thorn in the flesh, he was told that the grace of God was sufficient for him. In practical application this meant that he would be enabled by the presence of the Holy Spirit to bear it, whatever "it" was. ("A thorn in the flesh" is a figure of speech that is left for us to decide what it might mean.)

What a thorn in the flesh is to me may differ from what it is in your life. No matter, the grace of the Lord is sufficient because he lifts the heavy end of the load. We are never given more than we can bear, unless of course, we are too stubborn to ask for the help of the Lord.

Stress is the common experience of all humanity. In the beginning it was different, however. Adam and Eve, when created, were placed in a garden that was free of all apparent excessive stresses. The only stresses that existed were from the normal functions of activities. Adam did, however, experience the stress of not having a suitable mate prior to the creation of Eve. Before the fall, Adam and Eve were in their natural habitat; all things needed having been provided. We were not created to experience the kinds of stresses we endure today.

It is my belief that people are experiencing mental and emotional breakdowns because stress is being heaped upon them. With the advent of our modern technological society we are being confronted with many conditions that is stress producing. Inventors, manufacturers, and advertisers strive to put the stress of desire upon us so we will purchase their products. New technologies require education so that we will be equipped to use the new products. The need for an ever-increasing income is the result of our expanding needs that largely come from an increase of desire. Have we become the victims of our own creation? Is there a way out of this dilemma? Is it possible to live in the freedom of the Garden of Eden in the present world? Obviously not in the same sense, yet we are able to live in the same sort of peace and contentment, but not without effort. It takes vigilance on our part to resist the temptations for what are either not needed or not good for us.

With modern technology has come the stress of availability of sinful indulgences as well. At the time of this writing we are now facing the Internet monster. I call it a monster because already it is responsible for the breakdown of morals in some people I know.

I guess it can be argued that it is not the Internet itself that is responsible, and I agree with that, but it is the availability of materials on the Internet that appeal to the fallen natures of many individuals and is so easily accessible, that creates the problem. If we were all strong enough to resist all temptations that we know are harmful, there wouldn't be a problem. Obviously, there are many among us who are not strong enough or wise enough to know how to deal with temptation.

Resisting temptation on ones own without divine intervention can be a very stressful experience. Our society is moving toward being more and more tolerant of sinful pleasures. With this attitude comes greater stress upon the weak.

There was a time when we could depend upon government to protect us from vices that the weak among us were susceptible to. It seems that those in charge of our system of laws now feel it their duty to accommodate the fallen natures of man. Laws are being made, and others overturned, that open our society to temptations that are bound to wreak havoc upon the lives of many individuals. Efforts are being made to legalize the recreational use of drugs and liberalize gambling, and pornography. We already have had to deal with alcoholism as a result of weak fallen natures.

As these conditions continue to expand into other areas of our lives, we are confronted with an even greater need to reach for strength. If we had difficulties living a godly life before such a liberal environment was thrust upon us, how much truer is it now? We can

no longer depend upon any system of protection, be it the legal system, religion, or our own home environments. We are left without most of the natural protections that were once around us, making our own relationship to God what we must depend upon.

Freedom from unnecessary stress is a condition that is attainable in God. The foundation of such a freedom is absolute faith in God and his care for us. Without absolute faith, we will not be able to access his strength in times of need, or his guidance to avoid conditions that create stress. The Holy Spirit is God's gift of love to us to enable us to live in his Spirit, thus keeping us free from the stresses that come from our fallen natures.

We are counseled to deem our fallen natures dead, and to no longer live our lives fulfilling the lusts of our fallen natures. If we live to fulfill the desires of the Spirit, we will not live in the morass of all the complications that the fallen nature leads us into. What I speak of seems to some to be unattainable, but if it weren't possible we wouldn't be commanded to live in the Spirit.

What is living in the Spirit like? Living in the Spirit is living in love. God is love, and those who live in his Spirit live in love. Love is a learned behavior in that it is the result of a choice we make. Making the choice to live in love requires that we know something about what love is, otherwise we might choose a counterfeit. Since real love is from God, we must go to God to get it. Once it has been obtained, its expression is where choice comes in. The fruit of the Spirit is love, and it is expressed in joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

What love is like is further expounded upon in I Cor. 13:4-8

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.

Since God is love it would be legitimate to substitute the name God for love and read it, "God is patient, God is kind. God does not envy, God does not boast, and God is not proud etc." Since we are to live in his Spirit we should be able to read it substituting our own name and find that it is a real description of us. If it is not, then we are not living in the Spirit, we are still living in the flesh. That doesn't mean that we don't have the Spirit, it means we aren't living in manifestation of the Spirit. This is where the choices we make come into play. Do we choose to sow to our flesh, or live in our flesh, or do we choose to live in the Spirit. If we choose to live in the flesh we will of the flesh reap corruption, but if we choose to live in the Spirit we will reap eternal life.

Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life. Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. (Gal. 6:7-9)

Living in the Spirit is the most stress free mode of living we can possibly choose, but is it possible to continuously live this way?

Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man, in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit.

Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace; the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God.

You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ. But if Christ is in you, your body is dead because of sin, yet your spirit is alive because of righteousness. And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you.

Therefore, brothers, we have an obligation — but it is not to the sinful nature, to live according to it. For if you live according to the sinful nature, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live, because those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father." The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs — heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory. (Rom. 8:1-17)

To successfully live in the Spirit, we must then choose to allow the Holy Spirit to lead us in our choices, and to reject the mind of the flesh, that is our fallen nature mindset, and live in the new mind, the mind of Christ. The mind of Christ will never let us down. The mind of Christ is not a series of words or thoughts that come to us like tuning into a radio station, but rather are governing principles that guide our thoughts and actions.

What Christ wants for each of us is always what is best for us. Determining whether we are listening to the flesh or the Spirit requires some basic understanding of the nature of God, however. The mind of Christ is not manifest so much in matters of choosing whether to go to this place or that, or such other daily choices, as in what attitude and spirit we go to this place or that. There are times, however, when the mind of Christ does dictate the right selection of where we go or do not go.

There are times when it is vitally important to seek guidance in a decision we must make. When we lack wisdom, he will guide us.

Worry, worry, worry is the common action of the mind of the flesh. Worry about food, what we will eat; worry about clothes, what we will wear, and worry about persecution coming upon us, what we will say or do in response. Jesus, in Matthew 6:25-34, and Matthew 10:19 addressed all these conditions. Repeatedly, Jesus admonished us; do not worry because our heavenly Father is watching out for us. "Look at the birds and look at the lilies," Jesus said. If our heavenly Father is concerned about them, how much more is he concerned about us? Trust is the mindset of the Spirit, not blind trust but rather trust knowing that God really does care about us. If he really does care, then he will order our lives.

How does God communicate with us? Three ways, through his word, the Bible, through the internal working of his Spirit, and the evidence of his will in the substances of life.

I read once that there are three lights in the English Channel to guide ships safely into the channel. To enter safely these three lights had to all line up. When these three were in line with the ship it was on course to enter. Two were not enough to insure safe passage. If two were all there were then a light on shore could be mistaken for the correct light and following it would lead to disaster.

Likewise in life, we have the Word of God, the Bible, where we find the words of instruction and wisdom for life. Then we have the Spirit who applies the appropriate wisdom to our individual circumstances, and after that we have a verification of divine intent through the physical provisions to accomplish the revealed will. If any one of these is lacking, we could be heading straight for the rocky shore.

There are sometimes those who proceed in life with only one light in view. That one light may be a correct one but if there are obstacles between where you are presently located and that light, you may be heading straight for disaster. It is always better to wait until you locate all three and align yourself with all three lights. Then you can safely travel into the waiting arms of Jesus.

Yesterday I was listening to a local radio talk show while I was working. The subject was about life after death and the host had a guest who is the author of several books on the subject. This man spoke taking a position of an authority on the subject because he has had three experiences of what is termed near death experiences.

Many people have had similar experiences and in each case they talk about going toward the light. The experiences they have sound good, and to lost souls, sound reassuring, but are they reliable?

The common problem is that they only have one light they are following¹⁶ into the experience of death. We are warned in the

Scriptures that Satan is an angel of light. Jesus warned us that there are many false prophets and false Christs who will come to deceive many.

There is only one name named among men whereby we must be saved, that name is Jesus. (Acts 4:12) It takes faith in Jesus to insure that the light we are following is actually leading us to heaven.

This man didn't have all three lights in line in his presentation. He didn't have faith in Jesus, Biblical verification of what he taught, nor did he have the validation of the Holy Spirit. He was placing all his faith in experiences that he believed to be reliable, but they lacked the essential ingredient of Biblical revelation. Though individuals who pass through the early stages of death seem to all have the same experience of euphoria, they haven't gone far enough to be certain that this is representative of their final abode.

Those who embark upon the last journey from this life to the next will find Jesus as their final point of reference in order to enter the heavenly city. Without him as the third and most vital point of reference the final outcome is loss of eternal life. None of the people who testify about these experiences have gone far enough on their journey to be sure that the light they see is coming from heaven!

When you have lived your life according to the teachings of the Bible, faith in Jesus, and verification of the Spirit working in your life, you will have in place all that is needed for safe passage into heaven.

These other teachings sound good to those whose lives are filled with sin because they don't require dealing with the sin nature. They don't recognize the need for eternal salvation through the redemptive work of Jesus on the cross. There is no requirement for repentance or holy living. These teachings are full of exaltations of man and his experiences rather than the time tested word of divine revelation. What folly to embark on such a journey without first checking the map! How like men to never ask for help until it is finally so evident that they are lost that it can be no longer denied.

The scriptures declare, "There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death." (Proverbs 14:12) "Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it." (Matt. 7:13-14) The way of life is the way of love, peace and joy. It is a place where entry is through a small gate at the end of a narrow road not heavily traveled.

The picture I have in my mind is of a wide well-traveled road that is just outside the walls of this beautiful city where there is love, peace and joy, such as has never been experienced by man on earth. Though the city is well known to the travelers on the road, they assume the road they are on leads to the gate of the city, but it doesn't, it leads to hell!

All who travel this road see the gate of the city in full view, but it's not the sort of entrance one would expect for such a wonderful place. It's not an ornate entrance; in fact, it is made more like a cross than a door.

It has a name, "Jesus" but only a few are willing to go through such a door. It seems too narrow, too old fashioned, too full of self-denial to pass through comfortably. It requires abandoning too many pleasures and freedom of sinful expression, and giving up affections for things earthy in nature. It seems too hard to trust in Jesus alone rather than the fine philosophies of well-wishers. Satan is the builder of the broad road, but to the travelers on the road, that realization seems absurd to them. However, "The way of a fool seems right to him, but a wise man listens to advice." (Proverbs 12:15)

The way of the cross can be painful to the fleshly nature, but it is the only way of peace on earth and good will to men.

With faith in Jesus comes understanding of why we are here in this life on earth. We understand that the reason why we are here is to make the decisions that affect our eternal existence.

This understanding is the foundation of peace, helping us keep everything in life in proper perspective. When all is in proper perspective, peace is the result. We are then able to accept what cannot be changed, and to adjust what is out of alignment with divine purposes. It is at this point that all unnecessary stress is eliminated and strength is found.

We aren't promised a stress free life here on earth, but we are given a¹⁷wonderful resource to draw strength from; the Holy Spirit. Seeking his presence in our life is wisdom manifest.

Chapter Six

Facing the Enemies of Freedom

Biblical stories, sometimes referred to as types and shadows, are given to provide inspiration and teaching. The story of Israel coming out of Egypt and entering into the Promised Land is filled with instructive types and shadows that teach. The Promised Land is, in my view, symbolic of the place a Christian is to occupy spiritually once he has come into a proper relationship of faith in God.

Occupying this land is not an automatic experience, however, as Israel learned when they sent spies into the land to see what was there. They found enemies of their intention living in the land.

When we cross over the line from being wanderers to living a purposeful Christian life, we soon encounter enemies of those purposes. When people are first filled with the Spirit and experience the joy of the Lord, it seems that nothing can take it away. Everyone, however, who has experienced the manifestations of the Holy Spirit, knows that there are enemies of this experience that must be dealt with.

It doesn't take long in our Spirit filled walk to discover that faith is not an automatic experience. Faith is not just an opportunity to experience divine intervention; it is now part and parcel of our new experience. Every moment of every day must be lived in faith. Faith in the life of a Spirit filled person is like air to the natural person. Faith is the atmosphere in which we now live our life in Christ. We believe God loves us and cares for us, is looking after our every need, and is constantly guarding and protecting us from dangers both seen and unseen. It is this life of faith that is the target of satanic deception.

Living in faith is the most relaxed mode a believer can attain. Faith, when in full manifestation, neutralizes all stresses that come from unbelief anxiety. Disruptions in our faith cause doubts to arise concerning the completeness of this relationship. Disrupting faith is the constant effort of Satan.

He is the accuser of the believers, and often tries to bring consternation into our lives when some circumstance can be put into a bad light. The reason Satan tempts Christians to sin is that he wants to put us in a position of having a guilty conscience before God. Once guilt is accepted, and it usually is when sin has occurred, Satan tempts us to abandon our position of positive faith, telling us we are no longer worthy of God's love. An alert Christian will respond to any negative suggestion that our relationship with God is lacking in forgiveness by going immediately to the Lord in prayer to affirm our repentance and faith and make our requests known to him.

When the attack is persistent, taking authority over Satan may be necessary to rid one's self of his accusations. The proper mode of conduct for a Christian under attack is to put on the whole armor of God, be alert, and pray with all kinds of prayers. (Eph. 6:10-18)

It is proper for a Christian to beseech God while taking a stand against the enemy, commanding him in the name of Jesus to release his attack and leave. This we do, standing in the full armor of God, with the powers of the kingdom of heaven in full array. This battle is not ours alone, it is the Lord's battle, however, we are both participants in the battle, and the objects of the battle.

The battle is not only a battle to destroy a faith relationship; it is also a battle to destroy fellowship with God. This battle comes in many forms, but the primary source of all battles is the fallen nature.

The sin nature that we were all born with is like unto the nature of fallen Satan. When Adam fell, he took all of us with him into the abyss of spiritual darkness, but Jesus came and is the light of the world. In his light we see the full manifestation of the sinful nature

and choose to abandon it, deeming it dead, assigning it to the cross where Jesus died for the sins of all humankind.

His death was so that we might live in the liberty of the power of his resurrection. Living in the power of his resurrection is not an automatic; it is a function of vigilant faith. The primary goal of Satan is to destroy or disrupt the flow of power from Jesus to us through the loss of fellowship resulting from sins committed in our fleshly life. We are thus commanded to abandon the manifestations of the sinful nature and live by the Spirit.

So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law.

The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other. (Gal. 5:16-24)
(Emphasis mine)

When these words of counsel are accepted and applied to every area of life, the result is the experiencing of love, joy and peace.

Every temptation that comes to us is designed to appeal to some facet of the fallen nature. Are you tempted to lust? The reason it is a temptation is that it appeals to the fallen sin nature. Are you tempted with selfish ambition? It too comes from the fallen sin nature. Do you experience fits of rage? It is because the fallen sin nature is reacting to something it doesn't like. The Spirit's response is to abide in love, patience, and long-suffering.

Does your life seem pointless, boring, and empty? This attack upon your sense of well-being is designed to steal your joy and peace! Are you tempted to indulge in sexual immorality, impurity, and debauchery? (Debauch—to corrupt another's virtue or chastity, to subvert honesty, integrity or corrupt allegiances. Webster's College Dictionary) These temptations are designed to destroy your sense of self-worth, your hope of a happy home with a well ordered life, and your peace with God. Added to this is the constant threat of unwanted pregnancies and diseases. Indulgence in these sorts of sins also brings special judgment to bear because our bodies are now temples of the Holy Spirit, and these sorts of sins defile the temple. (1Cor. 3:16)

Every temptation, though appearing to be a city with walls and giants as occupants, is in no way a serious challenge to God. It is only to the indecisive and fearful that temptations become overpowering. This is the effort of Satan in temptation, to make sin seem so desirable that we will abandon our walk in the Spirit to go for it.

I have heard some Christians say, "Oh well, God will forgive me." But will he? When the Israelites were given instructions concerning sacrifices, God told them to bring an offering for unintentional sins, but what about sins done intentionally? Can we expect to not be judged when we know we are sinning and don't care? Everyone has been overcome with a sinful temptation, and yes, at times have sinned knowing better. This is the anatomy of a fall, but true Christians realize that they have fallen and rush to repentance. When a Christian is overcome, it is not with a careless "oh well" that they quickly repent. Some people who fall also need help in getting back on track because Satan is quick to move in on a person who is down, heaping guilt and condemnation upon them. Those who are spiritual must go to such a one to encourage them to get up and continue their life in Christ, learning from the lessons learned in the fall. It is the person who hardens his heart that is in danger.

So, as the Holy Spirit says: "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion, during the time of testing in the desert, where your fathers tested and tried me and for forty years saw what I did. That is why I was angry with that generation, and I said, 'Their hearts are always going astray, and they have not known my ways.' So I declared on oath in my anger, 'They shall never enter my rest'"

See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness. We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first. As has just been said: "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion." (Hebrews 3:7-15)

Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God. (1Cor. 6:9-11)

The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. By his power God raised the Lord from the dead, and he will raise us also. Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself? Shall I then take the members of Christ and unite them with a prostitute? Never! Do you not know that he who unites himself with a prostitute is one with her in body? For it is said, "The two will become one flesh." But he who unites himself with the Lord is one with him in spirit.

Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a man commits are outside his body, but he who sins sexually sins against his own body. Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body. (1Cor. 6:14-20)

From these scriptures we can see that God expects us to be overcomers in our lives on earth. Some have erroneously excused sin in the lives of believers because their view of grace is such that it covers all sin "past, present and future," and so it does, but can we ignore such warnings as are in these scriptures?

Sin is a symptom of a spiritual need in the life of the person so afflicted. It is a sure indication that the person is walking after the flesh and not the spirit. We all know that temptations to sins are formidable foes, and winning battles over the flesh are not always easy. This is why we must become decisive in our commitment to the cross, and live lives of fellowship with the Lord Jesus. He too, knew what we are up against and warned us that we can't go it alone; we must abide in him. It takes the power of Jesus to neutralize the power of temptation.

In Christ, all things are possible, even victory over those things that have such a grip you can't even imagine being free of them. All we can do in some situations is call upon the name of the Lord. When do we call? The moment we become conscious of our need.

I am concerned sometimes because I hear people say, "I know I shouldn't do this or that habit, but I know that the Lord will take it from me someday." Attitudes of complacency are seldom rewarded with victory. Victories are won when the desire to change becomes stronger than the desire to continue. When the desire to walk pleasing to the Lord becomes strong enough, we will then walk after the Spirit, and at that point will find victory over the flesh. Until then we will fall again and again, experiencing the cry, "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (Romans 7:24-25)

Victories come from Jesus Christ our Lord and only from him, therefore, fellowship with him is mandatory if we are going to win in the battles against sins.

Living in the Spirit is not for the faint in heart. Before Joshua was able to win in the conquest of the Promised Land, he had to be admonished by the Lord to be strong and very courageous.

Courage is a decision we make, but the promise is that we will be successful in battle. God promised Joshua that if he would be strong and very courageous, not a man would be able to stand before him all the days of his life.

In view of the fact that these stories are given to teach us, we can legitimately say, that not a giant of temptation, or any other kind can stand before us, if we will be strong and courageous, because God assures us that victory is ours! Joshua's victories were not won by his physical might, but rather by God's power, and so our victories are likewise won when we take the initiative and use all our strength and courage, then God grants his strength in the battle.

Victories are sweet. Joy and peace are the result, and how good it is. Defeat is bitter, and remorse is inevitable, but such is assured to the faint of heart.

Satan is a sly, deceptive, cunning adversary. I am often reminded of this when I see men struggling to put their lives back together after having gotten involved in the sins of the flesh. I have also seen people who have lost their marriages because they have done bad things, then try to make up for it by serving the Lord in the hope that their spouse will come back to them. I have observed that they often leave off serving the Lord when it appears that their marriages are beyond repair. Some would say that this only proves that they were never sincere, but does it?

While working with men at the prison where I am designated a religious volunteer, I see men who are very sincere in their walk with God. Nevertheless, many of them will fall once they are back home in their old environments. It is there that Satan tries to bring circumstances of disillusionment to them, and once having done that he tempts them with the same sins that have caused all the grief in their lives.

If Satan can fill our minds with thoughts of despair, we are then sitting without any armor on. When we are entertaining thoughts of despair, we are not standing against the enemy of our souls. We have no protection against the darts of temptations that are then coming at us from Satan.

This is why so many people fall in times like that, not because they were insincere in the days previous. This sort of fall occurs in many people on a daily basis, but the consequences are less disastrous and therefore are not seen in the same light.

When we are dealing with a drug addict, or an alcoholic, a little despair is all it takes to become an occasion for a fall. Because their fall is so devastating to their lives and walk with the Lord, we are very conscious of them. Yet many people allow the same spirit of despair to cloud their minds and lives never thinking of it as anything serious or abnormal.

The seriousness of a sin is not how devastating it is to the life we now live, but rather what it does to our relationship with the Lord Jesus. Anything that affects our life with the Lord Jesus in a negative way is serious. A little sin here, a negative thought there, soon all that is left is the memory of how it used to be when the touch of the Lord was fresh upon us. There is little interaction with the Holy Spirit, and the sense of joy is gone. How very sad it is to see Christians in the pit of despair, totally miserable, but powerless to do anything about it.

A friend once had a vision or dream of a pit. He looked into the pit and saw a lamb and a pig wallowing in the filth together. As he looked he noted that there was one huge difference in the two animals, one was enjoying the filth and the other was totally miserable.

This is the plight of the fallen Christian, there they are in the pit where they used to enjoy going to wallow, but now they don't enjoy it. Their natures have undergone a change; they have been born again. How can they now do what they once did? The Holy Spirit within them is grievously grieved; misery is the result. They must either repent or he will have to disassociate with them!

This is why there are so many professing Christians who never interact with the Holy Spirit. If we are going to interact with the Spirit, we must first have the Spirit. If we have the Spirit we must interact with the Spirit. This is what is meant by the term living in the Spirit.

You may ask, does this mean that when a person has fallen from a place of fellowship with the Spirit that they have lost their salvation? I don't believe so, but some of us believe it could come to that.

The discussion of whether a person can ever lose his salvation is a discussion for theologians to pontificate upon. They've been trying to prove or disprove their theories for centuries and to my best knowledge there still are differences of opinion.

I was not called to settle this dispute, but rather to warn all Christians that the issue is not whether you can lose it or not, but rather, do you have it now in force so that if you suddenly died, would you be ready? It is better by far to live your life in fellowship with the Lord Jesus every day, standing against Satan's devices. We can't live for Jesus and Satan at the same time. Any effort to do so is sure to lead to trouble.

The Israelites were warned not to compromise with the enemy in the land. Doing so would lead to disaster. They did, and it did. The process didn't happen over-night, but in due time their compromises led to expulsion from the land. Repentance, however, led to a remnant return and they were granted an allowance of grace to rebuild what was lost. Each time they were driven into captivity some never returned, being lost to the nation forever.

How tragic it is to see when parents play with sin, then repent and return to the Lord, how their children are often dragged away into the same sins they just escaped. Sadly some of the children are forever lost to a Christian life. What a price to pay for a little sin!

Victory is possible if we will obey the admonitions of the Lord. When we come to the Lord, we are entering a battle zone. There never is a time when it's okay to take off the armor of God and sit under a tree of selfishness.

We are not alone in this battle, Jesus is right here with us. He is here to renew our strength and to refresh us with a fresh impartation of his power. All that is needed is a heart full of desire and love for Jesus and a willingness to stand against all temptations that lead us away from him.

When battles occur we sometimes get wounded, but when we are fighting the good fight we always find healing in the presence of the Lord. The wounds I speak of are often psychological repercussions and emotional upheavals but these will pass as we continue our walk with the Lord. The wounds are only fatal when we turn from the Lord and, of course, this is exactly what Satan is trying to accomplish. Separation from God is his goal because he hates God and since we are the objects of God's grace, and therefore his love, he hates us as well.

As we progress in our Christian life the Lord deals with areas of need in us on a progressive basis. We aren't expected to attain full development of Christian character overnight. Since godliness is both the results of growth and education, it takes time to accomplish what is needed.

Soldiers skilled in the techniques of war have to undergo intense training and conditioning. Those who don't submit to the training process will not do well in a real battle situation. When bullets are flying, those who are well trained have the best chances of survival. Since a real war is going on all around us, we can't afford to be lax or lazy. You don't have to declare war for war to happen, it is happening all around you every day.

Every time you encounter the world or the world encounters you, a war is going on. Every time a student goes to school he encounters the spirit world at work. If it is a public school, the teachers may be full of sin in their private life and the spirit of their sinfulness surrounds them and affects how they teach. The student is required to learn from the teacher, and therefore is vulnerable to whatever spirit the teacher is of. The student may, due to a strong walk with the Lord and good teaching at home reject the evil spirit's influence, but it is a battle.

Today we are taught that it doesn't matter what the personal life style of a teacher is so long as they don't encourage the students to live as they do. Is that a correct teaching? Of course not! The attitude of the teacher that allows for a life of sin will be subtly taught to the students, teaching them to become permissive in morality as well. Though teachers don't hold out their lifestyles as the most desirable ones, nor are students being encouraged to follow them in sinful living, still the attitude is, "so what, if it is your thing, do it so long as you don't hurt someone else." Since teachers are role models, wittingly or unwittingly, what they believe has a profound effect upon the students. Satan's strategy is not to make sinful robots out of students, but rather to create a climate of permissiveness for them to live their lives in, thus making them vulnerable to future temptations.

Permissiveness is like a contagious disease that moves from one person to another and from one generation to another. As it spreads so does the total effect upon society, the sum being greater than the parts. Societies that walk this deadly path seldom ever come back from the precipice. The only hope is that God in his mercy will send a spirit of revival to such a nation.

The description of sinful progression given in Romans, chapter one, is an applicable portrait of America. The author of the book, the apostle Paul, begins his description by stating that the knowledge of God is held in unrighteousness. No nation on earth has had more teaching, greater understanding, seen more demonstrations of the

power and love of Jesus, than America. We have evangelized the world while²³ backsliding here at home.

He continues by saying that the problem erodes to unthank-fulness. This is a predictable step down the slippery slope to destruction. Once the spirit of holiness is abandoned, unthank-fulness is automatically embraced. The casting off of Biblical divine awareness leads to changes in how God is perceived. Once the divine revelation of God is abandoned, what remains is a perception of our own making. God is no longer the Holy God; he is now whatever each person deems him to be.

As was stated, the knowledge of God was held in unrighteousness, the first step away from a life in the Spirit, which means that such individuals are now living in their fallen natures, or flesh. Living in the fleshly nature requires that a means of accommodating that nature be developed. Sinful desires demand expression, thus comes a need for freedom of expression. Freedom is then redefined from freedom from sinful desires to freedom to express sinfulness.

This of course leads to the exaltation of humankind as the source of wisdom while God is seen as less and less relevant and useful. Because God's wisdom remains constant, changes of views require abandoning God's wisdom as no longer relevant. If God is honored at all, he is now seen in whatever light remains. Soon anything may be seen as God, mortal man, birds, animals, reptiles and, as we now know, the very earth itself. Mother Nature has now taken the place of Father God, and man is free to do whatever is seen as an expression of Mother Nature. Sin is thus seen as a natural part of us, therefore; expressing it is necessary. The rule of holiness is considered archaic, leading to a need for a new rule of conduct. Law then becomes that rule. The sin nature left unchecked will certainly lead to destruction; therefore, law must determine the boundaries.

I sometimes feel a sense of sorrow for politicians who are trying to find a balance between total freedom of expression and civility. As a society, we are now caught in the web of our own sinful desires trying to accommodate all forms of sinful expressions and still maintain some sort of order that is beyond us. The allowance of sexual perversion leads to an increase of sexual crimes as unstable individuals seek greater freedom of expression of their perversions.

The tendency to violence is fueled by the entertainment industry, and greater expressions of violence are now upon us. When our children and all of society lived in the reverence of God, the disciplinary problems educators faced in the lower grades of school was throwing spit wads, or pulling little girls hair. Some of the more bold boys would steal a kiss from a girl, but rape was unheard of until sometime after puberty. Today we have to have armed security guards in many of our schools to try to avert disaster to our children.

Tolerance and permissiveness are the new spirit of the age. Biblical good has been placed as evil and Biblical evil has found its way in the thinking of our culture to be good. Biblical good doesn't allow for homosexual rights, same sex marriages, or the myriad of other expressions of sinfulness. Sinful behaviors are now seen as natural, and are further justified as the result of some genetic flaw. The only question remaining is how far do we go in tolerance? Obviously, we can't allow a person with a flaw of homicidal desire to be granted freedom of expression, nor can we permit rapists the same freedom. Where do we draw the lines? We tolerate pornography as freedom of speech, but condemn the behaviors it encourages. What folly.

Paul got it right, when he said:

For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.

Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen.

Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion.

Furthermore, since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, he gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done. They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they are senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them. (Romans 1:21-32)

If the battle against evil is ever going to be won, it must start with a return to loving and respecting God and an abandonment of the spirit of permissiveness and tolerance, as we now know them. Returning to stricter laws is only a Band-Aid solution. Holiness must once again be the revered goal of every heart.

Chapter Seven

Revival of God Fearing Love

We have a choice, either live under law or live in the liberty of the Spirit. When the Apostle Paul made a statement like that, people thought he was saying that it's now okay to commit sin! That never was his intent, however. What he was speaking of was liberty from the form of religion the Jews had been living under. Not only had they been living under the laws of God, but also the added burden of the traditions of the elders.

Since the system of religious government was now being set aside, new understanding was necessary to take its place. There had to be a clear line drawn between the old religious system and what God was now bringing into being. The old religious system was over, totally, all of it. This was not a patch job; it was a totally new concept, a totally new form of worship with new leadership. God was doing a new thing, and any similarity to the old was not to be taken as an extension of the old. The old system of law was characterized as bondage, and the new relationship of grace was liberty.

The similarity between the old system of the religion of law and the new religion of love and grace was that both served the same God, both had within them the same recognition of what constitutes evil, and the same righteous requirements of the adherents.

The two were dissimilar in the religious forms and rituals that had been such a part of their lives up to this point! They were also dissimilar in the method that righteous conduct was to be achieved. This was a big point of difference and one that is still only vaguely understood by many people to this day.

The method of control that was used under law was the enforcement of religious practices by the elders. Fear, intimidation, and power derived from the concept that God only would recognize the adherence to his laws as the means to his favor was the means they used to exercise their authority. Love was only remotely a part of the religious demand; obedience was everything. They saw God as austere and angry, desiring the strictest possible adherence to their traditions. The idea that true worship springing from love and obedience is the response of that love never seemed to occur to them, although a love for God was taught in the psalms. Breaking the death-grip of such a system requires a total abandonment of the system.

There was an even greater reason for the abandonment of the old religious forms, however. What came into being was not a reformation; it was the next step of divine purpose. The old led to the new, just as a road leads to a destination, so the old religious forms led to their destination, the Lord Jesus Christ. He was what everything had been leading to all the while. Everything they said and did was in anticipation of, and was a proclamation of his coming.

He came with a mission, and though the religious leaders of the system had proclaimed it, they didn't understand even when it was fulfilled just as they had said it would be. Jesus was the fulfillment of the old and the author of the new. The old is the history of the new, the new not being disconnected from the old, but rather the next step of God's unfolding plan of redemption.

The old had become repressive, oppressive and burdensome, the new was seen in the light of a new day. Love, joy and peace are now the characteristics of a person dedicated to the worship of God. The emphasis is upon redemption, restoration of fellowship with God, and a healing from what Satan has stolen from us, both as individuals and as a society.

Christianity was never intended to be repressive, oppressive, or boring. It is intended to be full of life, and growth. It is also intended to be full of righteous conduct springing from a heart in worship to God, and a recognition that righteousness is, after all, not repressive. When we come to the understanding that righteousness is liberating, we can embrace it with enthusiasm.

True righteousness is not a knee-jerk response to the sinful ways of our old lives that we know we must now abandon. For example, often an addict seeks sobriety or liberty from a habit, embracing a relationship with God as a knee-jerk response to the old problem. This is probably inevitable in the beginning of the effort, but it is not the foundation upon which a meaningful relationship with God can be built.

Just as the abandonment of the old religious system was necessary to bring in the new, so an addict must abandon his old life to enter into the new. The purpose is not primarily to be free of an addiction, as necessary as that is, but rather to find a new life in Christ Jesus. Freeing ourselves from an addiction is initially the focal point of redemptive efforts, but once achieved the previously bound person must realize that this is only the beginning of their walk with Christ. Many have centered their life on achieving sobriety, and once achieved, see no further challenge. There are many other issues than overcoming an addiction. Once the person so entrapped moves beyond being a recovering addict to a growing Christian, he has begun a normal life development process and is now free to grow in Jesus.

The idea that once an addict always an addict has a show of wisdom, but it can also be a trap. The recognition that an old addiction can be revived at the first onset of participation is very real. One who has been in a trap of that kind must always remember from whence he came and not ever go back. As the saying goes, alcoholics must never again even smell the cork of a bottle or they are in grave danger. This truth remains, but one must realize that is not where life stops. Release from bondage is not the goal; living a life of liberty is. Now that we are free, how should we live? When sin has occupied every waking moment, and what has defined life was what that addiction has brought to us, how do we live otherwise? The idea of living without some involvement with the sin of our past may seem impossible at first, but God will teach a better way.

When the Israelites came out of Egypt they didn't know how to live as freemen. They needed a new identity, expression of life, and a sense of personal identity as freemen. This God graciously gave them at Mt. Sinai revealing himself to them in the form of a power display—thunder and lightning, the sound of a trumpet and a voice upon the mountain speaking from the clouds. He revealed himself more intimately to Moses upon the mountain as he gave the people commandments that would be the cornerstone of all that he would say and do. The result was that when they left the mountain, they had a form of religion that was uniquely theirs, a national identity, and civil laws to govern them. They were now a unique nation. Now God wanted to be their God and for them to be his people. This was only partially achieved. They fell short in their faith.

Learning to live as freemen is a process that sometimes involves false starts and ups and downs, but to the person who is willing and determined, God is there for them.

Sometimes God grants miracles of healing and deliverance at the onset of ones experience with God. When this happens it is because God has graciously granted what often is struggled for in other people.

Those receiving such a blessing must realize that what they received was very special, but they must be careful to be thankful and never look down on those who have to struggle for freedom. God grants special gifts, but they aren't always the same to all people. This doesn't mean God is playing favorites, but it does mean he has different goals in mind for different people. He knows what is needed and best suited to bring the desired end result into our lives.

One brother who received the Lord, having been into drugs, smoked cigarettes, and whatever else was a part of his lifestyle in sins, found change easy. He threw his cigarettes away, and turned away from drugs and all the other sins, and received the Spirit into his life, only to later become harsh and judgmental toward those who were still struggling with the sins he had left behind.

One day, with pride and hardness of heart, he was tempted to try a drug again. First it was just a thought and then a few days later it became action. Like Samson in the Bible, he didn't even notice that the power in his life had diminished while he was being prideful and judgmental. His fall into shame and disgrace was quick and painful. Soon the money he had saved for a down payment on a new home was gone, he injured himself jumping from a balcony to escape detection, injuring his ankles leaving a painful condition that has never left him. He lost his job and resorted to begging on the streets. Though he has returned to the Lord, found new employment, and bought a new home, he is still suffering the results of his waywardness and is not at all the same.

When we begin our walk into victory and freedom, Satan is always there to challenge our decision. Will we return to our Egypt, or will we continue our journey, believing in God? There are those who once seeing the reality of the kingdom of God, advance toward it and never look back. They have made a decisive decision, and growth in the Lord and the wisdom of his kingdom is evidenced in their lives. These are an inspiration to behold, and like an obedient child, they bring joy to the Lord.

Chapter Eight

Freemen, Servants under Discipline There is a special benefit to consistent Christian living. In the teachings of Jesus he said that a day of accounting was going to come, and that those who had been faithful in the little things would become rulers over much.

How this will become a manifest reality is still to be seen, probably mostly in the life after this worldly sojourn is over. Some believe that it refers to special blessings during the millennial reign of Christ, perhaps, and probably even beyond that. Be that as it may, the truth is sure that the Lord Jesus promised special rewards for faithful and diligent service.

I've noted in observation that there are people who advance in the Lord to a point, and then have a choice of whether to advance into an unknown blessing or settle for where they are. This is especially noticeable in people who are tied to a particular denominational doctrine and are unwilling to explore the possibility that their doctrine may be either faulty or incomplete.

A minister brother described the condition as a pool of water along a river that is fed by the river on occasions but for the most part is separated from it. These pools are not the river, but some people like them because they are quiet water, perhaps warmer, and often filled with fish, plants and animals. They can be a delightful place, but they are not the river.

Those who are called to be river people but choose to live by a pool are not doing what they are called to do. They may feel blessed, and in many ways I am sure they are, but it isn't fulfilling what the Lord had in mind for them. They will never know where the river would have taken them, what joy was just around the next bend, what adventure was laid up for them.

Those familiar with rivers know that they can be dangerous and challenging. Following the river of God often takes us through dangerous and hostile territory. There are internal dangers and external dangers. Within the river are currents that must be understood or they will overwhelm the traveler. On the shores are enemies of the traveler that are seeking to divert their attention from the river. Despite these realities, the kingdom of God is advanced by

those who are not willing to reside by the quiet water of a pool, but continues to move on as the river takes them to a land yet unexplored. They don't need to go it alone, for, the Holy Spirit is their constant guide and the Lord Jesus is their captain. The land ahead is an abundant land where undescribed blessings abound.

Those who travel the river are somewhat visionary people, but their vision is from God. They, like Abraham before them, see a city beyond the horizon whose builder and maker is God. They reach for that city, and regardless the cost while living on earth, it is worth the price to them.

These people are the ones who are familiar with the yoke of discipline in their lives. They don't run about on the shore while the boat is traveling the river. They stay with the boat and the divine captain of it, the Lord Jesus.

Doctrines are danger things. Doctrines are well-defined truths that are established by those who traveled the river ahead of us. Some are meant to protect us from dangers that they have faced, and others are meant to define us. They are best suited to the pools along the way, however, and are taught in fine buildings with clever names on them. In the end, they tend to capture those who come to them, and once they get them, keep them away from the advancing flow of the river.

The river I speak of is not an undefined wandering body of truth, it is well defined, and it is also liberating. It frees us from mediocrity, and allows us the adventure of our faith. This river is designed for travel, and has as its destination, a broad and fertile land, the Promised Land designed for believers. There is so much of God to be learned about and so much to be explored in our relationship with him. This exploration is best suited to the Promised Land, (life in the Spirit). It is in the land of the Spirit that revelations abound, that new vision is granted and real joy is found.

There is a prerequisite to this kingdom, relationship with the king! He must bring us to this relationship. To stay here he must feed us. We are never free to go it alone. He shows it to us, he assigns our place in it, and we enjoy and enjoy, and enjoy! It is a large land, bigger than any of us. No one will ever feel confined in it or denied any joy that is available here. Everything you ever longed for is abundantly supplied, only without sin. Righteousness and holiness are the boundaries of it and the interior is love.

It was Satan's business to distract us and entice us to settle for the safety of a pool back up the river. When I speak of doctrines being dangerous things, I am speaking of the distracting nature of doctrines, which demand they be defended. These are systems of theology; great doctrines of the church, all of them having their place in the development of Christianity. They give definition to what we believe, and form a body of truth to define God, man, salvation, sin, repentance, and many such themes. What we understand about each of these is important to our journey but when we allow them to become the journey, our journey with the Lord ends.

There has been a developmental process of doctrinal understanding going on in the world of the church. From the early church with the Apostles ministering sound doctrine came a period of decline in understanding until the confusion of the dark ages set in. Then the Lord began a restoration process, new understandings and insights were once again introduced to those who sought the Lord. It was a time of exciting exploration of divine truth, and teachers emerged who had profound influence upon the development of doctrinal understanding.

Because errors abounded, many of the doctrines were a sort of knee-jerk response to errors that had invaded the world of believers. It has been a common problem in the church for teachings to be given to counter teachings that were incorrect. Errors have been the catalyst of change, but corrections have also brought their own unique errors. Truths taken to an unintended level is error as surely as the errors before them were.

The restoration process I speak of is not the introduction of new doctrines, but rather a process of gaining understanding of those doctrines. Teachings given to correct errors often involve the overemphasis of a truth. This overemphasis becomes an error of its own, though at the time the emphasis was needed to counter the former error. It is what follows the era of correction that is the problem. People tend to become fixated upon some teaching as

though everything in the kingdom of God depends on understanding this one point. This is the sort of thing I refer to as pools that were once a part of the river but are now separated from it. Great institutions of learning have been built to house the instructors of doctrines; but many of them are more monuments of the past rather than participants in the Promised Land journey.

This knee-jerk approach is still going on in some doctrinal circles, and as was the case in previous time periods, over-emphasis is still the result. The issues are different, but the result is the same. Pools are being formed that are no longer a part of the flow of the river. Some pools are in response to the over-emphasis of teachings, and other pools are the over-emphasis.

However, there are those who ignore the pools and continue to move with the river. These are the ones whose eye is not upon teachings or the teachers but rather, the Lord Jesus himself. They hear the teachings but serve the Lord. Teachings are only of value to them when they are directed and applied by the Holy Spirit.

Some have wondered why I am reluctant to climb on board every new thing that comes to us as a new understanding. There is only one boat in this river that interests me, the one that has Jesus as the helmsman. When a new understanding comes from him, I need not change boats, just continue with the understanding and apply it to my journey. His instructions are never overly emphasized nor do they require an institution be built to memorialize it.

There have been times on my journey when the Lord has allowed time to view the pools and to hear the teachings going on around them. He has pointed out the correctness of some of the doctrines being taught and has also pointed out the errors. Then we go back to the boat and continue the journey. If I stay too long, he is no longer by my side.

What I have said here is not intended to be an indictment against schools established to prepare young people to enter the ministry or other occupations. Most are doing a wonderful and necessary work. It is only when their focus has become clouded, or the students fail to realize that doctrines are to be understood, not served, that there is a problem. I have studied and taught doctrines of the church. I fully subscribe to the basic body of truth that is sometimes referred to as orthodoxy, that is, the commonly believed truths that the Bible clearly teaches that had their origin in the teachings of the Lord Jesus and his Apostles. These truths are important to understand and serve as guidelines to help us recognize truth and error. With understanding firmly in place, we leave the institution and commence with the task of application under the leadership of the Lord Jesus Christ. We don't leave to serve the doctrine; we leave to serve Jesus.

We are freemen under the Lordship of Jesus. As freemen we are able to be voluntary servants of the Lord. Paul declared his allegiance to the Lord Jesus by stating that he was a love-slave of the Lord. His focus was upon pleasing the Lord and caring for his church. The ability to commit himself to the tasks was an expression of his freedom.

We too are freemen and as such have the freedom to pursue our journey. We can allow ourselves to be diverted and distracted if we want to, but the Lord Jesus beckons us on. The duties of the Apostle Paul never took him away from his journey, nor did he try to establish monuments along the way. One thing he did was to proclaim his allegiance to Jesus and what that meant in practical application. Once he began his journey, he never left the river. He kept looking for the city and his place in it. His was a high calling in Christ Jesus and he kept pursuing the prize to the very end. This was his choice; this was his duty. He was a slave to duty, but by choice. So it is with every one of us.

Chapter Nine

28

The Journey

From the previous chapter it should be clear that there is a difference between being a Christian in stagnation and a Christian in pursuit of the prize.

In 1 Kings 19 and continuing in 2 Kings 2, is the story of Elijah and Elisha on a journey together that resulted in the transfer of the office of a prophet.

For Elisha, the journey began when Elijah went looking for him, found him in a field with twelve yoke of oxen plowing, and he was plowing with the twelfth. Elijah came near where he was and cast his cloak around him and then walked on.

Elisha then ran after Elijah and asked permission to go back and bid his household goodbye and then return to follow Elijah. Permission being granted, Elisha slaughtered his oxen and broke up the yoke and used it for wood to cook the oxen over, fed his servants and bid his parents goodbye, then left to become Elijah's attendant.

The journey had begun for Elisha, one that would make him a permanent part of the Biblical story, and one that would be instructive to all those who would read it. What happened to Elisha that caused him to leave his home and his apparent wealth, and journey with the prophet, we can only speculate. Was the gesture a symbolic act with a meaning that he understood or was there a power flow from it that signaled something to Elisha? We may never know, but it is a fact of the story that he made a decisive decision to follow Elijah. He burned his bridges behind him, as the saying goes, and headed down the road with his new teacher.

They journeyed on for an undisclosed period of time, and during which it would seem that Elisha and Elijah became well acquainted. Finally the story picks up with Elijah telling Elisha that he was going to Gilgal.

After the nation of Israel had left Egypt and wandered in the wilderness for forty years they entered the land of promise and made their first camp at Gilgal. It was at this camp that the males of Israel were circumcised because none of them had been circumcised while they were in the desert. This is where the last remnant of the slave mentality was finally being given up and Israel was aligning itself with the commands of God. In the New Testament circumcision speaks of the cutting away of the fleshly desires of the fallen nature. Circumcision was a symbolic act, as well as a covenant symbol, dating back to Abraham who received the sign of circumcision for he and his descendants.

There was a practical reason for circumcision in the beginning; it had to do with cleanliness. These were the days when washing with soap and water was not understood as a healthy thing to do. There was no concept of germs, and therefore, no concept of personal hygiene. Many of the commands of God had to do with the practical needs of the people. They didn't know why God gave them these commands, only that they were to obey them. It hasn't been until recent times that science has caught up with the commands of the Lord. Because the Israelite men were circumcised, many problems women have had as a result of the uncircumcised males, has been minimized among their women.

Circumcision in the New Testament is understood in a symbolic sense that has to do with the heart. It speaks of the sinfulness of the flesh and the need to cut away the nature of sin. We are to deem ourselves dead to sin and alive unto the Lord. We are to deal with the sin-nature as an enemy of good spiritual health.

Not only does there need to be cleanliness of our sexual lives, but also a cleansing of our hands as well. Our hands are symbolic of our involvement in the enterprises of our natural lives.

“Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.” (James 4:7-10)

This scripture outlines the process of deliverance from the power of sin in the Christian life. It is a procedure that is needed whenever the fleshly nature begins to surface in our daily life. First we are to submit to God, that is, to embrace the character and the commands of God. It means to lovingly embrace the spirit of holiness as our heart-felt love. Creating this attitude and spirit enables us to take the next 29 step, which is to effectively resist the devil and his temptations. Having done this we can now draw near to the God we love.

Looking to the tabernacle worship of the Old Testament as a guide, we see that as the worshippers first began their approach to God, their sacrifices to the Lord were brought to the brazen altar. The next step was the washing at the bowl of water that spoke of the washing of the word. Here the priests, in behalf of the worshippers, would wash their hands, speaking of the industries that their lives were involved with.

The Word doesn't stop with the washing of the hands, however; it also involves washing the spirit of the heart of man and dealing with the duplicity of his mind.

Now we progress from the cleansing mode and come repentantly to the Lord, beseeching him, and realizing how far we have fallen from fellowship. The ugliness of sin has become the cause for grief, thus we mourn and wail, changing our shallow and false joy to gloom. We now humble ourselves before the Lord realizing we truly need him because he alone is the source of spiritual health and strength.

Having been to Gilgal and having partaken of the cleansing act that it was famous for, we are now ready to journey on with Elijah our host.

Elijah in the Hebrew is a name with meaning; it could be rendered Almighty Jehovah, or God Jehovah.

This man, it seems, was properly named because he was a symbol of the authority of God over the nation of Israel. His authority also extended to other nations as well, just as God's authority is over the whole earth.

Elisha also is a name with meaning; it could be rendered almighty in supplication. This strikes me because there is no indication that this name had any meaning in the life of Elisha until he met Elijah. He may have felt that his name was a contradiction to the reality of what was happening around him. Perhaps this was the catalyst that caused him to follow Elijah.

Sometimes it takes seeing the contradictions in our lives to motivate us to actions to remove them. When Elijah placed the cloak or mantle upon Elisha, evidently something about it said to him that this was the means to accomplishing what he knew was his destiny.

The next stop on their journey was Bethel, which means house of God. This is where Jacob had spent his first night when he was fleeing the wrath of his brother, Esau. At that time there was no city or even village there, just a spot to lay his head on a rock for a pillow and fall asleep. During the night he saw a ladder or stairway to heaven with angels ascending and descending upon it. In the morning after awaking and realizing what he had seen, he named it Bethel because he believed it to be the house of God.

The house of God is suggestive of a place of fellowship with the Lord and the Lord's people. When the presence and glory of the Lord is felt in the fellowship of believers, there is great joy. As the singers sing and the worshippers worship, the dancers dance and the preachers preach; it is an experience without compare. People who love their God and love each other, having a love feast in the purity of holiness, without even a hint of sexual overtones is an experience that can't be equaled. Such is Bethel; a place of spiritual enjoyment and pleasures that are not of this world, yet for Elisha, the contradiction is still a reality of life. He still hasn't come to the place where he is doing God's bidding in his life. He is Elisha and as wonderful a place as Bethel is, it doesn't hold the answer to his need. Elijah offered Bethel to him as a stopping place, but Elisha wouldn't hear it, he must move on with Elijah to whatever still lay ahead.

They journeyed on to Jericho, which means a place of fragrances and illumination. Jericho lay at the south end of the Jordan River just before it emptied into the Dead Sea. It was the first city that Israel conquered upon entering the Promised Land. It was strategically located and well-fortified but it was no match for the power of God. Though it was cursed and left uninhabited, it was, in the day of our scripture, a town once more. There was a school of the prophets here now, and they were an aware group, knowing that Elijah was about to be taken into heaven.

Jericho spiritually is a great place to be, because it speaks of the teaching ministry with illumination, and of the special flavoring of delightful fragrances which suggest thrilling revelations of divine truth. Anyone who has experienced the revelation power of the Holy Spirit as he comes to us in the teaching ministry knows what a thrilling experience it is. The prophets knew what it was like being there, and were content to remain. Elijah suggested to Elisha that he remain as well, but he wouldn't stay there. As wonderful a place as it was, it wasn't the answer to the cry of his heart. He must move on with Elijah.

Now Elijah was to Elisha, in our story, what Jesus is to us. He was his master, and he represented the presence and power of God. Elisha didn't want to simply be cleansed of his old sinful life, nor did he want to be just a worshipper or a student of the word with special skills in teaching. He wanted the contradiction removed from his life; he wanted to be almighty in supplications.

So it was that Elijah took him to Jordan, a very low place. In fact the only place on this planet that is lower geographically is the Dead Sea itself. It lies over 1200 feet below sea level, making it a very low place.

Those called to move on past the former experiences to such a low place may feel that this can't possibly be God's will for them. Leaving the places of cleansing, fellowship and learning, to go to a solitary place that may seem like the very door of hell, doesn't seem very appealing. Everything about it suggests death, solitude, and battles with doubts, fears, and loneliness. This is where what is portrayed at baptism becomes reality. This baptism reality I speak of is when we finally are confronted with the necessity to leave all the last remnants of our old way behind. No longer do we trust in what other men trust in, but rather now we are fully indentured into the kingdom of God. All our affections, motives, dependencies and goals have been placed in the heavenly kingdom and the power of God. Nothing threatens us anymore because; we have truly died to the world.

We come here to experience fellowshiping in his sufferings. It is an experience with the cross that is different somewhat from our first visit. Our first experience with the cross was when we came sin laden, full of guilt and disgust, finding cleansing in the power of the shed blood of Jesus for the remission of our sins. Now we are here again, but this time the meaning and purpose has to do with the application of the spirit of the cross.

The spirit of the cross has to do with the attitude of life that Jesus embraced in his going there. The first expression of the spirit of the cross was at Gethsemane where Jesus prayed, "not my will, but your will be done."

This surrendering to the Lordship of Jesus, is to us, fellowshiping with the sufferings of Jesus. To Jesus, this surrender meant he was totally putting the needs of the objects of his sacrifice ahead of any personal consideration. Whatever denial from friends, misunderstanding of his teachings, rejection of his mission, or personal pains to be suffered, he must do it as an offering of praise and thanksgiving to God. This would then be acceptable to his Father in Heaven.

They went to Jordan, but death for them was only symbolic. Our death at the cross is also only a spiritual experiencing of the benefits of the One who died for us. We often suffer some of the pains he suffered, but the purpose is different; his was redemptive, ours is fellowshiping in divine purposes.

Elijah parted the water, just as our Lord has parted it for us. We walk through it but are not destroyed by it. We come out the other side to meet God in a very personal and special way. We are now friends. We have suffered some of what he suffered giving us empathy for him, the sort that draws even humans together.

We walk on, but why are we here? All around us is barrenness; this is a desert! Then the voice of Elijah is heard, "Tell me, what can I do for you before I am taken from you?" (2Kings 2:9)

At this point, whatever is in our heart is what we will ask for. This question was not asked before now because for many people the request would be for carnal pleasures. If greed is in our heart, we will want financial blessings. If we hunger for attention, we will ask for some position of influence. It wasn't until late in the ministry of Jesus that he invited his disciples to ask what they will. This sort of open-ended request can only be offered to those who have been through the fire of special dealings. For Elisha it was not a question about what he wanted. It was not a matter of saying something that

sounded real spiritual to disguise a wicked heart; it was pure, it was simple, "Let me inherit a double portion of your spirit," Elisha replied. (2Kings 2:9)

"You have asked a difficult thing," Elijah said, "yet if you see me when I am taken from you, it will be yours — otherwise not." (2Kings 2:10) Now that is a challenge. He must keep his eyes on Elijah or his journey will have been in vain.

It is Satan's business to keep us from the prize. He wants to distract us and keep us from our inheritance. What is it that is being used to distract you on your journey? Does it take your eyes off Jesus? Sometimes it's nothing more than our daily routines. The tasks that get heaped upon us, little league for the kids, trips to the store, school activities, church, youth group outings, and on and on goes the list. Others don't have these sorts of distractions, for them it's just boredom. Idle time is said to be the devil's workshop.

Elijah and Elisha journeyed on not knowing when or how he would be taken up, only that God had purposed it. Would Elijah just suddenly vanish? Elisha must now keep him in full view or he might miss the event and lose the blessing! It would seem that Elisha's destiny was now secure, but was it? He had to see it happen, that was the word.

Assumptions don't win great prizes in the kingdom of God. Assumptions lead to complacency, and complacency leads to mediocrity. How many times would God have done great things if complacency hadn't entered into the mix?

How long they walked is not revealed. Bodies tire from the journey. Did they stop and rest, perhaps take a little nap? What if Elisha fell into sleep and Elijah got up and went on without him, would he have seen him when he went up?

It didn't happen that way, however. "As they were walking along and talking together, suddenly a chariot of fire and horses of fire appeared and separated the two of them, and Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind. Elisha saw this and cried out, "My father! My father! The chariots and horsemen of Israel!" And Elisha saw him no more. Then he took hold of his own clothes and tore them apart. He picked up the cloak that had fallen from Elijah and went back and stood on the bank of the Jordan.

There he took the cloak that had fallen from him and struck the water with it. "Where now is the LORD, the God of Elijah?" he asked. When he struck the water, it divided to the right and to the left, and he crossed over. (2Kings 2:11-14)

Don't you love it when the end of a story is success? For Elisha the story would go on, he was there when Elijah was taken up, he saw it happen. He witnessed the chariot of fire, and saw the whirlwind take Elijah up. He disposed of his garments of a servant, and put on the cloak of Elijah, now he looked the part of a prophet! Was he a prophet or did he just look like one? The test came at Jordan. Could he do what Elijah had done, part the water?

When he got to Jordan, he struck the water with the mantle. The text leaves me pondering, did he strike it once and nothing happened? It says, "He picked up the cloak that had fallen from Elijah and went back and stood on the bank of the Jordan. Then he took the cloak that had fallen from him and struck the water with it." (2Kings 2:13-14) It seems so. Assuming this is the intended meaning, we would see a real challenge of faith. What would you do at this point, lift your cloak and start wading? Perhaps shrug your shoulders and say, "Oh well, parting the water isn't everything. Maybe tomorrow evidence will appear."

Elisha didn't let the moment pass, this was the place, this was the moment; he would claim the prize of his journey. He knew he couldn't part the water himself, it had to be an act of God. Where then was God? This wasn't a magic trick, parting the water, God would have to show up and do it, so where was he? Elisha called out, "Where now is the LORD, the God of Elijah?" he asked. When he struck the water, it divided to the right and to the left, and he crossed over." (2Kings 2:14)

The men of the school of the prophets watched from afar, that is what they do. They saw them disappear from their sight, and now they saw Elisha return alone. What was going to happen had been revealed to them, but they chose to remain where they were.

Elisha reported to them what he saw, but their faith was weak. What if God just picked him up and moved him to another spot dropping him on a mountain. They should go see if they could find him. Test the miracle you know. Did he really go up or did it just seem like he did. They went out and searched, but came back without Elijah or any sighting of him.

Elisha, on the other hand, went on with his journey. He was the prophet now and evidence upon evidence followed. Truly, a prophet and an aspiring prophet had left the school of the prophets, and a new prophet had returned, only the evidences of his mission were twofold compared to what they had been under Elijah.

Summary

In the beginning of this presentation, we came to the realization that everyone is bound in some way in life. That is the nature of life; it is unavoidable. There is, however, negative and positive bondage. We must choose the sorts of bondage we will allow and which ones we will flee.

We also have come to the realization that if we are to ever be liberated from negative bondage, it is going to be a work of the Holy Spirit in our lives that accomplishes it. We learned that though some bondage may seem like it is positive, and is, with reference to what is healthy and good in this life, yet that which is really positive is eternal in nature, and is our life in the Spirit. We see that anything that distracts us or takes away our fellowship with the Holy Spirit is an enemy of our peace.

We also have found that the Holy Spirit is involved in our life with a purpose in mind, to heal us, liberate us from harmful habits and bondage, and deliver us into the Promised Land. The process involved in getting from where we were, bound in the fetters of sinful and selfish living without Christ in our lives, to a life of fullness in Christ, is sometimes referred to as a journey. Just as the Israelites experienced a process of transformation to prepare them for entry into the Promised Land, so we experience a process in our lives.

If we are to ever embark upon this journey, however, we must first come to the end of wanting the bondage of our past. We, like Elisha, must slay our oxen, use the yoke to prepare a goodbye ceremony to the old life, pick up our traveling luggage and head down a new road of life, becoming the constant companion of the Lord Jesus, our teacher and our guide. Unlike Elisha who left his family and friends behind, they are welcome to come with us, but theirs must be a separate and personal quest just as ours must be.

When we have begun our journey, we will immediately begin to dispose of all the negative bondage from our lives. Once the Holy Spirit is actively a part of the process, we can expect changes to be made. He is good at exposing conditions of heart that we have always had and thought were natural.

One day not long ago, I went to get some bagels for our breakfast, and because I have yet to learn the proper procedure concerning seatbelts, I failed to put my belt on. When I left the bagel store evidently a policeman was watching and seeing that I didn't put it on immediately, gave me a ticket.

I have been driving for fifty years and wearing seatbelts has only recently become mandatory. I realized I had a problem remembering this so I started putting it on the minute it would come to mind. This has helped me, but I still haven't learned to put it on first. When the officer gave me the ticket I was admittedly annoyed and frustrated.

I didn't want to lose my peace over this but I struggled with bitter thoughts. I remembered remarks I had heard about this policeman and how mean he was in giving tickets for minor infractions. I also remembered a recent incidence where I hadn't handled a situation correctly and ended embarrassing the Lord and myself. I was determined that this would be different, but it wasn't until I could fully accept the blame and say, "I was wrong, not the policeman," that I was able to find peace over it.

The previous incident that I referred to where I embarrassed myself and the Lord, was the result of a problem we have at the

church. Our restrooms are in the basement of the building which is quite old and being low are subject to problems. It is in an older part of town and the sewers are barely deep enough to work. They are also overloaded because of recent developments and sometimes get plugged up. This happened on Thanksgiving morning one year resulting in sewage flooding the basement of our church. I went to the church to get some extra chairs for our dinner, and found this very smelly condition. Needless to say, this spoiled our day, but we dealt with it and spent the rest of the day pumping sewage and trying to get the mess cleaned up.

The workers of the city assured me this wouldn't happen again as they were going to put this line on a regular maintenance schedule. And yes, they tried to maintain it but it happened again, only this time their machine that uses water pressure to back-flush the system caused it. It was on this occasion that my problem with anger began. It was bad enough that they blew sewage into our basement, but when they denied it and said one of our toilets overflowed due to a stoppage, I was frustrated.

Anyone could see that perhaps 50 or more gallons of sewage was in our basement and no toilet could have possibly done that! They couldn't, however, be convinced, so I walk away from the conversation and went in the church and called the cleaning company and had it cleaned and sent the bill to our insurance company.

I thought that was the end of it, but what I didn't realize was that the anger was still in my heart. After a couple more minor incidences still another spill occurred. This time a clean-out plug that had been deteriorating over many years and had been repaired blew out. They blamed the spill on the plug and I lost it. I threw my car keys on the ground in anger and said a word not normal to my vocabulary and then raised my hand in a threatening way, something also out of character for me. Interestingly, as I raised that fisted hand my other hand reached over and pulled it down. I have laughed at that because it was so unexpected. Our conversation ended, and I got in my car and went to the office of the crew and discussed it with their supervisor who scolded me for my actions. He pointed out that I had failed to install a check valve and warned me not to repeat what had happened.

I feel sure I had a right to be angry, but did I as a Christian? I was embarrassed by my actions, but why did I lose it? It didn't take long for the Lord to let me know in his quiet but sure way that I just hadn't dealt with the previous anger. I had allowed an unresolved irritation to remain in my heart and it was just waiting for an opportunity to come out. And yes, I could have justified it by saying that I had just cause for being irritated, and I am sure I did, but that still didn't alter the fact that I had allowed something in my heart that was wrong. Carrying unresolved anger is like carrying a time bomb just waiting to go off.

What I experienced is common to humanity. It is the sort of scenario that is played out every day in one way or another. As our lives become more and more pressurized we tend to carry more and more unresolved issues. These are laying in our subconscious minds waiting for a means of release. We are able to cope with a certain amount of stress resulting from unresolved issues, but sooner or later they will boil over and hurt will occur. Some people will use techniques such as rigorous exercise to help release the tension, and yes, that can help, but it is not resolving the problems.

Anger is an emotion of frustration resulting from something being out of our control that we either should be able to control or would like to control. Sometimes it is justifiable and sometimes it is not.

There is righteous anger and there is unrighteous anger. Righteous anger, when vented, moves us in the direction of good resolutions or solutions. Unrighteous anger happens when we are either trying to control something that is not ours to control, or are harboring bitterness that has festered into an angry sore. Not everything out of control needs to be controlled by us; some things are beyond our control. People who can't accept their limitations are people heading for trouble.

If we are to be freemen, we must be willing to accept that we are not called to solve the problems of the world; we are, however, called to be peacemakers.

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When Jesus came to this world he came without a political or social agenda; he came with an answer to the internal problem of sin in the heart. When sin in the heart is cured, peace results. The cure of sin in the heart begins with a clean confession of sinfulness, it moves to repentance, then to forgiveness of those who have sinned against us. It involves an embracing of the redemptive work of Jesus on the cross for us, thus giving us peace with God. When all is completed, we have peace with ourselves, those who have hurt us, and with God.

A God given peace in our spirit is a good indicator that we have achieved a position of freedom from negative bondage. Once we have achieved it, we must guard it with all diligence. The moment we feel a lifting of the sense of peace, it is wise to stop and ask, "why?" If we are willing to give up whatever it is that has caused the breach of peace, our peace will return. If we persist in the violation, we will become increasingly more miserable, and will either have to harden our hearts through self-justification or repent.

Many people have gone on past this point of lifting of peace without even realizing they did it. Living without peace is so natural to them that it seems okay.

Some will substitute religious practice for peace with God and think that all is well. Others will look to grace and find a false peace based on a doctrinal point, but real God given peace is no longer in their hearts because they are harboring sin once more.

The way back to real God given peace is very similar to original repentance. I do not say that we have to be born again over and over, but I do maintain that if we are to walk in peace we must walk in the spirit of repentance from dead works. This spirit of repentance will produce in us a constant awareness of our need to have the living life of Jesus within us at all times. We live by his strength, walk in his counsel, and have fellowship with God.

Freedom from a sense of bondage is the result of a life lived in harmony with the character and person of our Lord, Christ Jesus. We are still bound but this bondage is the bondage of love, and how good it is.