

Saving Faith



Ralph E. Johnson

SAVING
FAITH

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This book is dedicated to Almighty God, without whose mercy and grace there would be no righteousness, joy or peace during this life, and no hope for the life to come.

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Unless otherwise specified, references in Scripture are taken from the New International Version of the Bible.

Preface

On June 26, 2000, I asked a question of those men participating in the *Life Learning Program* at the Pinellas County Jail in Clearwater, Florida: “Can anyone explain what faith means?” The answer came immediately from a man involved in ministry despite a besetting sin that had led to repeated incarceration. He recited from memory: “*Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen*” (Hebrews 11:1, KJV).

As the brother spoke, I could not help but think how we can memorize Scripture, and yet lack the revelation and empowerment needed to make the word of God be a living experience. This incident created in me the desire to teach what faith that saves is all about. Over the following weeks, we examined several aspects of faith and this book contains these lessons in only slightly revised form.

Scripture tells it is impossible to please God without faith, and that salvation comes only through faith. Thus the meaning of faith is critical for all those who confess Jesus Christ as their personal Lord and Savior. For indeed, faith is not simply knowing certain doctrines or agreeing that Jesus is the true Son of God.

Faith is a living active trust in God that results from having a personal relationship with Jesus. Faith produces an *inner* heart change that results in different *outer* behavior by the work of the Holy Spirit called sanctification. In the absence of outer as well as an inner change, faith is just as dead as are works dead without faith.

Paul tells that we are to examine ourselves to see if we're in the faith. This is excellent advice, because false prophets surround us who preach a gospel that really is no gospel at all. The gospel handed down to us by the apostles is being distorted to a point where it has a form of godliness while denying its power.

The power of God is denied to heal the sick, to set alcoholics and addicts free from addiction, to deliver the sexually immoral including homosexuals and lesbians from bondage, and to change lovers of themselves and lovers of money into lovers of God who are more concerned about others than about themselves.

False prophets offer easy salvation. This claims one can be saved without having to give up selfish and sinful living. It promises salvation without requiring repentance or any other cost. But salvation that comes by grace through faith in Jesus is never free of cost. In fact Jesus tells that we must give up everything to become His disciples.

We live in a time of which the scriptures prophesy, a time when men do not seek sound doctrine. Instead they "*gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear*" (2 Timothy 4:3). I hope the lessons in this book help you to understand why saving faith is so precious...and costly...a gift.

I pray the Holy Spirit will guide your reading. May your spiritual eyes only see what is in accord with the will of God. And may your heart prove fertile soil for planting what the Spirit feels will be to the glory of God in your life.

Ralph E. Johnson

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1.	A Man of Faith.....	7
Chapter 2.	A Step of Faith.....	13
Chapter 3.	A Touch of Faith.....	19
Chapter 4.	A Prayer of Faith.....	25
Chapter 5.	A Seed of Faith.....	31
Chapter 6.	A Test of Faith.....	37
Chapter 7.	A Life of Faith.....	43
Chapter 8.	The Obedience of Faith.....	49
Chapter 9.	The Assurance of Faith.....	55
Chapter 10.	The Peace of Faith.....	61
Chapter 11.	The Love of Faith.....	67
Chapter 12.	The Fear of Faith.....	73
Chapter 13.	The Joy of Faith.....	79
Chapter 14.	The Patience of Faith.....	85
Chapter 15.	Faith That Saves.....	91

Chapter 1. A Man of Faith

*Now faith is being sure of what we hope
for and certain of what we do not see.*

Hebrews 11:1

It is valuable to study the life of Abraham for several reasons. Paul refers to those who believe in Jesus as *children of Abraham* who lived 2000 years before Jesus' birth. We are also told Jesus came to redeem us so that a blessing given to Abraham might come to us, this being a promise of the Spirit (Galatians 3:14). It's the promise about which Jesus says to His disciples: *"I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high"* (Luke 24:49).

Clothing with power is what Jesus calls a baptism with the Holy Spirit: *"Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised... For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit"* (Acts 1:4,5). This baptism is an event that takes place later than salvation in most cases. This is important to understand. The kingdom of God is not a matter of talk, but is a matter of power that comes through filling with the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 4:20). And it is common to see rather little evidence of spiritual power today, although there's an abundance of talk in our churches.

It is Holy Spirit power that brings us blessings known as grace. These include not only new spiritual life, but also the revelation to know Jesus intimately, the power to gain victory over besetting sins and to be transformed into Jesus' likeness, and the strength and comfort that enables us to share in His sufferings (Philippians 3:10). It's by power of the Holy Spirit that

spiritual gifts come to believers as God chooses to give the church for the common good (1 Corinthians 12:4-11). So then, let us look at this man whose spiritual descendants those who are Christians today are being called.

Abraham [called Abram] is first mentioned in chapter eleven of Genesis when he leaves the country of idol worship called Ur [modern day Iraq] to go to Canaan [Israel] with his wife Sarai and nephew Lot. Abram did this in obedience to the call of God to separate himself from his country and from the household of his father. Arriving in Canaan, Abram receives a promise from God to inherit the land along with promise of a great nation eventually coming through his descendants.

This is a *type* or illustration of the call issued when we are called to follow Jesus. It's a call to live apart from ungodly ways and live as a stranger on earth, looking forward to a city in heaven whose architect and builder is God (Hebrews 11:10,13). Abraham is a role model for all those who confess Jesus. Like Abraham, we're to live in the expectation of eternity in God's presence, and thus hold all earthly ties loosely in our grasp.

We must resist temptation to seek satisfaction in things of this world. Abram's obedience in leaving Ur is a *type* of our being called to separate from addictions, to avoid all greed for worldly possessions, and to leave behind anything that hinders a godly life in Christ. Like Abraham, we're called to live in the obedience that comes from faith that is saving (Romans 1:5).

We can easily confuse hearing the call of God with just asking God to forgive our sins. For years, I simply asked to be forgiven before I made a genuine decision to answer the call of God. Before that I was a religious pretender like those John the Baptist spoke to by saying, "*Produce fruit in keeping with repentance*" (Matthew 3:8). Pharisees talk a good game, but fail to practice the teachings of God in everyday life.

Abram *chose* to obey, and was told his faith would be rewarded. His offspring would be numerous as the stars in the

heavens (Genesis 15:5). Abraham believed this promise and his faith was credited to him as righteousness (15:6). Here it is we find righteousness and faith linked together for the first time in the scriptures. The Hebrew for righteousness literally means to do what is right in God's eyes. The faith of Abraham has the mark of obedience. Any faith that fails to be obedient to God's will is not the faith of Abraham. As the apostle tells us, "*You are slaves to the one whom you obey – whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness*" (Romans 6:16).

Twenty-four years later, the LORD appeared to Abram again to confirm their covenant. Obedience was demanded for the covenant promises to be fulfilled. God said, "*Walk before me and be blameless*" (Genesis 17:1). As a sign of the covenant, circumcision was required by God (17:11). This cutting away of foreskin symbolizes that nothing of flesh has value to God. It is not by works that salvation comes, but only by relationship to God based on faith. And it was at this time God changed the name of Abram to Abraham, meaning 'father of many.'

One year later, Abraham now being 100 years old and his wife Sarah 90 years old, a son promised twenty-five years earlier was finally born. We also may have to wait for God's promises to be received, and we also suffer trials as we wait. Peter says the trials come so that our "*faith may be proved genuine*" (1 Peter 1:7). We need to realize that it is precious to God when our faith endures through times of testing and trial.

Abraham had his faith severely tested as Isaac became a young man. God said, "*Take your son, your only son Isaac whom you love and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about*" (Genesis 22:2). Abraham had trusted God for twenty-five years before this son was born, and then he is told to offer him as a sacrifice. Immediately this raised two questions in the mind of Abraham.

The first was whether or not Abraham's love for God was greater than for anything else...even his long-awaited son. The second was whether he placed his entire hope for many descendants on his son Isaac. Or did he still trust God to fulfill the promise of descendants as numerous as the stars. And we also can have similar questions arise in our lives.

We face choices between self-indulgence and helping others sacrificially. If trapped in an alligator swamp, we must choose whether to trust God or to wrestle with the alligators. Do we seek the approval of others or is having God's approval foremost in our mind? These are but a very few of the many questions that regularly confront us.

The words of Abraham to his servants bear witness to his faith. Reaching the mountain chosen by God as the place of sacrifice, Abraham said to his servants, "*Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship, and then we will come back to you*" (22:5). He did not tell the servants that *he* would return. Instead he said, "*we will come back.*" What incredible faith this demonstrated in the midst of a most difficult situation.

We likewise must decide where to place our trust. Is our faith rooted in God when trying times arise? Or instead do we depend on our own ability to get our way? Do we spend time in fervent prayer, asking God to resolve our nightmares? Is it our custom to seek His direction first, or do we decide on a game plan and then ask God to bless the plays we've already decided to run?

As Isaac and his father approached the place chosen for sacrifice, the lad asked about a lamb for the burnt offering. Abraham's answer foretells how God gives *His* only son as a sacrifice: "*God himself will provide.*" Then just as Abraham was about to slay Isaac, the angel of the LORD intervened and said, "*Do not lay a hand on the boy...Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son*" (22:12; underlining added).

Faith that makes us the children of Abraham isn't just characterized by obedience. It is a God-fearing faith as well. Later we'll learn that it is unbiblical to teach that we are not to fear God. Jesus Himself tells that we are to fear our heavenly Father: *"I will show you whom you should fear: Fear him who, after killing the body, has power to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him"* (Luke 12:5).

Is God asking you to demonstrate faith right now? Do you find yourself in a fire, wondering why your circumstances are so difficult? You may not realize that Christians are meant to be children of the fire if we think of fire as having a refining and purifying effect. God tells us, *"I have refined you, though not as silver; I have tested you in the furnace of affliction. For my own sake, for my own sake, I do this. How can I let myself be defamed?"* (Isaiah 48:10,11).

We bring shame on the name of Jesus by failing to live in a godly way. God may refine us in a furnace of affliction in order to correct our ways so that we'll not be condemned with the world (1 Corinthians 11:32). This biblical principle is contrary to much of the teaching these days, teaching that so commonly says, "Let's make people comfortable and say whatever their itching ears want to hear" (2 Timothy 4:3,4).

Indeed, Jesus tells us that *"everyone will be salted with fire"* (Mark 9:49). This makes it clear there are but two options. One is a refining by the fire of the Holy Spirit, allowing God's will to be worked into and through our lives. The other option is to be salted in the lake of fire after condemnation. But one way or another, each one of us will be salted with fire.

Sitting on the sidelines is not an option. We can take it to the bank that each of us will reap what he sows. *"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"* (Galatians 6:7,8).

"Saving Faith"

Let us determine to be children of Abraham. Let us follow his example by walking in steps of obedience that lead to righteousness (Romans 6:16). Saving faith is to abandon oneself to obey the revealed will of God. And unwillingness to do this is no different than unbelief. Only if we submit to God's will do we receive the blessing of the Spirit that provides us with the grace we so desperately need (Acts 5:32; Titus 2:11,12).

Once we recognize life can never be satisfying outside of God's presence, a milestone is reached. It's a revelation to realize saving faith doesn't concern joining a particular church or denomination, or having perfect attendance at church, or putting money into a tithe box, or saying a 'sinner's prayer.' Saving faith concerns the example given us by Abraham. This faith involves a willingness to abandon our own agenda and to trust and then obey God's plan for our life.

The apostle Paul describes his own apostleship as one of calling Gentiles *"to the obedience that comes from faith"* (Romans 1:5). It's when we utterly surrender our will to the Lord that we have a promise for everything that is necessary for life and godliness. It is a promise of the blessing that was given to Abraham...a promise of the Spirit that is given to empower all those who are committed to obeying the will of God (Acts 5:32).

*"His divine power has given us everything we need
for life and godliness through our knowledge of him
who called us by his own glory and goodness."*

2 Peter 1:3

Chapter 2. *A Step of Faith*

*Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep
in step with the Spirit. Galatians 5:22*

It had been a most unusual day. First came news that John the Baptist was beheaded by King Herod. Hearing of His cousin's death, Jesus withdrew off to a solitary place to spend time grieving. But crowds followed from surrounding towns and villages and soon a multitude had gathered so that the sick might be healed. By the time evening arrived, a throng of five thousand men not including women or children had assembled at a considerable distance from any market where they could get something to eat.

The people were hungry, and the disciples asked Jesus to send them away to find food. But He replied by saying to feed the people themselves. This puzzled the disciples who then answered, "*We have here only five loaves of bread and two fish*" (Matthew 14:17). Then Jesus said, "*Bring them here to me.*" After giving thanks to the Father in heaven, Jesus broke the loaves. What little was put in His hands suddenly became more than enough to feed the entire multitude. There were even twelve large baskets of broken pieces remaining.

This was a clear illustration of Jesus' power to perform miracles, and is an event described in all four gospels. But it does much more than point to Jesus as a miracle worker who is the *bread of life* (John 6:48). It teaches that God is able to provide for our needs...with a condition attached. We must have enough faith to place our circumstances and needs in the hands of God and then trust Him with the outcome, no matter how impossible things might seem. It's a lesson to be learned by all who profess Jesus as their personal Lord and Savior.

Immediately after this event, Jesus had the disciples leave by boat to cross the Sea of Galilee while He went up on a mountainside alone to pray. Meanwhile a fierce storm arose, and the disciples' boat was severely buffeted by the wind and waves. It was during the fourth watch of the night (3-6 a.m.) that Jesus went out to them by walking across the lake. At first the disciples were terrified, thinking they were seeing a ghost. But Jesus called out, "*Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid*" (Matthew 14:27).

With his usual impetuosity, Peter replied, "*Lord, if it's you, tell me to come to you on the water.*"

Jesus answered with a single word: "*Come.*"

Let's be certain that we understand exactly what took place next. Matthew tells that "*Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus*" (Matthew 14:29). Peter did not think about getting out of the boat. He didn't just start to get out of the boat. He actually got out of the boat, and then began to walk on top of the water!

I have experienced this sort of thing in my own life and have watched others do the same. I'm referring to having faith to let God deal with some kind of situation that is impossible by any natural way of thinking. Yet God did what exceeded human understanding. In other words, God did what He does so well. It's frequently called a miracle.

These desperate situations can take many forms. It can be the loss of a job, the breakup of a marriage, or the diagnosis of life-threatening illness such as cancer or AIDS. At times the situation is created by our own misdeeds, like theft of property to support a drug addiction. It can be arrest for anger and rage that led to the abuse of another person, or many other types of crisis situations.

Often we refuse to place our faith in God under these circumstances. We try to work things out in a way that makes 'common sense.' I'm not suggesting that we sit on the sideline

without any involvement. We're supposed to take an active role, but many of our battles really belong to the Lord. And problems result when we're not willing to accept Jesus as our commander-in-chief, realizing that He works in all things for the good of those who love Him (Romans 8:28). Our difficulty is in not being willing to submit to God's purpose for each of our lives, which is to mold us into the image of Jesus.

It is always easier to engage in a pity party, fueled by pride and selfishness. It's rare to meet a person focused on the hand of God in the midst of terrible circumstances. More often we are trying to justify ourselves or attempting to explain what happened. The cry of our day seems to be, "It just isn't fair?" or "Why does this have to happen to me?" But there is no benefit in pity parties. Neither does our own wisdom usually help us when we're between a rock and a hard place.

At times we may take a step of faith by allowing God to govern the outcome in a tight spot. But when it seems the tide is turning against us, a conflict arises. Do we continue to surrender our will to God? Or do we lean on our own understanding and return to a strategy that seemed to help the last time we were in trouble? Unfortunately we often do the latter, and take back our prior decision to trust God.

In the same manner, Peter was doing fine walking on water until he allowed circumstances to distract him. When he first got out of the boat, his focus was on Jesus reaching out to him with open arms. But Peter gradually began to direct more attention to the wind blowing across his face and the waves swirling about his feet. Then it did not take very long until his faith began to disappear, and he started to sink!

Peter failed to remember that it was faith in Jesus that enabled him to walk on water in the first place. It's exactly the same in our lives at times. We clearly recognize that God has intervened in our lives in certain situations. Something could never have been an accident, and we may have even publicly acknowledged that the hand of God was with us.

But when the next trial came along, our faith flew out the window like a bird desperately seeking to escape. It was back to square one, and we made Jesus our last resort instead of our first resource. And once again, we were only willing to seek the intervention of God after all other efforts had failed.

Peter sank in water over his head and called to Jesus in panic, “*Lord, save me!*” (Matthew 14:30). Though he wanted to be saved, note that Peter didn’t call “Savior.” We must beware of teaching that promotes Jesus as savior instead of as *Lord*. The Greek *kyrios* translated as “Lord” means to have complete ownership and sovereign rule over. And it was to the “*Lord*” that Peter called out in his extreme.

At times, we find ourselves over our head in a barrel of trouble. As was true for Peter, Jesus must be confessed as the *Lord* to be saved (Romans 10:9). This means having a broken heart and contrite spirit, being willing to repent and allow God to govern our lives. It means surrendering control to Jesus, giving Him ownership of personal rights we hold so tightly. The notion of Jesus being our Savior without allowing Him to be the Lord of our lives is never found in the scriptures.

To take this step of faith requires as little faith as a tiny mustard seed. But there must be at least a germ of sincere trust in Jesus for the Holy Spirit to recognize. For without this germ of genuine faith, the new spiritual life referred to as being born again will never take place. Let us not allow ourselves to be deceived that mouthing a ‘sinner’s prayer’ will result in our salvation in the absence of true repentance and genuine desire to embrace the lordship of Jesus Christ.

Once Jesus climbed into their boat, the wind subsided and the disciples were able to reach the opposite shore without delay. Yet we are reluctant to accept the principle illustrated here. It is that having Jesus in our boat means we need not fear sinking in the storms that enter our lives. Storms will still take

place, but we will have protection. It is the same principle that is illustrated in the parable about the kingdom of heaven being like a man building his house.

Jesus tells us that those who listen to and then practice His words have a house that can withstand the storms (Matthew 7:24-27). But those who fail to practice His teachings will have their houses crash in times of trial. Many claim to know Jesus, but they fail to apply this principle to their own lives. Their difficulty is that *self* continues to reign in the heart. We like to have Jesus be a *resident* in our heart as Savior. But we resist letting Him be *president* as the Lord of our life.

When Jesus says faith as little as a mustard seed makes it possible to tell mountains to move, He is referring to those obstacles that hinder us from living in accord with the purpose of God. Obstacles like addiction, anger, or greed for material possessions not only result in a lack of peace and joy. They also keep us from satisfying lives. If we insist on walking by sight instead of faith, demanding that we see each step in the road ahead, most mountains in our lives will remain. This is because mountain-moving faith concerns what Jesus will do if we trust Him, not what we can do for ourselves.

It is only when we take a step of faith by turning over our hopes and dreams to God as well as our worst nightmares that the mountains have a way of moving. If the mountains do not disappear, we find ourselves directed along paths that keep our progress from being blocked. It is even possible to have what seems to be a terrible misfortune become a servant that draws us closer and closer to God.

However, stepping out in faith requires that we set our minds to do what is contrary to natural instincts. In moments such as these, we may have to pray like the father who wanted Jesus to heal his demon-possessed child: "*I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief*" (Mark 9:24). He believed his child would be healed, but admitted that his faith wasn't strong. I've

"Saving Faith"

Had those moments when I've called on God for greater faith: "I trust you, Lord, but my faith is weak at this very moment. Please help me by Your grace, and give me more faith!"

Faith is a gift, and it pleases God when we pray for the grace to step out of the boat into the water. Our responsibility is to abandon reliance on self, and utterly depend on God. "*Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need*" (Hebrews 4:16). As we give up control and increasingly depend on God's grace, we'll also find that our level of faith is steadily increasing. Obedience and faith are closely related, and keep regular company with one another.

God so frequently works through situations that are poorly understood in any natural sense. It may seem nothing can benefit us from what is happening. And it's only when we reach our wit's end that we appreciate God was in full control. He'll never permit someone depending on Him to drown in a flood or burn in a fire unless it's His perfect will (Isaiah 43:1-3). Remember it's the promise of God that we'll never be given to testing beyond what we're able to bear (1 Corinthians 10:13).

The truth is that we only learn to walk on the water as we find ourselves facing missions impossible. It must be done just one step at a time when this happens. We're never given the sight to know what's ahead other than the will of God. But that's enough! The most satisfying journeys in life are to live by faith and keep in step with the Spirit, one step at a time.

We tend to see ourselves as human beings trying to have a spiritual experience. But it's far more fitting to look at ourselves as spiritual beings having a human experience. Then it becomes so much easier to step out in faith.

"A man's steps are directed by the LORD. How then can anyone understand his own way?" Proverbs 20:24

Chapter 3. *A Touch of Faith*

*If I only touch his cloak, I will
be healed. Matthew 9:21*

One of the precious things about faith is that it compels people to actions that make little sense by any natural way of thinking. Nonetheless, these actions result in great blessings. We're told about two such actions in three of the four gospels in almost identical form. Each involves faith in the power of Jesus to minister a healing touch. One concerns a woman with a bleeding disorder for twelve years, the other the daughter of a synagogue ruler who is critically ill (Mark 5:21-43).

Both stories must be seen in the light of the culture in which they took place. On one hand, the synagogue ruler was a highly respected and prosperous man. For twelve years he enjoyed the blessing of a healthy daughter who now becomes gravely ill. Hearing about the miraculous power of a carpenter from Nazareth, he comes to kneel before Jesus, and to humbly beg, "*Please come and put your hands on her so that she will be healed and live*" (5:23).

This situation contrasts with the woman who pressed through a crowd to touch the hem of Jesus' robe. Again we see great faith: "*If I only touch his cloak, I will be healed.*" Unlike the synagogue ruler however, she was banned from society and likely lived alone. By the law of Moses, any woman with a flow of blood was unclean as were persons she might touch. Any object touching her also became unclean, so a husband could not sleep in the same bed. It was a miserable existence that she had endured for the same twelve years.

Circumstances couldn't have been more different.. One person blessed for twelve years, the other cursed for the same period of time. The woman had spent all her money on care by doctors so she lived in poverty while the synagogue ruler lived in prosperity. She lived with rejection while the ruler enjoyed the generous praise of men. However both now had developed a desperate need for the touch of Jesus.

How true this is of life. Adversity can enter the door of any house without warning. Accidents or fatal disease have no respect for economic status or social class. The same is true of addictions as well as moral failure, and the ever-present curse of greed. Scripture also tells that God will bring adversity on men at times so they will repent and not be condemned. Silver linings can often exist in dark clouds as the psalmist learned: *“Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I obey your word. It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees”* (Psalm 119:67,71).

Many times trouble will bring us to the point where we become aware that we're headed toward destruction. This was certainly true in my life, and it is also true for many who are incarcerated. This offers an opportunity for evangelism in the U.S. where the percent of population incarcerated is higher than in any other country. The total is approaching two million adults at this time, and does not include a significant number of programs for juvenile delinquents.

Once the woman touched the robe of Jesus, bleeding immediately stopped (Mark 5:29). Little could she have realized that she'd touched the robe of her Creator. But she did have faith, and so it was that Jesus told her, *“Your faith has healed you. Go in peace”* (Luke 8:48). But the situation was different for the synagogue ruler. For by the time Jesus finally reached his house, the gravely ill daughter had died.

The father grieved upon hearing this dreaded news, but Jesus exhorted him, *“Don't be afraid; just believe and she will*

be healed” (Luke 8:50). Then in the face of scorn and mocking by the mourners, the dead girl was miraculously restored to life. Her parents were astonished, and these reactions are still common. When a situation seems utterly hopeless, the world mocks any expectation that God might achieve the impossible. And we too are frequently astonished at the miraculous power of God in what seems to be an impossible situation.

The presence of Jesus puts us into contact with the very source of life and grace. Even when we’re responsible for our own circumstances through poor decisions, Jesus will hear us if we cry to Him with repentant faith and ask for mercy. It is God’s desire that none of us would perish, but that all might come to repentance (2 Peter 3:9). This is why God sent His Son to seek and save the lost. But it requires that we touch Him.

We can’t touch Jesus unless we deliberately choose to leave the kingdom of darkness. It is our responsibility alone to respond when Jesus knocks on the door of our hearts. We are the only ones who can open the door. There is a single handle, but it’s on the inside. And Jesus will never force His way in. He doesn’t ever choose to live where He’s unwelcome. We are responsible for opening the door and inviting Him to enter.

Touching Jesus is NOT only confession of sins. It’s a conscious and deliberate act of setting aside one’s own agenda to obey Him as the Lord of life. The gulf between receiving Jesus as Savior and accepting Him as Lord is a wide gulf. He will not be a Savior unless His lordship is accepted as well. To call Jesus ‘Lord,’ but then refuse to surrender to His authority is nothing but hypocrisy. It causes Jesus to ask, “*Why do you call me ‘Lord,’ and not do what I say*” (Luke 6:46).

We’re never forced to surrender our lives to Christ. To place faith in Jesus requires a measure of grace be given to us, but we never lose free will in this process. Our loving Father in heaven will make us aware of our sinfulness, of our need to be saved, and gently draw us to His Son. But we still retain the

freedom to reject Jesus' invitation when He knocks on the door of our hearts. It remains our choice whether to open the door and touch Jesus. And unfortunately, Jesus tells that most will reject the gift of salvation that He paid for at such a great cost on a cross two thousand years ago (Matthew 7:13,14).

As part of redemption, Jesus came to destroy the work of the devil (1 John 3:8). Satan desires to steal our peace and joy, to kill us physically and spiritually, and to destroy not only our relationship with God but the integrity of families. But by the work finished at Calvary, Jesus broke the power of Satan over our lives. Now Jesus wants us to recapture everything that the devil took away from us.

But first of all, we must touch Jesus. Scripture tells us to earnestly seek what is only found in Christ. There is nothing else worth holding tightly in our grasp today. Pleasures that so easily corrupt our souls will soon be destroyed by fire. On that day, only a single thing will have any real meaning. It will be whether or not we reached out to touch Jesus and turned over our lives to Him. And for all who haven't made this decision, today is the day of salvation.

What's required is the same thing required of a woman with the bleeding disorder and the synagogue ruler whose daughter was ill. It's an act of abandonment. While his fellow religious leaders were plotting to kill Jesus, the ruler humbly knelt at Jesus' feet. Similarly, the bleeding woman risked a severe rebuke by the crowd when she reached to touch Jesus. In both cases, there was willingness to ignore the disapproval of others and to abandon depending on self.

The same is required now. We must reach out to Jesus and trust Him to be the Lord of everything in our life. The promise of this touch is what nothing else can ever fulfill. It's a promise that we'll never again hunger or thirst for what truly satisfies. The question is whether or not we are finally ready to abandon doing as we see fit in our own eyes. Or is pride and doubt still in the way?

Let's not delay touching Jesus. We have no guarantee that we'll hear His voice calling again. Scripture tells us to not risk hardening our heart if we hear His voice calling us today (Hebrews 3:12-15). We're to believe Jesus is indeed the crucified and resurrected Son of God who reigns at the right hand of the Father in heaven. Then we're to turn from our old ways and follow the steps of Jesus on a path of righteous living. This is a process called repentance. Turning from the old to the new.

Some teach salvation is a gift free of cost. It is teaching totally contrary to Scripture. In fact, Jesus tells us to count the cost before deciding to follow Him (Luke 14:28-32). Then He adds, "*Any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple*" (14:33). Don't be deceived by the false prophets who proclaim the gift of salvation is without cost.

Jesus uses the parable of a merchant looking for fine pearls to describe His kingdom. The merchant is so grateful in finding a pearl of great worth [a picture of Jesus] that he sells everything he owns in joy to possess the pearl (Matthew 13:46). Using other parables to illustrate this principle, Jesus stresses that the gift of salvation is very costly in any worldly sense.

However, God freely gives this gift to all those willing to accept the lordship of His Son. Nothing we can possibly do merits this gift or makes us deserving of it. Salvation comes only by the grace of a loving God. He wants none of us would perish, and that everyone would come to repentance and place faith in His Son, and so be saved (2 Peter 3:9).

In contrast to teaching of salvation without cost, the apostle Paul tells that we must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God (Acts 14:22). And Peter stresses that it is hard even for the righteous to be saved (1 Peter 4:18). But we have the assurance of God that we'll be able to do all things through the strength Jesus gives us (Philippians 4:13). Likewise, God promises us rewards that exceed all we ask or can even imagine, if we'll just reach out to touch Jesus in faith.

"Saving Faith"

The only thing there is to lose by touching Jesus is our life the way it's been in the past. For many of us, that means there's very little to give up except doing what seems right in our own eyes. And that has resulted in terrible circumstances for some of us, as well as for our families. On the other hand, we may never have thought about reaching out to Jesus except for the desperate times that have occurred.

God will use difficult situations to encourage us to turn our lives over to His loving care. In these situations, we may find ourselves forced to admit that we have no power at all to change the way things have been going. And it's only when we find ourselves between a rock and a hard place that we're willing to seek what God so freely offers...the lordship of His Son Jesus who is full of mercy and grace.

Jesus may be asking you right now, "*Are you ready to reach out and touch me in faith? Haven't you had enough of a roller coaster ride in your life? Haven't you had enough bitter disappointments that you're ready to give up trying to make things work your own way?*"

Jesus is waiting for you to reach out and touch Him!
Hasn't the time come to do so?
Right now?

"Repent then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord, and that he may send the Christ, who has been appointed for you – even Jesus." Acts 3:19,20

Chapter 4. *A Prayer of Faith*

Will not God bring about justice for his chosen Ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly. Luke 18:7,8

Things couldn't have been worse! James had just been put to death. The Jewish leaders including the Pharisees found an ally in King Herod to persecute those involved in a growing Jesus movement. Herod was seeking political advantage, and it benefited his popularity among orthodox Jews to arrest and murder those who followed this man called Christ. When the king's poll ratings surged after James' murder, soldiers were ordered to seize Simon Peter as well for execution (Acts 12:3).

Not only was Peter arrested but precautions were taken to insure against escape. He was securely bound by chains and forced to sleep between soldiers while still other soldiers stood guard. In addition, squads of soldiers were changed every six hours to reduce any likelihood of falling asleep. There was no doubt as to Herod's intention. He would execute Peter just as soon as the Passover was over following a mock trial. And the religious authorities were rejoicing over this entire situation.

The timing of this incident is interesting. The Passover was the yearly feast to celebrate the miraculous deliverance of Israel from bondage in Egypt. Centuries later it was at the time of Passover that Jesus paid the price God demanded to redeem those in bondage to sin who would receive Him as Lord. Now at the time of Passover again, the church prayed earnestly for still another captive to be set free. This time the prayers were being said in faith for the imprisoned Simon Peter.

Scripture says “*without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him*” (Hebrews 11:6). And there is no more rewarding and important a way to seek God than through prayer. That’s exactly what the church was doing before the trial of Peter. They were storming the heavens in an all-night prayer vigil (Acts 12:12).

As they prayed, an angel of the Lord appeared in the prison to awaken Peter as chains fell from his wrists. “*Put on your clothes and sandals,*” said the angel. “*Wrap your cloak around you and follow me.*” At first Peter thought it was a dream, but he followed the angel. They left unnoticed by the guards, and the iron gate leading to the city opened by itself. Only after leaving the prison did Peter actually realize his life had been spared.

An amusing event took place at the house where the people were praying. The servant girl Rhoda answered Peter’s knock on the door and recognized his voice. Overjoyed, she ran to tell others but neglected to open the door. They did not believe her, but Peter continued to knock. And when the door opened, they were astonished to see him. All were amazed at how their prayers were answered.

The situation today is different as well as similar. All-night prayer meetings are all but unknown, and there is often little faith in the power of prayer. We rarely agonize in prayer as did the faithful in the early church, or many people would have thickly callused knees today. It is no wonder that Jesus asked the disciples, “*When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?*” (Luke 18:8).

Like Peter’s friends, we also are amazed when God is so gracious as to answer prayers. We forget a parable told of a persistent widow who kept going to the judge with a plea. The judge refused to answer at first, but gave in to her persistence. Jesus assures us that our heavenly Father also brings justice to all those who cry out to Him day and night (Luke 18:7).

Jesus' question about finding faith on earth when He returns reflects His concern, and it stirs me. Many times I have failed to approach the throne of God with persevering prayer. Yet Jesus commands us to be diligent in prayer, and not just when we need a heavenly repair man. The disciples were quite aware of something remarkable in the way Jesus so often had communion with His heavenly Father in prayer.

Not once did the disciples ever ask Jesus to teach them how to preach or to evangelize. But they did ask to be taught how to pray. And Jesus gave them a model of those areas that should be included in prayer (Matthew 6:9-13). Usually this is called the *Lord's Prayer*, though most likely it wasn't meant to be repeated as a ritualistic prayer.

Jesus was explaining the areas of prayer and petition to which attention should be directed. Often we go to God with a shopping list, and just stop praying at the end of the list. So let us examine what Jesus suggests in the *Lord's Prayer*. At the same time, let us realize that there's ample room for individual prayers as our own needs dictate and as the Holy Spirit leads.

"Our Father in heaven, hallowed by your name," is a recognition of the **pre-eminence** of our heavenly Father. He is to be praised and given all glory, not only because of blessings that we receive but because of who He is...the great *"I AM."* God alone is worthy of our continuous worship and there is no more important purpose for prayer than to reverence and exalt God. Anyone having intimate love for Jesus cannot help but express that love on a regular basis.

"Your kingdom come" is prayed for because that is the **plan** of God for the world. This includes prayer for growth of His kingdom on earth, that others be brought out of darkness into the light of Christ. We're also to pray for the power of God to be manifest, that we might reflect the love of Jesus in such a powerful way that our witness brings many to a saving knowledge of Him. At the same time, we pray for the return of Jesus to earth to reign as the King of Kings.

“*Your will be done*” is a prayer for the **purpose** of God to be fulfilled in our lives. We ask for the grace to learn self-denial and to practice sacrificial living. This also concerns the intention of God to have the Holy Spirit sanctify us through whatever trials are necessary so we might be transformed into the likeness of Jesus and become holy instruments of God. So often we confuse our desire for comfort and for approval by men with heavenly rewards and the approval of God.

“*Give us today our daily bread*” is to pray for God’s **provision**. God promises to meet our needs according to His glorious riches in Christ Jesus but that doesn’t mean we ignore praying for provision. Prayer reflects dependence on God, and should include gratefulness for blessings received. Prayer for daily bread also extends far beyond physical needs. Jesus told the disciples that His food was “*to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work*” (John 4:34). So it should be with us.

“*Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors*” is prayer for God’s **pardon**. Here we’ve been given a condition for answered prayer. We’re forgiven only if we do not refuse to forgive others (Matthew 6:15). There is no cliff that Christians are in greater danger of falling over than that of an unforgiving spirit. It’s a cliff that Jesus says has a consequence of losing our own forgiveness should we fail to forgive others for their offenses (Matthew 18:23-35).

“*Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one*” is a prayer for **protection**. Many are deceived into a belief they are immune to the attack of Satan because of grace. Were this true, we’d not be warned to beware of Satan, to not give the devil a foothold, to recognize his schemes, and to take up the shield of faith daily (Ephesians 6:16). Satan is clever and powerful, and Christians are sitting ducks for his fiery darts in the absence of heavenly protection. So we are firmly exhorted to put on the whole armor of God, which includes a command to “*pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests*” (Ephesians 6:18).

It is beyond imagination what might happen should we beseech our heavenly Father with persevering prayer as did the early church. Examples like Peter's deliverance should be an encouragement, yet we ignore the matter of earnest prayer. Jesus told the disciples who repeatedly fell asleep before His arrest, "*Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak*" (Matthew 26:41). This warning is to be taken to heart lest we ourselves fall into temptation as Jesus warns.

Prayer is the best way of showing dependence on God. It indicates we recognize our lack of ability to produce lasting fruit in our lives outside of God's grace (John 15:4,5). There is little that needs erasing from our minds more than the idea we can sustain our spiritual walk aside from the grace provided by God. And grace is received just one day at a time. We need frequent refillings with the Holy Spirit just as the apostle Paul admonishes us (Ephesians 5:18).

Finally, prayer is not intended to be communication in only one direction. Too often prayer is confined to speaking to God. Meanwhile our spiritual ears are deaf to what God wants to say to us. It's critical to have ears that listen as well as a mouth that speaks. Perhaps that's why we've been given two ears and but a single mouth. Praying in faith involves listening to God as much as it involves presenting our own petitions, intercessions, and needs to a loving heavenly Father.

Unless we make an effort to listen for God's voice, we will miss incredible blessings that only result if we're willing to follow His directions. Jesus tells us, "*My sheep listen to my voice; I know them and they follow me*" (John 10:27). Daily time in prayer and in the Word of God are essential to maintaining the intimate fellowship with Jesus that is needed to hear His voice. Those who refuse to listen and obey Jesus' voice are simply showing that they really do not belong to His flock. Sadly this is true of a great many who mistakenly believe that they belong to the kingdom of God and are saved.

"Saving Faith"

It has been said that a prayerless church is a faithless church. Those who lack a consistent prayer life are showing they really don't place their trust in God. They are refusing to seek guidance for everyday life, refusing to seek grace for the removal of besetting sins, and refusing to seek filling with the Holy Spirit so that they can obey the will of God.

Our heavenly Father is aware of our failure to seek His grace through prayer. The prayerless life of many Christians is a cause of grief to God. The crucifixion of Christ rent the veil before the Holy of Holies from top to bottom, opening the way for direct access to the throne of grace. And Paul tells us to not receive the grace of God in vain, but failure to pray with some degree of faithfulness is to risk doing exactly that.

It is a sign of unbelief when the church fails to utilize the power that is available through prayer. People sometimes turn to witchcraft and Satanism because there's more evidence of power in the dark side than is seen in faithless and tradition-bound Christianity. While Paul tells us the kingdom of heaven is a matter of power (1 Corinthians 4:20), this power is not seen in those who lack regular communion with God through prayer.

Prayerless people not only lack intimacy with Christ and the power that comes through the work of the Spirit. They also lack faith without which no one can please God. Not only is it essential to have a consistent prayer life to endure in faith, but we must learn to pray with confidence and not doubt. God is always faithful to reward those who seek Him diligently. He is required to do this because it is His promise.

"Without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him."

Hebrews 11:6

Chapter 5. *A Seed of Faith*

If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, “Move from here to there” and it will move.”

Matthew 17:20

Highly ranked military offices are prone to develop the handicap of thinking more highly of themselves than those of lesser rank, at least subconsciously. They often restrict their socializing to other officers, and violate the biblical commands to associate with those of lesser position as well as to consider others better than oneself (Romans 12:16; Philippians 2:3).

From the way Naaman’s story unfolds, one suspects he was subject to this character flaw. Naaman was commander of the army of Aram and a highly regarded soldier (2 Kings 5:1,2). However, he had the misfortune to develop leprosy. But as the circumstances would have it, his soldiers captured an Israelite girl who told of a prophet having the power of God to heal.

Naaman goes to visit the king of Israel, taking along a generous amount of gold, silver, and clothing. Instead of going directly to the person with power to heal, Naaman was used to going through political channels and using extravagant gifts to gain favor. However, the king of Israel is so frustrated at being asked to heal this military hero that he tears his own clothes.

The prophet Elisha hears what takes place and sends a message to Naaman who later arrives with his entourage. But Elisha ignores all protocol expected by the general. He does not even come to greet his distinguished guest. Instead, Elisha sends a message by his servant to Naaman: *“Go wash yourself seven times in the Jordan, and your flesh will be restored and you will be cleansed”* (2 Kings 5:10). And the reaction to being

treated like a commoner could certainly have been anticipated. Naaman was not only angry; he went off in a rage (5:12).

Leprosy is a symbol of sin in the Bible and this story is a *type* of God offering salvation and freedom from besetting sins to every person. But this military man has two obstacles that are common in blocking the way to both salvation and divine healing. And it is difficult to know which is the greater hindrance of the two obstacles at times.

The first is pride, a clearly seen issue with Naaman. He was used to subordinates showing respect to him at every turn. But the insolent prophet didn't even have the courtesy to greet him personally. The general was treated like a private and was offended. It is not without good reason that pride is referred to as the 'mother of all sins.'

The other obstacle is intellectual. Were Naaman asked to perform a courageous act, he'd have accepted the challenge. But washing in a muddy river made no sense whatsoever. We can easily have the same doubt where faith is involved. There is such a tendency to hesitate whenever we're told to trust God and to not lean on our own understanding.

Naaman may have told those traveling with him, "If a person can be cured of leprosy by washing in the Jordan, I'd certainly have heard about it. Every leper in the world would be there by now!" Naaman wanted to hear what fit with his own way of thinking and faith didn't top the list. It's a familiar reaction to me as well. We struggle with doubt in the same way in dealing with personal issues such as health, marriage, finances, temptation, etc.

The doubt that keeps us from acting in faith isn't really any different than unbelief. Doubt and unbelief are so related as to be twin sisters. Doubt is the opposite of faith, and is why the Israelites failed to enter the promised land after being delivered from Egypt. It was a lack of belief that caused God to turn away and deny the Israelites entrance.

The story of Naaman illustrates redemption by faith in Christ. Washing in the Jordan is a type of having sins washed clean by the blood of Jesus. Jesus tells us that we only need to have as little faith as a mustard seed for Him to do this on our behalf. Faith doesn't depend on what we can do for ourselves. Instead, faith depends on what Jesus already did on our behalf at Calvary...and what He will do for us in the future if we will only trust in him.

Naaman fortunately had servants who suggested he try washing in the Jordan. They might have said something to him like, "Master, there is so little to lose if you'll only do what the prophet suggests. And there may be a great deal to gain. Why not give it a try? If it doesn't work, we'll bring you some clean water from the rivers in Damascus, and then you can wash off the mud!"

Perhaps with faith as little as a mustard seed, Naaman dipped seven times in the Jordan. Nothing happened with the first six dips, but his skin was like that of a young boy when he came out of the water the seventh time (2 Kings 5:14). Then Naaman returned to Elisha and said, "*Now I know that there is no God in all the world except in Israel*" (5:15). And so it is today. There is no other name under heaven that can save men except the name of Jesus (Acts 4:12).

This story is a wonderful picture of salvation by grace through faith in Jesus. Mountain-high faith isn't needed at the start, but only a measure of faith that comes as a gift of God. But we must be willing to abandon our own ways, and place our trust in Christ alone to gain a righteous standing with God. And we can apply this principle to other struggles as well.

Often we're just like Naaman, reacting with frustration and anger when obstacles can't be overcome by our own effort or by common sense. Instead of placing problems on the altar and giving them to God, we try to solve matters our own way. And much if not most of the time, things never come close to working out to our satisfaction.

Failure to believe with even with mustard seed faith is the greatest illness in the church today. Doubt keeps the power of God from being manifest, and destroys the effectiveness of Christian witness. For example, the sick are to call elders for prayer and anointing with oil so prayer of faith can make them well (James 5:14,15). But there is such doubt about the power of prayer to heal that this instruction is usually ignored today.

There is a lesson to learn from Naaman having to dip seven times in the Jordan. Nothing suggests that he began to see healing after the first or second dip. He would have been encouraged by a sign of healing, but it didn't happen that way. Healing took place only after he finished what he'd been told to do. But desire for instant gratification is a great hindrance to healing faith today.

Perseverance is all but a lost word in the vocabulary of today, nor is it always taught from the pulpit. We want to see results...quickly! We expect God to answer our prayers today, not tomorrow or next year. And if we don't see the answer we desire at once, we simply quit praying. We have forgotten that faith is to be sure of what we hope for and that faith calls what is not as though it were (Romans 4:17).

Doubt is an ever-present enemy, and comes from the father of lies Satan like all other lies. We need to see doubt for what it is...a lie from the pit of hell. The devil is called a liar by Jesus and Scripture refers to lying spirits (e.g. 1 Kings 22:23; 2 Chronicles 18:22). These agents of Satan can swarm over us with falsehoods, screaming, "There's no point in praying for that!" or "You've done it now, so give up! You'll never see happen what you are praying for!"

Don't buy into these lies of the accuser. They only lead to shrinking back from trusting God. That's the purpose of the devil with his lying tactics. He wants us to distrust the faithfulness of God. But God can't be anything but faithful because that's His character. And we need to remember that God tells

us, *“My righteous one will live by faith. And if he shrinks back, I will not be pleased with him”* (Hebrews 10:38).

On the other hand, God will allow a situation to move to a crisis stage before He intervenes. If this were not the case, we would take credit for having worked things out. It is when we throw up our hands and finally say, “It’s impossible! I give up!” that God loves to step in. Then we are finally willing to listen when He says, “Just watch me now that you admit you can’t possibly do it by yourself!”

It’s in letting us push the envelope without success and taking us to the very edge that God best makes us aware of His faithfulness and grace. If we fail to wait upon God, blessings will be missed. Being willing to wait for God’s perfect timing is illustrated in this story by Naaman having to dip a full seven times. Seven is the biblical number for perfect completion.

When Scripture tells us that the righteous will live by faith, it isn’t the same as saying that it will always be easy. We seem to be made in such a way that we like to know ahead of time exactly what’s coming next. But God’s desire is for us to abandon ourselves, and to utterly trust in Him to know what’s best for us. Only then is the Holy Spirit able to guide our steps in the direction that is God’s choice for our life. There’ll never be a life as exciting and satisfying as a life walked in step with the Spirit.

Furthermore, God will never guide us without providing everything needed to accomplish what He intends. It may not be everything we might want for our comfort, but it will certainly be everything we really need. And we also have the precious promise that Jesus will never leave or forsake us. No matter what lies Satan tries to tell us, we can always take that promise to the bank.

Finally, Satan does not want us to believe that God’s mercy is greater than any sin we’ve ever committed. But God

"Saving Faith"

is a specialist at making new limousines out of junkyard heaps and nothing pleases Him so much as straightening out what is crooked. That is why He not only sent His Son to pay our sin debt. It is why He also sends the Holy Spirit to live and work within us.

It is the desire of the Holy Spirit to transform us into the likeness of Jesus, as incredible as that may sound. But let us never doubt that God can - and will - finish what He has begun. As little faith as a tiny mustard seed can remove every single obstacle that stands in the way of God's purpose being completed in our lives. If we're faithful to obey what God is telling us, then we'll be just as blessed as Naaman was in his cure of leprosy.

"But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord."

James 1:6,7

Chapter 6. *A Test of Faith*

We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God. Acts 14:22

There is a fairy tale that is very appealing to those who are unsuspecting. It's the idea becoming a Christian means the end of testing and temptation...a smooth ride. But the opposite is often true. Many biblical stories describe the testing of those who are godly, one of which concerns Job. And this story can only be understood if we realize that Job was a person who not only feared God, but made a diligent effort to avoid evil.

God described Job as upright and blameless due to his commitment to godly living. However, Satan questioned the sincerity of Job. *“Does Job fear God for nothing? Have you not put a hedge around him and his household and everything he has?”* (Job 1:9,10). Satan claimed Job was faithful because of God's blessing, not because he had love for God. So God gave Satan permission to test Job's faith and motives. Thus it was that a trial of incredible severity began for this godly man.

One might argue this story isn't relevant under the new covenant, that God doesn't permit such testing of those who are in Christ. Oh, that such were true! But it isn't! Jesus even warned Peter, *“Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail”* (Luke 22:31,32). A request of Satan to test Peter wasn't denied, nor is permission to sift us denied today. So it is we find ourselves warned about the attacks of Satan, and are commanded to put on the full armor of God lest we fail to stand (Ephesians 6:13).

Satan came against Job with fury, just as he comes against us to steal, kill, and destroy (John 10:10). Job first lost all of his possessions and then his children were killed. But in the

midst of tragedy, Job said, “*The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised*” (Job 1:21). In spite of great distress, the praise of God did not leave Job’s lips, nor did he sin by charging God with wrongdoing. Sadly, we find many in the church today who criticize and curse God if they find themselves being severely tested by adversity.

When Job refused to reject God, Satan insisted that Job would curse God if his body were afflicted with suffering and pain. The LORD replied, “*Very well, then, he is in your hands; but you must spare his life*” (2:6). Satan then caused painful sores from the top of Job’s head to the soles of his feet. After this happened, Job’s wife said, “*Are you still holding on to your integrity? Curse God and die!*” But Job answered her, “*Shall we accept good from God and not trouble?*” (2:9,10).

This is a powerful lesson for today. Faith in Jesus will never exempt us from trials and suffering. Neither does trust in God necessarily mean we’ll have worldly prosperity. *Spiritual* prosperity is a certainty, but some will have virtually nothing like the apostle Paul (2 Corinthians 6:10). Believers are actually called to suffer for the sake of Christ (1 Peter 2:20,21). What the New Testament scriptures teach is so contrary to what false prophet teach the ignorant about worldly prosperity. In truth we’re to live as strangers and aliens who are looking forward to a heavenly city whose architect and builder is God (Hebrews 11:8-10). It is for this reason that Jesus exhorts us to store up treasures in heaven, not on earth and telling us “*What is highly valued among men is detestable in God’s sight*” (Luke 16:15). Let us never treat these blunt words of warning casually!

Job had three friends who came to sympathize and to offer comfort. But their attitude was like another mistaken theology today. They had the idea trials are always a sign of sin in one’s life and that only good things will happen to godly people. Eliphaz said God always delivers the righteous from trials, and Bildad claimed God will never bring affliction on a

righteous person. And a third friend accused Job of being self-righteous and pressed him to turn away from sin. As a result of these accusations, Job became humiliated and cursed having been born. So let us never presume to know why some people suffer extreme trials during their life on earth.

Despite all this speaking against him, Job maintains his faith and makes an incredible statement about God: *“Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him”* (Job 13:15). What a terrific declaration to make in a time of distress. That we might show such faith to an unbelieving world in our times of trial. Jesus is dishonored by those who profess Him as their Lord and Savior and yet grumble or complain in times of affliction. Or perhaps even accuse God of not being faithful.

Eventually the suffering causes Job to feel that he is perhaps being punished unjustly. A thought comes that he has possibly become the enemy of God. But still Job continues to cling to God, saying, *“I know that my Redeemer lives, and...after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God”* (19:25,26). His greatest longing throughout the ordeal is for the presence of God. *“I cry out to you, O God, but you do not answer”* (30:20). Our thoughts are similar at times when we find ourselves in dark tunnels without an end in sight.

But God will always answer those who hold to Him in obedience: *“From everlasting to everlasting, the LORD’s love is with those who fear him...with those who keep his covenant and remember to obey his precepts”* (Psalm 103:17,18). Here we see that there are conditions attached to the promises of God. The psalmist tells us that God’s blessings are with those who fear Him and obey His laws. In the same way, Jesus tells us to fear God (Luke 12:5), and warns that only those who obey the will of God can enter the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 7:21). It is falsehood to teach that God’s richest blessings and the inheritance of eternal life will come not only to the obedient but to the disobedient as well.

When God answers Job, He doesn't explain all of the suffering or criticize Job for making careless statements. But Job is humbled by questions that reveal how little we really understand about the ways of God. He comes to realize that God does not permit trials without a spiritual purpose, and Job repents for having ever questioned the wisdom of God. We too must learn our *"present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us"* (Romans 8:18).

Trials are never intended to weaken faith. Instead they are intended to prove faith genuine, and to build our spiritual muscle. Jesus tells Paul, *"My power is made perfect in weakness"* (2 Corinthians 12:9). This is a principle that many of us have not learned to grasp as we struggle with a wide range of issues in our lives. It is as our dependence on God increases that spiritual muscle is built, not as self-sufficiency increases.

Eventually God not only comforts Job, but restores his blessings with abundance. What Job suffered for reasons that he never understood resulted in greater blessings than he could have imagined. In the same way, God doesn't let us suffer without reason. Peter gives assurance that those who endure will have *"an inheritance that can never perish, spoil, or fade – kept in heaven for you"* (1 Peter 1:4). The NT promises many spiritual blessings if we but persevere. Keeping this in mind is one secret to never losing our joy in the midst of affliction.

The testing of Job should encourage us in our times of trial. If we'll endure in faithfulness, God will bring restoration for us as well. Trials are always meant to benefit the children of God, never to destroy us. This spiritual principle is why we are told to consider it *"pure joy"* as we find ourselves facing trials of many kinds (James 1:2).

While our faith may be severely tested in the furnace of affliction, all disciples of Jesus are meant to be children of fire. Fire is a symbol of the Holy Spirit who is sent to sanctify the children of God (Luke 3:16). It is in the fire that we become

purified, are taught to develop patience, and learn to abandon self and depend more completely on God.

At times, the fire can involve persecution because we refuse to conform to worldly standards. Many of us experience the fire as a consequence of having made terrible decisions. And fire can represent the chastening of God intended to mold us into the likeness of His Son Jesus and make us more Christ-like in both thought and deed (Hebrews 12:5-10).

Whatever the reason for testing or suffering, let us not forget that *“in all things, God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose”* (Romans 8:28). This is a promise for all who love Jesus and have a true desire to become more like Him. Even incarceration in jail or prison has eternal benefit if it leads a person to submit to the lordship of Jesus Christ.

The testing of Job also addresses a common question: “Why does God allow a good person to experience suffering?” Many well-meaning persons find themselves tormented by this question and spend a great deal of time asking, “Why has this happened to me?” But that is the wrong question to ask!

Paul tells us much of the church is still on a milk diet, not ready for solid food. We remain infants in Christ far too long. When adversity comes, we should be asking “what” and “how” instead of *why*. *What* can I learn from this experience? *How* can I use what I’m experiencing right now to comfort others? These are far more important questions than ‘why.’

A very important way of witnessing our faith to others is the way we handle personal affliction. Few things have the power to show what it means to trust God as how we deal with adversity. We are reminded by Job that faith does not depend on a continuous flow of worldly blessings. Faith depends on a revelation of who God is and on the hope that we have for the future. Faith is certain that God is full of mercy and grace, although His ways may be not be clear to our spiritual eyes for

the moment. Faith knows that no matter what circumstances are like at present, God is always faithful to deliver us in His time if we will only persevere and not give up.

God had no responsibility to explain His ways to Job, Neither is God obliged to explain why we must experience certain trials and afflictions. We are not meant to lean on our own understanding when it comes to traveling down roads that are bumpy. God simply wants us to learn to trust Him, and to stop trying to figure out the cause of everything that comes up in our lives (Proverbs 3:5).

Let us be encouraged to look for silver linings that are always to be found among clouds. Rather than always complain about the weather, let us look for positive things about the rain. Even if nothing else is true, stormy weather keeps us aware of the Majesty on high and of our need to continuously depend on Him for the grace to endure to the end.

So let us determine to follow the example of Job. Let us remember to count our blessings and always give the Lord thanks and praise, even during times when our faith is severely tested. If we make up our minds to endure to the end, we will not only be saved (Matthew 24:13). We'll also be rewarded with great blessing as was Job. Indeed that is the promise of God.

"Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him." James 1:12

Chapter 7. A Life of Faith

In the same way, faith by itself, if not accompanied by action, is dead.

James 2:17

During the time Israel was ruled by judges, Elimelech and his wife Naomi left Bethlehem in Judah along with two sons to live in the country of Moab because famine had come to their homeland. Elimelech later died as did the sons who had married Moabite women named Orpah and Ruth. This left Naomi alone with her daughters-in-law, and she told them, “*It is more bitter for me than for you, because the LORD’s hand has gone out against me!*” (Ruth 1:13).

Naomi decided to return to Judah where relatives lived, and she told Orpah and Ruth to remain in Moab where they might find another husband more easily. So Orpah kissed her mother-in-law good-bye and left. But Ruth insisted on staying with Naomi: “*Don’t urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go, I will go, and where you stay, I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God*” (1:16).

So it was that Naomi returned to Bethlehem together with Ruth, and they arrived as the barley harvest was starting. Ruth went to gather leftover grain in a field that belonged to Boaz, a wealthy relative of Elimelech. And Boaz took notice of Ruth, telling her to gather grain only in his field. He then ordered his harvesters to not touch Ruth and to make her work easier by leaving behind stalks of grain. By doing these things on Ruth’s behalf, Boaz becomes a *type* or illustration of Jesus in playing the role of provider, protector, and advocate.

Ruth told her mother-in-law about the kindness shown by Boaz, whereupon Naomi explained that Boaz was a kinsman. As a close relative of Naomi's husband, he was required by the law of Moses to provide for Elimelech's family. Naomi told Ruth to express interest in marriage to Boaz: "*Wash and perfume yourself, and put on your best clothes. Then go down to the threshing floor, but don't let him know you are there until he has finished eating and drinking*" (3:3). In reply to her suggestions, Ruth said, "*I will do whatever you say*" (3:5).

Here is a picture of believers preparing themselves for Jesus. Jesus isn't coming for a bride that is soiling herself with worldly ways. Jesus will be coming for a church cleansed "*by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless*" (Ephesians 5:26,27). As illustrated by Ruth, Jesus will be looking for a bride dressed in clothes of godly, self-controlled and upright behavior (Galatians 5:19-21; Ephesians 5:5,6).

Ruth prepared herself as instructed and went to where Boaz was sleeping. Humbly she said, "*I am your servant Ruth ... Spread the corner of your garment over me, since you are a kinsman-redeemer*" (Ruth 3:9). Boaz replied, "*The LORD bless you... You have not run after the younger men, whether rich or poor... I will do for you all that you ask*" (3:10,11). This is a picture of Jesus becoming human as our "kinsman" so that He might redeem those who put their trust in Him and keep free from spiritual adultery by not running after worldly pleasures here referred to as "younger men" (1 John 2:15-17).

However, it turned out that Boaz was not the closest relative to Ruth's deceased husband. The other relative had the first option to inherit family property, so Boaz went to meet him where such matters were usually discussed. Boaz told this relative, "*Naomi... is selling the piece of land that belonged to Elimelech. I suggest that you buy it*" (Ruth 4:3,4). However, this

relative refused to redeem the property. It would have forced him to acquire Ruth as a wife: *“I cannot redeem it because I might endanger my own estate”* (4:6). By his rejection, this relative becomes a type of those who refuse to accept Jesus as their personal Lord because of what it might cost them.

Boaz then announced, *“Today you are witnesses that I have bought from Naomi all the property of Elimelech, Kilion and Mahlon. I have also acquired Ruth...as my wife, in order to maintain the name of the dead with his property, so that his name will not disappear from the town records”* (4:9,10). In the same manner, no person who submits to the lordship of Jesus and continues to do so will ever have his name disappear from the Book of Life in heaven.

But we have free will just like the relative who refused to redeem Elimelech’s property. We are permitted to reject the inheritance held in heaven for those who place their trust in Jesus. Even though the price demanded by God for redemption of mankind was paid in full by Jesus, only those who are willing to receive Him as Lord will benefit from God’s mercy and grace and inherit eternal life.

The story of Ruth is a picture of developing a saving relationship with Jesus Christ. Like Ruth, we may be required to leave behind what is comfortable to follow the path God has chosen for us. We are *“created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God has prepared in advance for us to do”* (Ephesians 2:10). We must make a genuine decision to abandon ourselves to obeying the will of God for our lives. Often this requires a total change in lifestyle from our old way of living.

Sadly this is not always taught today. But the gospel given us by the apostles is clear. We must walk by faith, not by sight. And this can’t be done if we insist on keeping the old ways or having the road clearly marked before we’ll take one step forward. The major struggle in living by faith isn’t having a willingness to try harder, but being willing to trust God and then enduring in that trust (Romans 1:17).

It is often said that a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush. But walking by faith is totally different than human wisdom. Walking by faith trusts in the Lord to not only guide, but to provide. And this way of thinking never comes to us in a natural or automatic way. It demands deliberate and repeated decisions to trust God, and at times these decisions have to be made one day by day, if not hour by hour.

A life of faith is only possible by remaining in close contact with our Kinsman-Redeemer Jesus. Just as Ruth asked Boaz to spread a corner of his garment over her, we must stay under the shadow of God's wings if we are to live by faith. Jesus refers to us as sheep because we tend to go our own way instead of staying close to the shepherd. He wants to cover all that we do, because Jesus knows there is no way that we can bear fruit on our own. *"No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me"* (John 15:4).

Two things are essential to live a life of faith. The first is to diligently study the word of God. The best way to learn to recognize counterfeit money is becoming so familiar with the genuine that counterfeits are easy to spot. In similar fashion, the best way to recognize the lies of Satan and the world is to feed continually on the word of God. Spiritual health requires a diet including daily meditation on God's word just as good physical health requires daily intake of proper nutrition. Sadly there are many spiritually malnourished Christians today.

Many who profess to know Jesus Christ continue with besetting sins in their lives. This results from lack of knowing as well as practicing the truth in God's word. Jesus tells us, *"If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free"* (John 8:31,32). We'll never know truth to practice if our Bibles are collecting dust on a shelf. Truth never comes from either the world or human wisdom, and dusty Bibles can only result in unclean living in the eyes of a holy and righteous God.

The second essential to living a life of faith is regular practice of prayer. We must remain in close communion with God through pray for the strength of the Lord to flow into our lives through the Holy Spirit. Faithfulness in prayer indicates a dependence of God's grace to guide, provide, strengthen, and comfort as well as empower for service in the kingdom. The scriptures tell us that unless the Lord builds His house, the builders labor in vain. And the absence of prayer shows that the builder is not depending upon the Lord to do the building.

A life of faith places trust in God to take better care of a person than we can care for ourselves. And faithful prayer is a reflection of that trust. Those who have a negligible prayer life cannot live a life of faith. Instead they seek satisfaction and peace through acquiring worldly possessions, use of drugs and/or alcohol, and dependence on secular counseling to bring some stability to their dysfunctional lives.

Furthermore, Jesus warns is that life holds trouble for those who sincerely follow Him. This includes not only active persecution, but even the enmity of family members. Peace will only guard hearts of those who follow the prescription of God for living by faith: *“Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus”* (Philippians 4:6,7).

Prayerless persons consistently find that life will fail to meet their expectations. There is never be lasting contentment or freedom from anxiety for those who fail to be faithful in prayer. Our role model is Jesus who frequently turned to His heavenly Father in prayer. We likewise must be faithful in our prayer life if we are to hear God's directions for our lives.

And prayer is absolutely critical if we expect to stand against spiritual forces of evil in the heavenlies and against the enticing lures of our flesh and the world (Ephesians 6:10-18). It is a daily battle to serve in the Lord's army, and we must stay in

constant communication with our commander-in-chief so as to be certain we are fighting in His power and not just depending on the strength of our own right arms. Pride is an ever-present threat, and constantly searches for an opportunity to attack.

Just as Jesus came to earth to redeem us, Boaz offered to be a kinsman-redeemer and acquire Ruth as a wife. In time, Ruth gave birth to a son named Obed who was father of Jesse, father of David the King of Israel. In this story, we see how a young woman made a decision to forsake all so that she might remain loyal to her mother-in-law and to the God of Israel.

By her decision, Ruth became part of a family through which Jesus came to earth as Kinsman-Redeemer for the entire world. Her life, lived in faith, yielded rewards that exceeded any expectations she might have had. And it all began with a simple yet deliberate decision to live a life of faith instead of following what many might call 'common sense.'

If we determine to seek God with all of our heart, we have a promise of finding Him (Jeremiah 29:13). And if we find Him, we have a guarantee of reward. Hebrews tells that God is faithful to reward all those who earnestly seek Him (Hebrews 11:6). So do not lose confidence. We are promised that a life of faith will always reward us far beyond all that we can ask or even imagine (Ephesians 3:20).

By His nature, God cannot promise anything that He'll not be faithful to accomplish. So let us beseech God for all the grace we need to walk by faith, and then give up insisting that we need to walk by sight. Only in this way can we ever hope to give God the glory due His name, and receive rewards that God has prepared for those who are faithful.

"He holds victory in store for the upright, he is a shield to those whose walk is blameless, for he guards the course of the just and protects the way of his faithful ones." Proverbs 2:7,8

Chapter 8. *The Obedience of Faith*

Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do what I say?” Luke 6:46

Except for love, there is nothing that Jesus stresses so much as obedience. In fact, obedience is so important that Paul has described his own ministry as calling people “*to the obedience that comes from faith*” (Romans 1:5). This principle has become badly distorted in the past century. Writing under inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Paul prophesies that people will turn their ears away from truth and turn aside to myths in the latter days of the age and even follow things taught by demons (1 Timothy 4:1; 2 Timothy 4:4). Today his words are in evidence.

Lack of sound teaching about obedience has resulted in serious pollution within the church. So many are deceived that I frequently encounter men who refer to themselves as Christian alcoholics, addicts, and homosexuals in spite of Scripture telling us that such persons will never inherit the kingdom of heaven (1 Corinthians 6:9,10; Galatians 5:22; Ephesians 5:5). There are even denominations giving a blessing to same sex marriages as well as accepting homosexuals into the ordained ministry.

With such flagrant disregard for the commands of God, it is hardly surprising to encounter hostility when one teaches about the responsibility to obey the commands of God. New Age religion has promoted a God who is just like men, a God who no longer requires absolute truth when it comes to either morals or ethics. But this is pure deception, and it comes from no one except the father of lies, Satan himself.

Compromise of obedience finds no basis whatsoever in the divinely inspired word of God. Faith is only saving when a person intends to unite with Jesus in love and obedience. This

is in contrast to the all-too-common “nothing will condemn a person as long as you confess Jesus” attitude. But the faith that saves is an obedient faith. This does not require perfection, but it does imply a sincere desire to obey God and say “No” to ungodliness. Those who are truly born again have this desire implanted in their hearts by the Holy Spirit (Titus 2:11,12).

Christ has broken the power and dominion of sin in the lives of those who are born again (Romans 6:22). Those who still continue to sin as a way of life remain as slaves to sin and are still the property of Satan. As Jesus says, *“I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin”* (John 8:34). The indwelling Spirit sets people free from the power of sin and immorality. So it is that Paul writes, *“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”* (Romans 8:13).

There is no question that Jesus demands obedience to the will of God for salvation. His early teaching tells us, *“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven”* (Matthew 7:21). While salvation is never gained by our personal effort, God nonetheless demands obedience of those who belong to Him. Grace never removes the need for human responsibility despite common teaching of compromise to that effect.

Grace not only convicts and saves the lost, but grace empowers the believer to live a self-controlled and godly life (Titus 2:11,12). God not only gives us the desire for holiness. He provides the power needed to act in accord with His purpose (Philippians 2:13). As Peter writes, *“His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness...that you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires”* (2 Peter 1:3,4).

The idea of continually sinning Christianity is totally unbiblical. Peter not only commands us to be holy in all we do

(1 Peter 1:15,16). He says God has given us *everything we need* through the power of the Holy Spirit for life and godliness. It is tragic that the gospel taught by some today is so far from the gospel handed down to us by the apostles. Innocent people are being deceived by the thousands that they possess salvation by simply repeating a ‘sinner’s prayer.’ Meanwhile, the biblical demand for repentance and living holy lives is totally ignored.

Many profess having a relationship with Jesus but they are completely unaware of how Jesus defines those who really are in His family. Jesus says He only lives in those who obey Him: *“If anyone love me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home in him”* (John 14:23). Likewise, Jesus makes it clear that those who refuse to obey His teachings do not love Him (John 14:24).

And on one occasion, Jesus defines those having a true relationship to Him. On this occasion, Jesus was teaching in a house when His mother and brothers arrived. Told His mother and brothers were waiting, Jesus pointed at the disciples and said, *“Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother”* (Matthew 12:49,50). Here we see the principle that we must obey God’s will to have a relationship with Jesus.

Jesus also used parables to illustrate the principle that faith involves obedience. One such parable describes building of houses having different foundations. *“Everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the wind blew and beat against that house and it fell with a great crash”* (Matthew 7:24-27).

There is no confusion as to what Jesus is saying. The kind of faith that can withstand storms of temptation and testing is an obedient faith. If one is to endure, it isn't enough to hear Jesus' teachings. They must be obeyed. To interpret this parable differently is pure foolishness. None of the disciples is more forceful about the relationship between obedience and faith than John. He tells us obedience and faith are so tightly related that they can't possibly be separated. *"If we claim to have fellowship with him [Jesus] yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth. We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands"* (1 John 1:6;2:3).

John is one of several writers to stress a failure to obey Jesus' teachings means a person is not *"born of God"* or born again. Yet today many believe that a person can be saved and yet live in habitual disobedience to Jesus' teachings. They are being deceived by *"godless men who change the grace of our God into a license for immorality"* (Jude 4). The scriptures are clear that the mercy and grace of God never allows for what has been called 'sinning Christianity.'

Saving faith strives for obedience through the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit. The grace that saves a person is the same grace that teaches that person to turn from sin and live a self-controlled, upright and godly life (Titus 2:11,12). Paul tells Titus to teach this with all authority and he warns Titus that teaching the truth about grace will cause others to look down on him, and he encourages Titus to not be dismayed (2:15).

Motivation to live in obedience stems from devotion and love owed Christ because of who He is...the Son of God. He alone is worthy, having done what we could never do for ourselves. He alone offers truth and life, and there is no other way to heaven except through Him (John 14:6). There's no other *truth* we can depend upon, for He alone came from heaven full of grace and truth (John 1:14). And there is no other source of *eternal life*. Jesus is the only bread a man may eat and not die

(John 6:50,51). Jesus is deserving of the very best we can give. That means nothing less than giving Him ourselves as living sacrifices, lived in obedience to His teachings (Romans 12:1).

Paul reminds Titus that they were once “*enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures*” (Titus 3:3). Then he says Jesus appeared to save them from their disobedience through rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit (Titus 3:4,5). The same applies today. We must lovingly submit ourselves to control by the Holy Spirit to not gratify the desire of the sinful nature.

Without devotion and love for Jesus, any effort to offer our lives as living sacrifices amounts to legalism. On the other hand, we can't claim to have love for Jesus without a genuine desire to obey Him. Indeed only those with a desire to live in obedience are given a promise of indwelling and empowering by the Holy Spirit (John 14:23; Acts 5:32).

We need to recognize Jesus as “*the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him*” (Hebrews 5:9). It's time to put aside all teaching that Jesus is the source of salvation for the disobedient as well as for the obedient. Nothing can be found in the scriptures that bears witness to this widely accepted idea that is believed by so many in the church today.

Jesus didn't intend evangelism to end with conversion decisions. That is obvious from His stress on obedience in the Great Commission: “*Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you*” (Matthew 28:19,20; underlining added).

Jesus' desire is not just to have converts. His desire is for disciples...disciplined believers who are doing everything necessary to separate from the world and its sinful ways. They are to be taught “*to obey everything I have commanded you.*” Jesus doesn't tell us to teach what is convenient or comfortable. He says to teach obedience to “*everything.*” Gratefully,

there are faithful teachers who take this seriously, but they are greatly outnumbered in America today by a multitude who are teachers of compromise.

The time has arrived of which Paul warns, a time when many pulpits are occupied by false teachers who masquerade as servants of righteousness. They teach only what itching ears love to hear (2 Corinthians 11:15; 2 Timothy 4:3). Under a guise of being 'seeker sensitive,' they dilute the gospel and avoid hard teachings of Jesus. Because their churches are well attended in some cases as well as being financially stable, they feel God's anointing is on their ministries. Such is the deception of which the scriptures warn repeatedly in the last days.

Paul has a powerful exhortation for all who profess the name of Jesus. His words were not written to heathens, but to Christians in the churches of Galatia. And just as Paul wrote to Christians in his day, his words are for the admonishment of those in the church of Jesus Christ today, lest we be confused.

"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." Galatians 6:7,8

Chapter 9. *The Assurance of Faith*

I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life.

1 John 5:13

The disciple who wrote the gospel of John also penned three letters. The first of these concerned a serious problem in the young church, namely that of false teachers. They taught a heresy that Jesus wasn't the Son of God and that a person was not required to live a life separated from sin to inherit eternal life. And this latter heresy has returned during recent years in parts of the evangelical as well as the more liturgical church.

Although written to expose heresy, 1st John includes a positive message as well. John writes that we can be assured of salvation, and sets forth tests by which we can be confident of eternal life. These tests are useful for doing what Paul says: *“Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you – unless, of course, you fail the test?”* (2 Corinthians 13:5).

Over the years I practiced as an oncologist, there was frequent opportunity to observe patients dying from cancer. A difference as wide as east is from west was seen between those having a deep commitment to Christ and those without sincere commitment to the lordship of Jesus. At times, I found myself profoundly impacted by the peace and serenity in the hearts of believers during their last days on earth.

Those having a firm assurance of salvation approached death with a joy that was absent with others who claimed to be religious. It was amazing to witness not only lack of anxiety, but trust in God to care for ones being left behind, even when

they were young children. It was obvious these lives reflected the very things of which John writes. Not only did they “*believe in the name of the Son of God*” (1 John 5:13). They had a faith that grew steadily stronger as the time to meet Jesus face-to-face approached.

John tells us obedience is not an option when it comes to being saved. He writes, “*We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands. Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did*” (2:3,6). And there was nothing hypocritical about these patients. They had sincerely sought to obey Jesus and to follow Him as the Lord of their lives. They were known for ‘walking the talk’ in their everyday lives.

Twice we find that John calls those liars who claim to be saved and yet practice continual sin. “*The man who says, ‘I know him,’ but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him*” (1 John 2:4). It wasn’t necessary to spend much time with these patients to realize that the focus of their lives was Jesus, and not what the world promotes. They kept a very loose grasp on things of the world, and both their lives and conversation reflected this attitude.

In reflection later, it almost seemed as though they could have written the following words instead of the apostle: “*Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world – the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does – comes not from the Father but from the world*” (John 2:15,16).

These patients also had a genuine love and concern for the welfare of others. Indeed, John describes this as a sign of salvation: “*Anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother*” (4:20,21). Unconditional love (*agape*) is the nature of God, and those truly indwelt by the Holy Spirit cannot help

but show compassion and sacrificial love toward others, and especially toward those who are in need (Luke 10:25-37).

The expression “*lives in him*” used by John means the same as born again. And John tells us, “*No one who lives in him keeps on sinning. No one who continues to sin has either seen him or known him*” (1 John 3:6). This is identical to words of Paul saying we can have assurance of eternal life only when holiness is practiced in our lives through power of the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:13). Putting to death the misdeeds of the flesh is never optional for those who would be saved.

It’s not unusual to encounter firm resistance when the words of John in this letter are taught without compromise. Untold numbers of people have been deceived by those who vaccinate the unsuspecting with a doctrine of easy salvation. They fail to demand true repentance as being required for true salvation, and those who accept their watered-down version of salvation quickly become resistant to truth.

But those with true faith do not take offense when John says, “*Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did*” (1 John 2:6). Instead they pray for grace to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives. They feed regularly on God’s word so that they’ll be certain to hold to truth: “*See that what you have heard from the beginning remains in you. If it does, you also will remain in the Son and in the Father*” (2:24).

Assurance of eternal life also comes from awareness of the Holy Spirit indwelling. “*And this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us*” (3:4). It may be asked with good reason, “How then can I be aware of the Holy Spirit’s presence in my life?” And the answer is that we are aware that the Holy Spirit is doing what He’s sent to do.

Only by the work of the Spirit is it possible to put aside works of the flesh on a continual basis. It is the Holy Spirit who makes it possible to put to death besetting sins and walk in the light instead of darkness (1:7). And what is called fruit of

the Spirit is exactly that! It is never the flesh of man that will produce in us love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, goodness, faithfulness, and self control (Galatians 5:22). That is why these characteristics of Jesus are called fruit of the Spirit.

The mark of a truly saved person is a changed life. It is the Holy Spirit who does the sanctifying work by which we are changed not only inwardly but outwardly in our behavior (2 Thessalonians 2:13). And as lives change with the development of new attitudes, and as our personal rights are surrendered to Christ, an inner assurance and peace develops that proves to be an incredible blessing.

If we stumble, God is faithful to forgive us when we confess our sin and repent of wrongdoing: *“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness”* (1 John 1:9). Today’s liberal teachers are quick to stress God’s faithfulness to forgive, but they rarely stress God’s clear intention to also purify us from all unrighteousness that brings shame on the name of Jesus.

Speaking through a prophet, God tells why it is that we experience affliction at times: *“See, I have refined you, though not as silver; I have tested you in the furnace of affliction. For my own sake, for my own sake, I do this. How can I let myself be defamed”* (Isaiah 48:10,11). We bring shame on the name of God by our sinful behavior, and God desires to purify us from all such behavior for His own sake.

This refinement is a process. A person truly saved will find himself increasingly thinking as well as acting like a new creation. What is *worked in* by receiving Jesus as one’s Lord is *worked out* in everyday life through the power of the Spirit. It is by this working of the Spirit that John says, *“This is love for God: to obey his commands. And his commands are not burdensome, for everyone born of God overcomes the world”* (1 John 5:3,4). The commands of God are not a burden because of grace...and grace alone.

The mistaken notion that forsaking a sinful life is just an option for those who are born again is refuted by John. To have fellowship with Jesus means a linking together of faith and action. It also means that Jesus serves as an advocate for us with the Father in heaven *if* we sin: “*My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But **if** anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense – Jesus Christ, the Righteous One*” (1 John 2:1).

It’s such a joy to reflect on these precious patients who could not wait to see the face of their Lord and Savior. The assurance that is associated with saving faith was so evident in their lives. Should this assurance not be present in our lives, let us examine ourselves to see if we’re in the faith as Paul has instructed. Remember John has said, “*I write these things to you...so that you may know that you have eternal life.*” If the Spirit of Christ is really indwelling us, then the things about which John writes will be in evidence in our personal lives.

Should we fail the test about the things of which John writes, a merciful God is waiting for us at this very moment. It is a profound yet simple matter to enter the presence of God. We’re only asked to have genuine sorrow for our sinfulness, be willing to turn from things that grieve God, believe Jesus is the Son of God who died to pay our sin debt and rose again, and finally be willing to trust in Jesus alone for salvation and to accept Him as the Lord of our lives.

The salvation that brings assurance of eternal life is a gift. It cannot be earned by a man’s effort, nor is it deserved. Only the mercy of our loving heavenly Father keeps us from receiving what we deserve, which is eternity spent in torment as punishment for disobedience. But God has provided us with an escape. It is by grace – receiving what we don’t deserve – that eternal life is available to each person who hears the good news of Jesus Christ and is willing to accept His lordship over their life.

"Saving Faith"

We only need to confess our sin, ask for forgiveness, and make a genuine decision to repent. And to repent means to *turn from sin and turn toward God* through faith in Jesus. For without repentance salvation isn't possible (Luke 13:3). *"Repent then, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord"* (Acts 3:19,20).

It is only in coming to Jesus by faith and then trusting Him as the Lord of all in our lives that there can be assurance of eternal life. And today is the day of salvation for anyone who does not have this assurance of eternal life. Do not harden your heart if the Lord is knocking at the door. Open the door, and invite Him to enter your heart. But understand that He will only come in under His conditions, not yours. And that is the condition of sincere repentance.

Are you ready to become one of God's children? Do you desire to be filled with confident assurance of eternal life. The apostle John has given us a series of tests that we can ask ourselves about our relationship with Jesus. If you have any question about a personal relationship with the Only One who can save you, then turn to Him in faith this very day.

"How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God!"

1 John 3:1

Chapter 10. *The Peace of Faith*

You will keep in perfect peace him whose mind is steadfast because he trust in you.

Isaiah 26:3

A new millennium has begun in a time of considerable uncertainty. While remarkable advances continue in science and technology, men are unable to share this planet with one another in peace and harmony. Horrific ethnic cleansing finds countrymen of differing persuasion treating each another with extreme cruelty. Religious persecution intensifies, especially in countries ruled by Islamic, Buddhist, and Hindu majorities. Famine and diseases such as AIDS threaten entire populations. Even prosperous nations are plagued with epidemic suicide, depression, and addiction.

Two thousand years ago, Jesus warned that the days at the end of the age would be marked by events causing stress. Speaking to disciples shortly before the crucifixion, He tells of signs that will characterize the days prior to His return: wars, ethnic cleansing, famines, earthquakes, persecution, and a falling away from faith as believers' love (Gk *agape*) grows cold. These signs along with increasing wickedness are described as the beginning of birth pains (Matthew 24).

Birth pains begin as widely spaced and relatively mild cramps that gradually become more frequent. They increase in strength until just before delivery when labor pain is virtually continuous. The last days will be similar. Although the flood in Noah's day was warned about in advance, flooding began unexpectedly and progressed rapidly. And so it is that Jesus repeatedly warns the church to be prepared and keep watch.

One might ask how it's possible to have any degree of peace with so much uncertainty in the world. But God gives a prescription for peace in the scriptures. Nowhere is it clearer than in the words, "*You will keep in perfect peace him whose mind is steadfast because he trusts in you*" (Isaiah 26:3). Trusting in the crucified and risen Christ is not just a profession of words. It is a heartfelt belief that places oneself in the hands of Jesus with great confidence (Romans 10:9; 2 Timothy 1:12).

Peace stems from genuine commitment to the care and protection of Christ. It includes assurance of salvation that is expressed by acts of loving gratitude to God and obedience to the will of God. Does that mean that everything in life will be smooth sailing. Of course not! Such perfection is not expected until we are in glory. What it means is that we will have peace and serenity in midst of the life's turmoil.

There will not be the continual anxiety and emotional conflict like many experience, even those within the body of Christ. No one is spiritually healthy when he or she must rely on mood-altering drugs, alcohol, or narcotics during the day, or needing sedatives to sleep at night. Such is not the rest that a loving God intends for those who place themselves under the shadow of His wings.

The Bible explains what disrupts the peace God desires for us to have. Until they fell into sin, Adam and Eve lived in harmony with God as well as with each other. It was only after eating forbidden fruit that they experienced guilt and shame, along with a loss of peace. Then they hid among the trees from the LORD. When they heard God calling out to them, Adam replied, "*I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid*" (Genesis 3:10).

Harmony between Adam and Eve was also broken by their disobedience. God told them that strife would continue to exist as well (3:16). The fall also interrupted the peace between man and nature. After the creation Adam worked in the garden

garden joyfully. But the work became “*painful toil*” after they sinned (3:17-19). The same theme is seen repeatedly through the scriptures, lest we be deceived. **There always is a high price to pay for low living.**

Where God intended peace, sin brought a “*groaning*” to all of creation. But in His mercy, God has made provision to restore peace on earth. To all having genuine hunger and thirst to be reconciled, God says, “*Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters. Seek the LORD while he may be found*” (Isaiah 55:1,6). And to make this possible, God sent Jesus as the “*living water*” that can satisfy our thirst for peace (John 4:10).

There are reasons why faith in Jesus brings this peace to our soul. The word for peace in Hebrew is *shalom*, a word that means harmony, freedom from anxiety, and a sense of well-being. And Isaiah tells why faith in Jesus brings shalom: “*He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities, the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed*” (53:5).

We can have freedom from anxiety because Jesus paid the penalty that is rightfully ours for transgression against the ways of God. It was a penalty of torment in eternal fire that we could never avoid on our merit. Peace comes from knowing punishment we deserve is taken by Jesus. Nothing gives such abiding peace as knowing with confidence that we’ll never be crushed for the sins (iniquities) that we’ve committed during our lives on earth.

How incredible that Jesus has come to do what we can never do for ourselves. There is no way we could ever redeem ourselves through our own efforts. But because of what Jesus did at Calvary, we can stop striving to earn any righteousness in God’s eyes through our own works, and simply rest in what Jesus has already done for us.

In the same way, there can be perfect peace regarding any and all physical afflictions that we experience on earth. In

time, there will be complete healing for all diseases because of the wounds suffered by Jesus. If health is not restored during this life through divine healing, we have the guarantee that our resurrected bodies will be free of every infirmity. It is such an incredible hope for all those who suffer with great disabilities.

Only through Jesus is this peace available to us. This was foretold in prophecy long before the incarnation of Jesus: *“He will be called...the Prince of Peace”* (Isaiah 9:6). But peace is only experienced by those men who accept Jesus’ authority and allow Him to reign over their lives. The Greek *kyrios* translated as “Lord” in the scriptures literally means to have complete possession and sovereign authority over. If Jesus is called Lord with sincerity, then we must accept His authority over us and be willing to give Him all our personal rights.

It is this matter of lordship that presents such a great stumbling block for many who desire the peace that comes from relationship with Jesus. It is a failure to be submissive to the authority of Jesus that is the major obstacle for those who lack peace in these days. As the prophet tells, only *“those who walk uprightly enter into peace”* (Isaiah 57:2). Only when we submit to Jesus and allow Him to direct our steps in godly paths can we expect to enter into His peace.

We may be content for brief periods while we insist on doing our own thing, but we’ll never experience any sustained peace if we keep choosing to be in control of our lives. We’ve all known situations where we tried to make things work out, and it didn’t happen. Yet in more difficult circumstances, we have experienced a peace beyond human understanding. This likely took place because we had turned matters over to God, realizing that no one else could possibly help.

This is why the apostle Paul exhorts us, *“Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard*

your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:6,7). Sadly there are a great many in the church today who are refusing to take this spiritual medicine that is prescribed by a loving God.

The false prophets who are plentiful in these days are fond of teaching God’s gifts and blessings are unconditional. In doing so, they distort Scripture to please their followers, if not to gain money by their greed. But God clearly tells us, *“If only you had paid attention to my commands, your peace would have been like a river”* (Isaiah 48:18).

Nothing removes peace any faster than disobedience to the revealed will of God. If we disobey the ways of God, the following words become a living reality: *“The way of peace they do not know; there is no justice in their paths. They have turned them into crooked roads; no one who walks in them will know peace”* (Isaiah 59:8).

Simply knowing that Jesus came to earth as the Prince of Peace will never guarantee peace in our life. To agree that Jesus is the Son of God who died and rose again is never the same as trusting Him as personal Lord of our life. Faith must be an active faith, and the operative word is *active*. We fail to have an active faith if we do not feed regularly on the spiritual food of His Word. We do not have an active faith if we fail to commune regularly with God in prayer. And we do not have active faith if we repeatedly disobey God’s will for our lives.

The psalmist David understood the secret of living in the peace that God intends for each of His children when he wrote the following words: *“Trust in the LORD and do good; dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture. Delight yourself in the LORD and he will give you the desires of your heart. Commit your way to the LORD; trust in him and he will do this. Be still before the LORD and wait patiently for him; do not fret when men succeed in their ways, when they carry out their wicked schemes”* (Psalm 37:3-5,7).

It is only when we give the control of our lives to Jesus and allow our steps to be led by His Spirit that we become true sons of God and experience His peace (Romans 8:14). It is only in loving devotion and obedience to Jesus that we can enjoy the richest presence of God and receive His promises in their fullest sense. Liberals may choose to debate this matter, but it is an inescapable truth that the peace of God as well as peace with God has a price. And that price is nothing less than being willing to submit to the lordship of Jesus.

Grace does not ensure God's promises for those who are deliberately disobedient and refuse to submit to the will of God as revealed to us through Jesus. There are some blessings that apply to every human being on the face of the earth. God does cause the sun to rise on the evil as well as the good, and He sends rain on the unrighteous as well as the righteous. But only if we abandon ourselves to Jesus as Lord of our lives are we entitled to claim the promises spoken through the prophet:

"Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. For I am the LORD, your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior." Isaiah 43:1-3

Chapter 11. *The Love of Faith*

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself.

Matthew 22:37-39

I vividly recall the day in 1983 when the presence of God became so real that that I fell to my knees in brokenness, and wept over a life that offended my Creator. What caused my sinfulness to be so acute was the love of God. The Holy Spirit had revealed Jesus' righteousness to me, how He died so that I might not have to spend eternity in torment. Until that time, I had never even really sought to escape judgment.

There was fear of damnation should I fail to turn from my ungodly ways. But behind it all was an incredible awareness of God's love and a realization that His Son had died for me. By the measure of faith given me, I had no doubt that God existed and that He would reward me if I earnestly sought Him (Hebrews 11:6). And to this day, I am overwhelmed by the grace of God that opened eyes spiritually blind for nearly fifty years.

This revelation of God's love was a part of my being born again. For as Jesus told Nicodemus, "*No one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again*" (John 3:3). I attended church and participated in religious activities all of my life, yet I had never really been able to *see* (understand spiritually) what is meant by the kingdom of God. I had been like so many people during the previous fifty years before 1983. I had taken part in rituals of religion without knowing Jesus in a personal way and allowing Him to become the Lord of my life.

Since 1983, the love of God has been revealed to me repeatedly in learning to live as an overcomer. It is a process that takes place *“not by might nor by power but by my Spirit”* says the Lord (Zechariah 4:6). Previously I had head knowledge about God’s love, for indeed I had memorized John 3:16 in Sunday School as a child. But the meaning of this verse never became revelation knowledge in my heart until the Holy Spirit opened eyes that had been spiritually blind for five decades.

One thing about God’s love is that it cannot be earned or merited. And out of this love that sets us free from bondage to sin comes a desire to put to death the misdeeds of the flesh. This desire, and power to act on it, comes by the same grace that brings salvation. *“The grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say ‘No’ to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age”* (Titus 2:11,12).

With each passing year, I am more aware that loving God cannot be separated from obedience. Jesus doesn’t just want me to be grateful that He did what I could never do for myself...make me acceptable in the eyes of a holy God. Jesus expects His undeserved love and grace to have an effect on my life. The effect Jesus expects is to be shown by doing what the scriptures tell us to do: *“This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his love for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers”* (1 John 3:16).

Saving faith will always express itself through acts of sacrificial love shown to others (Galatians 5:6). Jesus commands this in clear terms: *“A new command I give you: As I have loved you, so you must love one another”* (John 13:34). Note this is not a suggestion to consider. It’s a *“command I give you.”* We’re told we **“must”** love one another just as Jesus loves us. This is neither a brotherly type of love (Greek *phileo*), nor a sexual type of love (Greek *eros*). The love of which Jesus is speaking is Greek *agape*. **And there’s a famine of teaching about agape in the church today.**

Agape isn't the kind of love that lukewarm Christians enjoy hearing about. It doesn't concern feelings, and that's a shame. Many if not most of us like to base our decisions on feelings. But agape is a conscious, deliberate decision to help others in a sacrificial way. It requires putting to death our self-centered attitudes: *"If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth"* (1 John 3:17,18).

When Jesus commands us to love others *"as I have loved you,"* He is saying decisions to love must not depend on others deserving love. Agape is thinking more highly of others than self, and loving unconditionally (Philippians 2:3). Agape is loving without thanks, being willing to sacrifice comfort and security on behalf of others, giving help to those who treat us spitefully. If love depends upon how one is treated in return, it's not the agape love of which Jesus speaks.

Anyone truly filled with the love of Jesus and love for Jesus is grateful for opportunities to sacrifice and help others. He is aware of God's expectation that we comfort others with the comfort we ourselves have received (2 Corinthians 1:4). But Jews living under the law of Moses were totally shocked when Jesus told them, *"I tell you who hear me: 'Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you'"* (Luke 6:27,28).

To illustrate what's meant by agape love, Jesus used a parable about the Good Samaritan. An expert in the law with suspicious motives asked Jesus, *"What must I do to inherit eternal life?"* (Luke 10:25). He knew the correct answer was to love the Lord with all one's heart, soul, strength and mind, and to love one's neighbor as oneself. But he claimed confusion as to what was meant by the word *neighbor*. And Jesus used this parable to explain a principle that is lost on many of those who hear it today in the churches of America..

A man we presume to be a proper Jew was assaulted and left for dead by robbers. He found himself ignored by the religious people including a priest and Levite. Many sitting in the pews of a church today have hearts so hardened that they fail to realize this parable doesn't only speak about religious hypocrites two thousand years ago. They fail to appreciate that this man who is stripped of clothes, beaten, and left for dead is not simply any man. He is a symbol or *type* of Jesus who was stripped, beaten, and rejected.

Interestingly, the injured man is shown compassion by a despised Samaritan with whom Jews wouldn't associate and would not help in return. The parable teaches that anyone who needs help is to be considered a neighbor in the economy of God. We are also told inheriting eternal life involves not only loving God, but also expressing love by helping those in need (Galatians 5:6). So it is Jesus told the expert in the law, "*Do this and you will live*" (Luke 10:28).

Failing to recognize Jesus as the stripped, beaten, and wounded man is true of many *religious* people in our day. It grieves God to see the spiritual blindness that exists in the church. Jesus tells that what we do for the least of men, we do to Him, and what we fail to do for the least of His brothers is failing to do for Him (Matthew 25:40,45). But this principle is not understood by those who do not know what it means to have a personal relationship with Jesus. They fail to see the Christ in others as Jesus has so clearly explained.

I believe many might like to escape the flames of hell but avoid relationship with Jesus because a price must be paid. They don't want their comfort zone invaded, so they either avoid attending church altogether or join a church that teaches a gospel so full of compromise that they feel allowed to stay in their comfort zone. At least the former are not deceived as are Pharisees who profess to know Jesus but refuse to obey His command to be a Good Samaritan to the suffering and needy in this world.

It is not possible to separate having love for God from obeying His commands and having godly fear. These three are woven together in a tapestry such that any attempt to separate one from the other two distorts the word of God. In a *Times Square Church Pulpit Series* article, David Wilkerson writes, “You cannot love God without having the fear of God in you. You cannot love Him without obeying His Word. And you do not truly fear God unless you love and obey Him.” I could not endorse these words any more enthusiastically.

The bottom line is that we either obey what Jesus says or refuse to do so. Nothing can be simpler. And Jesus says, “*If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching...He who does not love me will not obey my teaching*” (John 14:23,24). We are warned in Scripture to beware of those who distort the truth in the last days, and these days have come in our generation. So it is that many turn their ears from truth and listen only to the falsehoods that tickle their itching ears (2 Timothy 4:4).

A day is soon coming when all nations of the earth will stand in judgment (Matthew 25:31,32). And Jesus explains what the agenda will be on that day. For it will be a time when He divides the people into two groups just as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. At this time, Jesus tells us that He’ll put the sheep on the right and the goats on His left. He is telling us that within the church, there are two groups of people. And these two groups will be just as distinctly different as are sheep different than goats.

Let us not be deceived about what Jesus is explaining will take place on that day. It will be a day when the love that is associated with saving faith will be shown to be a love not only for God but for our fellow man as well. Jesus will make it clear as to what His words are telling us about loving Him. No longer will anyone doubt that loving Jesus means to obey His words to do for friend and foe alike as we would do for Jesus. By the grace of God, let us never hear the following words of Jesus and yet fail to put them into practice.

"Then the king will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to drink, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me. I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.'

Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart From me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me. I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.'

Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life."

Matthew 25:34-36,40-43,46

Chapter 12. *The Fear of Faith*

I will tell you whom you should fear: Fear him who after the killing of the body, has power to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him.”

Luke 12:5

My childhood was spent in a church that taught we are not to fear God because He is love. Pastors who rarely used the Bible to teach did not understand the difference between a fear of the Lord and a “spirit of fear.” As a result, the church members were not concerned about hypocrisy as a way of life. They performed religious acts, yet harbored besetting sins like greed, envy, uncontrolled anger, sexual immorality, jealousy and drunkenness without any fear of God’s wrath.

Certainly God wants us filled with peace, even in the midst of severe trials. As the psalmist writes, “*I will fear no evil, for you are with me*” (Psalm 23:4). God tells us, “*Whoever listens to me will live in safety and be at ease, without fear of harm*” (Proverbs 1:33). Paul says to not be anxious, but to lift our needs in prayer so the peace of God can guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Philippians 4:6,7). And Peter exhorts us to not fear what the unbelievers fear (1 Peter 3:14).

These and other passages make it clear we are not to fear physical, financial, or accidental adversity; and we’re not to fear Satan either. Instead of seeing trouble as an enemy, we are to view trials as servants that draw us closer to dependence on Jesus. We are assured that if we submit to God and resist the devil, he will flee from us (James 4:7). What a blessing it is that God is such a shield of protection about us and will work for the good of those faithful to Him in all situations.

But in spite of all this, Jesus tells us directly that we're to fear our heavenly Father because He has power to throw us into hell after death (Luke 12:5). And many other scriptures are written by inspiration of the Holy Spirit to illustrate this same warning. In fact, the first reference to fearing God occurs in Eden after Adam and Eve fell to temptation. God called out to Adam asking, "*Where are you?*" And Adam replied, "*I heard you in the garden and I was afraid*" (Genesis 8:9,10).

Man is created with a conscience that causes feelings of guilt if we sin. The creation story tells how our relationship with God is affected by sin. And the later wickedness of man caused God to grieve such that He decided to destroy mankind with a flood. Noah then built an ark "*in holy fear*" to save his family (Hebrews 11:7). And our obedience to God's will should be carried out in holy fear as was true with Noah.

Liberals might choose to argue this point but they can't disagree that Jesus tells us to *fear* God. The Greek translated as "fear" in the New Testament is *phobos*, a word that literally means a trembling fear and not just reverence as some suggest. It is the root word used to describe trembling fear that people experience with different kinds of *phobias* concerning high places, being confined in elevators, flying in airplanes, etc.

Paul commands us to work out our salvation with fear and trembling as did Noah (Philippians 2:12). When the Israelites arrived at Mount Sinai after being delivered from Egypt, they were not only given the Law. They were also taught to fear the LORD. "*When the people saw the thunder and lightning and heard the trumpet and saw the mountain in smoke, they trembled with fear*" (Exodus 20:18).

Moses told them, "*Do not be afraid. God has come to test you, so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning*" (Exodus 20:20). God displayed awesome power so the people would fear Him and refrain from sin. It is a lesson that is usually ignored where a gospel of compromise is taught in these last days.

Sin never fails to abound when there is no fear of God. Paul writes of those who live wicked lives, “*There is no fear of God before their eyes*” (Romans 3:18). Scripture repeatedly tells us that it is the fear of the LORD that turns us away from the evil snares that lead to death (Exodus 20:20; Deuteronomy 5:29; Psalm 111:10; Proverbs 14:27; 16:6; Luke 12:5). And when the people of Israel refused to fear God and obey His decrees, there were always severe consequences.

The prophet Isaiah tells us, “*The LORD Almighty is the one you are to regard as holy, he is the one you are to fear, he is the one you are to dread*” (Isaiah 8:13). God desires that we have a holy fear of Him so that we’ll turn from evil. We are to dread the consequences of sin, which is why we’re told to fear our heavenly Father by the Lord Jesus Himself.

Indeed, any true encounter with a holy God produces a sense of fear if not despair. With his vision of God’s holiness, Isaiah was filled with fear: “*I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips...and my eyes have seen the king, the LORD Almighty*” (Isaiah 6:5). A similar experience occurred when Peter had his first encounter with Jesus. Falling down on his knees, he said to Jesus, “*Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!*” (Luke 5:8).

The disciples saw Jesus calm a storm by commanding the wind and waves to still, and they were terrified (Mark 4:35-41). The Greek indicates that they were twice as fearful of the power they had just witnessed from Jesus as they had been of the storm itself. So it is Scripture tells us that the fear of the LORD is the very beginning of wisdom (Proverbs 1:7; 9:10; Psalm 111:10). Mercy and grace must never be thought of as a blanket of forgiveness that excuses deliberate disobedience against the will of God.

Moses built a tabernacle so that God could dwell in the presence of His people and be worshipped. But when Aaron’s sons dared to offer incense in a manner not authorized by God,

they were immediately destroyed. Later God took His Spirit from the temple because the people were unfaithful. Then He had Babylon invade Judah, allowing their enemy to destroy the temple and take the Israelites captive, killing a great many in the process.

Do not be mistaken about what took place in Hebrew history. Paul tells us these are examples for us and are written down as warnings for today (1 Corinthians 10:1-12). God Himself brought severe consequences on His chosen people because of His displeasure over their disobedience (e.g., Amos 4; 2 Chronicles 36:15-20).

Paul tells us his forefathers were under the cloud and drank from a spiritual rock that was Christ. In other words, they were a type of the church today. Now the temple of God is in hearts of those who believe in Jesus, not in buildings of stone. And we're accountable just as were people in ages past.

Many seem confused about what Paul is saying. Paul is warning that if God did not spare natural branches [the Jews], neither will He spare those who refuse to fear and obey Him today. This is why Jesus commands us to fear a holy, just, and righteous God. He wants to remove all doubt from our minds about accountability for our behavior.

“Do not be arrogant, but be afraid. For if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either. Consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God: sternness to those who fell, but kindness to you provided that you continue in his kindness. Otherwise, you also will be cut off” (Romans 11:20-22).

This theme is repeated in Paul's writing to the church in Galatia: *“Do not be deceived. God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows”* (Galatians 6:7,8). It is tragic misguided teachers ignore these biblical admonitions, and dismiss fear of the Lord as not relevant. Refining fear of the Lord will never exist if one believes salvation is gained at a single moment in time, never to be lost in spite of what a person sows thereafter.

No longer will such a person concern himself about the warning of Jesus to be ready, to keep watch, and that only *“he who stands firm to the end will be saved”* (Matthew 24:13). No longer will such a person heed Jesus’ warning that a lukewarm believer is rejected (Revelation 3:16). No longer will he heed the warning of Paul that those who continually indulge in sinful acts will never inherit the kingdom of God (Galatians 5:21).

Confusion can be caused by teaching salvation comes by grace through faith alone unless it’s taught that saving faith is never alone. Faith demands both repentance and obedience to be saving, and if this is not taught, it becomes tempting to neglect scriptures that say *“A man is justified by what he does, and not by faith alone”* (James 2:24). To ignore the demand of God for obedience leads many to forget that Jesus the *“source of eternal salvation to all who obey him”* (Hebrews 5:9). There is nothing in Scripture to support the idea that Jesus will be a source of salvation for one who deliberately disobeys.

Speaking through the prophet Ezekiel, God tells us, *“If a righteous man turns from his righteousness and commits sin and does the same detestable things the wicked man does, will he live? None of the righteous things he has done will be remembered”* (Ezekiel 18:24). Those who place their trust in God must never feel that they remain secure if they later decide to become rebellious against God’s revealed will.

God set before the Israelites both blessings and curses: *“blessing if you obey the commands of the LORD your God that I am giving you today; the curse if you disobey”* (Deuteronomy 11:27,28). This choice exists today. If we shun the world and walk in step with the Holy Spirit, blessings will be ours. But if we willfully disregard a need to walk in godly paths, blessings along with God’s protection will most certainly be lost.

As a result of poor teaching, church pews are filled with persons unconvicted by the besetting sins in their life. In these people there is as little fear of God as in those who never

darken the door of a church. We need to realize that fear of the Lord is our protection against hypocrisy. As David Wilkerson writes in his Times Square Church Pulpit Series (8-17-92), “I believe it is impossible to consistently walk in obedience and holiness unless you have the fear of God in your heart.” There are many scriptures that testify to the truth of his statement.

Finally, let us be aware that we are saved through the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit as well as through grace through faith. For in the end, it is all the work of God’s grace. *“From the beginning God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth”* (2 Thessalonians 2:13). Without fear of the Lord, we’re reluctant to submit to this sanctifying. Human nature is such that we are prone to resist having our comfort zone invaded, and change is not always terribly welcomed by our flesh.

But in letters to the churches in chapters two and three of Revelation, Jesus repeatedly says, *“I know your deeds.”* Let us carefully note that Jesus does not refer to our intentions. He refers only to our *deeds*. And many of Jesus’ parables are about the consequences of faith that is lacking in obedience as expressed through good deeds. This is what can result if fear of the Lord is lacking. So let us consider this matter and reach a conclusion similar to that of Solomon in his great wisdom:

“Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.”

Ecclesiastes 12:13

Chapter 13. *The Joy of Faith*

Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and grant me a willing spirit to sustain me.”

Psalm 51:12

We live in a time when the world is sailing uncharted waters in many respects, a time of both amazing technology and remarkable scientific advancement. Yet the ability of man to live in harmony is eroding. Moral standards are crumbling and homosexuality is shamelessly paraded before the public. Traditional family values are in decline, and out-of-wedlock births account for one-third of newborns in the U.S.

The media reports more people claim to be religious than ever before. But despite profession of faith, there's never been a time with less possession of Jesus as reflected in lives that are changed. The body of Christ is indeed suffering. This is nowhere more evident than in the lack of joy with so many believers. In fact, problems with divorce, depression, suicide, and addiction are as frequent within the church as outside it.

During the protest days in the 60's, lyrics of a popular song asked, "Where have all the children gone?" Today these lyrics might be rephrased to ask, "Where has the joy of people gone?" Guilt, fear, and anxiety torment so many in the church, yet Scripture speaks of the joy that is to characterize one's life in Christ, even during times of trial. It is obvious something is terribly wrong. But there's an answer! And it's found where answers to all perplexing problems are found...in God's word.

The inspired word of God never promises that those who believe in Jesus Christ will have a trouble-free existence. To the contrary, Jesus tells that we are to expect trouble in this life (John 16:33). At times it seems that the more godly a person,

the more adversity can be expected. Jesus explains it happens because the world hates Him for testifying that what the world does is evil (John 7:7). Those who bear a witness to Jesus share in that hatred (John 15:18). But the time is coming, after a period of grief, when the faithful *“will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy”* (John 16:22). Hallelujah for that promise!

Jesus exhorts us to take heart if trouble comes. We are assured of overcoming if we hold fast. *“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us”* (Romans 8:35,37). Any failure to overcome will never be the result of a lack of God’s grace or any external cause.

Failure to overcome results only from not keeping in a close relationship to Christ, in whom we are to trust and take refuge. *“The salvation of the righteous comes from the LORD; he is their stronghold in time of trouble. The LORD helps them and delivers them; he delivers them from the wicked and saved them because they take refuge in him”* (Psalm 37:39,40). Only if we look for a counterfeit refuge will we lose our joy.

After David committed adultery with Bathsheba, and then arranged the murder of her husband, severe consequences resulted. The child born of the affair died, and the sword never left David’s house. David experienced severe mental anguish and loss of fellowship with God for a season. He cried to God, asking his punishment be withdrawn. *“O LORD, do not rebuke me in your anger or discipline me in your wrath. For your arrows have pierced me, and your hand has come down upon me. My guilt has overwhelmed me like a burden too heavy to bear”* (Psalm 38:1,2,4). Clearly it isn’t biblical to teach that God will always forgive sin without discipline.

Guilt comes on believers as a result of failing to live in the will of God. The conscience is a spiritual alarm system and

it triggers guilt in response to our disobedience. One serious consequence of disobedience is the disappearance of joy. Both Hebrew and Greek words for joy imply sincere rejoicing and having a great delight and sense of gladness. David's joy was gone when he found himself confronted by the prophet Nathan over the sin of adultery and murder.

He cried for forgiveness: "*Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion, blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin*" (Psalm 51:1,2). Then David asked of the LORD: "*Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and grant me a willing spirit to sustain me*" (51:10-12). Note that David pleads for restoring of the joy that had marked his relationship with God.

David understands the conditional nature of joy. He also recognizes the need for God's help to create a pure heart. The heart [mind, will, and emotions] cannot be filled by lust, greed, envy, anger, jealousy or impure thoughts and still have joy and the peace that passes understanding. Such things are not simply compatible any more than oil and water easily mix.

David realizes his promising God that moral failure with Bathsheba won't happen again will not hold if left to his own devices. So he asks God to give him a new pure and holy heart. He also prays for *a steadfast spirit*. The Hebrew translated as steadfast is a word *kun* meaning established, firm, and being prepared. David doesn't want to repeat the rollercoaster like we often experience whenever temptation comes along.

Likewise, David is aware of need for a *willing spirit* to live in obedience to God's ways. We also need to realize that only God's power working through us makes this possible: "*It is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose*" (Philippians 2:13). Only the Holy Spirit can give us a spirit that is continually willing to obey.

It is in obedience that joy springs forth from the heart of man. Joy of the Lord will never exist in the presence of willful disobedience. When his joy left, David recognized that it could only be restored by repenting. This is why many in the church today have little joy in their lives. They're not keeping themselves free of besetting sin by depending on help from the Holy Spirit to put to death the misdeeds of the flesh.

For some, sin is not an external behavior like sexual immorality or anger or drunkenness. Instead the sin is a more subtle problem of greed or self-centeredness. **JOY** only comes to the extent we put **J**esus first, **O**thers second, and **Y**ourself last. Not having priorities in the correct order results in a total lack of contentment as well as absence of joy and inner peace.

Joy becomes a hallmark of life if we develop a heart of gratitude for blessings of God. Contentment isn't getting what we want, but is being satisfied with what we have. We can be so preoccupied with problems and cravings that we're almost like corpses when it comes to praising and thanking our Father in heaven for daily gifts. Gratitude is a first cousin to joy, and they usually keep very close company with each other..

When our lives are governed by the Spirit and remain in accord with the teachings of Jesus, the joy of the Lord will be our strength in time of trial. Joy is never a product of flesh, but is a fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22). Therefore joy is absent when the Spirit isn't permitted to guide us. This is why many in the church have such difficulty identifying with the words of James: *“Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that testing of your faith develops perseverance”* (James 1:2,3).

When we are not trusting in the Lord to work in us for our own good during trials, joy is absent (Romans 8:28). Often we make such an effort to force solutions by depending on our own strength and the wisdom of the world. But there are times the battle belongs to the Lord. Unless we depend on weapons having divine power, our own efforts will consistently fail.

The degree of joy in the midst of affliction is a good measure of a person's faith level. Certainly it is not pleasing to God when those who claim to have faith in His Son have total lack of joy during times of trial. In spite of incredible trials, Paul never lost his joy. Actually quite the opposite was true.

On one occasion Paul describes being harassed at each turn with conflicts on the outside and fears within. But in spite of this situation, Paul says, "*in all our troubles, my joy knows no bounds*" (2 Corinthians 7:4). He realized joy didn't depend on circumstances in his life, but came from his relationship with a God he knew was loving and always faithful.

There will be sustained joy in our life if we are making a sincere effort to apply the word of God to our life and realize that God will never forsake us with His love. The Holy Spirit is not only faithful to complete what He begins in us. He will bring joy like that of Paul who sang praises to the Lord while bound in prison chains.

We can be assured that Jesus came to set captives free ...and that includes us. The secret to having joy in our life and being set free is to submit our will to the Spirit's direction. He has been sent to live in us and to work God's plan through our lives. And that plan is nothing less than for us "*to be like God in true righteousness and holiness*" (Ephesians 4:24).

There is no greater reason for our lacking the joy that comes with salvation than failing to submit to the purpose for our creation. Only by separating from worldly ways and then directing our focus toward God's purpose for our lives will we find ourselves filled with joy of the Lord. And it requires that each of us make a decision.

The decision is whether or not we want the "best" God has for us. The greatest enemy of enjoying God's best can be what is quite good. At times we must be willing to sacrifice what is good and acceptable if we are seeking the very best of God's plans. This means putting our agenda and desires on the

altar, and saying to God, "What do You have in mind for me? I will give up everything to have the joy of living in your perfect will for my life. Open the door and I will walk through it."

This answer demands that we are willing to utterly abandon ourselves to God and stop leaning on our own understanding. It is the doorway to the abundant joy God intends for His children. Any joy that we try to manufacture or create by doing our own thing is always going to be counterfeit, and will never satisfy the thirst that God has placed in our hearts.

Until we trust the Holy Spirit to take full control of our life, our joy will always be less than what God has prepared for us. The Lord's prescription for receiving the abundant joy He offers is, "Trust and obey, for there's no other way!"

Let us stop making things more complicated than they really are! The Holy Spirit is waiting to produce the fullness of His fruit in our lives. And that includes joy unspeakable and full of glory.

"May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit."

Romans 15:1

Chapter 14. *The Patience of Faith*

A man's wisdom give him patience; it is to his glory to overlook an offense.

Proverbs 19:11

The mark of a person having saving faith is a changed life. Jesus calls it being “*born again*” when the Holy Spirit indwells a person who repents and places his trust in Jesus for salvation (John 3:3). Then the indwelling Spirit begins an inner working that manifests itself outwardly with changed behavior called sanctification. As Paul explains, “*God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth*” (2 Thessalonians 2:13).

Scripture teaches that salvation involves a belief in the truth and the working of grace known as sanctification. God’s purpose for this inner working of the Holy Spirit is that we be conformed to the likeness of Jesus. And Jesus’ character is beautifully seen in what Scripture calls the fruit of the Spirit: “*love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control*” (Galatians 5:22).

These qualities of character are not referred to as *fruits* but are referred to by the singular term “fruit.” They describe a lifestyle that is to be practiced in every single believer through the power of the indwelling Spirit. The particular virtue that is called *patience* (Greek *makrothymia*) means to show inward as well as outward control under those circumstances that are extremely difficult.

Patience is to bear with difficult situations and be long-suffering. It means to not resent being wrongly treated, to not take offense against others, and even to respond just as though

nothing of any significance had happened. This demands that one always be ready to forgive promptly. The identical Greek root word for patience is used as a verb in a parable taught by Jesus about a servant who was unmerciful. This parable needs to be etched into the memory of every Christian, because it illustrates a principle that is of extreme importance.

The disciple Peter was apparently experiencing some kind of problem with someone causing him repeated offense. Peter no doubt considered himself generous by being willing to be patient as he asked Jesus, “*Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?*” (Matthew 18:21). Jesus answered, “*Not seven times but seventy-seven times.*” Then Jesus gave a parable that begins with a familiar declaration, “*the kingdom of heaven is like.*”

This introduction makes it clear that what follows is a principle applying to the church. It is a warning to the church as well in this particular case. Jesus goes on to describe a king who wanted to settle accounts with servants in his kingdom, this king being a *type* of God. And one servant owed a debt so great that it could never be repaid, a reference to every person on earth, Christian and heathen alike. This debt is a *type* of our sin debt, a debt that required Jesus to do what we could never possibly do for ourselves.

This servant was about to lose everything because of his debt, including his freedom, family and all his possessions. But the servant fell to his knees and pleaded to the king, “*Be patient with me, and I will pay back everything*” (Matthew 18:26). In his asking for patience, the same Greek root word is used as when referring to patience as fruit of the Spirit. The servant asks the king to be patient in spite of the fact that any significant repayment of debt is not remotely possible. By his asking for patience, he is really seeking a spirit of mercy.

The king did show mercy and completely canceled the entire debt. The servant was set free and this is a picture of the

willingness of God to forgive any sinner who comes to Him with a contrite heart and spirit of repentance. But as we learn, forgiveness depends on a person then being willing to forgive others just as he has been forgiven.

This same servant went to a fellow servant who owed a rather small amount. Grabbing the man and choking him, he said, *“Pay back what you owe me!”* The man fell to his knees and begged, *“Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.”* But he refused to show his fellow servant any mercy, and had the man thrown into prison until such time as he could pay the entire debt.

When others saw what happened, they told the king. The king called the unmerciful servant and said to him, *“You wicked servant. I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?”* (Matthew 18:32,33). The king then turned this unmerciful servant over to the jailers to be tortured until he could pay back what he owed.

Jesus finishes the parable by saying, *“This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart”* (Matthew 18:35). We are thereby given a stern warning about the consequence of being unforgiving. This parable teaches our forgiveness by God is conditional and can be forfeited by having a bitter, unforgiving heart. Yet this principle is rarely emphasized in the churches of America.

When Peter came to ask Jesus about forgiving as many as seven times, he may have had a previous teaching of Jesus in mind. When disciples asked Jesus how to pray, He offered a model prayer outlining some key points, including the request, *“Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors”* (Matthew 6:12). Then Jesus added, *“For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins”* (Matthew 6:14,15).

There likely will be few things as crucial at the time of judgment as having forgiven others, aside from faith in Jesus. Unfortunately many Christians today are filled with bitterness, and harbor resentment over past offenses committed to them. The grave implication of Jesus' parable about this unmerciful servant has been compromised to a point where these people are not under any conviction over their failure to forgive.

Aside from the lack of faith, unforgiveness is likely the most dangerous sin in the church today. Human nature being as it is, there's a strong tendency for people to not only take offense but to hold onto offense. We devise a great multitude of excuses to justify bitterness over things that have violated our personal rights. And we tend to hold resentments close to our hearts for a long time in some instances.

It is true that repeat forgiveness for the same offense goes against human instinct. But just as Jesus Christ overcame evil with love, we are given no choice except to follow His example. That means repeatedly forgiving those who treat us wrongly. This is especially critical when it involves a person who is particularly close to us, even though patience in such a circumstance may be especially demanding at times.

To forgive when there is abuse and rejection by someone close can be extremely difficult. Patience is described as a *fruit of the Spirit* for this reason. It is only through grace that comes through working of the Spirit that forgiveness can even be considered at such times. We must remember that forgiving does not mean a hurtful offense never took place. And it does not mean that we're required to ignore our deep inner pain.

Likewise patience does not mean we're to make some excuse or forget what has happened. Rather, forgiving is what we must do to heal ourselves of bitterness and insure that God will continue to forgive us. We must take the warning of the parable to heart and not deceive ourselves about what Jesus is saying. The message is blunt! Forgiveness can be forfeited. And that means condemnation.

In my former medical practice, I never saw a greater way to invite one's own torture than acting like the unmerciful servant in this parable. A wide variety of illnesses can have its root in a bitter and unforgiving spirit. These can include heart attacks, high blood pressure, colitis, bleeding ulcers, headaches, and insomnia to mention a few.

Jonah was unforgiving because he didn't want Nineveh to be spared punishment that he felt they so richly deserved. As a result, he found himself imprisoned in the belly of a large fish. And if we are not careful, we can become imprisoned in the belly of an unforgiving spirit. And the consequences aren't very pretty, either in the short term or eternally.

When sand gets inside an oyster, the irritation caused can result in the formation of a beautiful pearl. However, the irritation caused in man by some kind of offense is unlikely to produce anything except a lump of resentment. If not promptly dealt with by forgiveness, it can easily embitter a person as well as spill over to defile others (Hebrews 12:15). This will not only risk destroying relationships on a human level, It will risk the loss of fellowship with God, and potentially even the loss of God's forgiveness.

For some, patience can be the most difficult cross that Jesus commands us to take up daily. It requires a deliberate and repeated surrendering of self to death. This is a conscious decision that must be followed by persistent prayer that God will work this fruit into one's heart by the power of the Holy Spirit. This includes not just hearing but practicing what Jesus has told us: *"I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you"* (Matthew 5:38; Luke 6:27,28).

Patience in loving those who cause offense is never an emotion. It is choosing to follow the true gospel rather than accept teaching of false prophets who compromise and water down the parable taught by Jesus about an unmerciful servant. In addition, patience can be used mightily by God for the sake

of His kingdom. It may result in bringing those who offend us into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ by overcoming evil with good.

Let us determine to unceasingly seek this fruit of the Spirit with the help of the Lord. It is such a worthy goal for us to shed the love of Christ abroad in a world that is filled with lost and desperate people.

"Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. Over all these virtues, put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity."

Colossians 3:12-14

Chapter 15. *Faith That Saves*

Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see live, for God's wrath remains on him.

John 3:36

There are things about what happened at Calvary that I do not really understand. One is how the love of God can be so great as to send His Only Son to pay the price necessary to redeem us. Another is that Jesus agreed to surrender His life of His own accord. A third is that after making such a sacrifice, we're still given the choice about being set free from bondage to sin and Satan.

This last puzzles me more than anything. After such incredible suffering, I would expect Jesus to insist that I accept Him as the Lord of my life. But Jesus doesn't insist. He loves so much that we are given free will to make our own decision. And that is difficult for me to understand.

It was the same for the two thieves crucified alongside Jesus. They were mockers of God, just as I was earlier in life. Because of acts against society, they were sentenced to death at the same time as God's Son. And given a choice. One chose to hurl insults at Jesus. But the other chose differently. His life was changed for eternity as he rebuked his fellow convict.

"Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what we deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Jesus answered him, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise." Luke 23:40-43

This thief demonstrated two crucial aspects of saving faith. He had godly sorrow for his sin and repented. And he believed and trusted in the crucified Jesus as his Lord and Savior. And as a consequence, he was granted eternal life.

Abraham and Ruth both had choices. They could have remained in their comfort zones and never left home. Ruth had lived her full life in Moab and her Jewish husband was dead. Abraham was nearing retirement and financially comfortable when called by God to leave Ur. No one would have criticized either one had they chosen to remain where they had ‘roots.’ We are given a choice as well, and making a decision is not always easy.

The reason deciding is not easy is because saving faith carries a price. It requires obedience and this involves leaving one’s comfort zone at times. It may involve separation from a relationship, quitting a particular type of work, changing one’s attitude toward possessions, or rejecting a previous lifestyle. There is always a change when faith is really saving, because Jesus commands each truly saved person, “*Follow me!*”

The mark of a true Christian is a changed life. And the most dangerous word in the English vocabulary may be the word *tomorrow*. If the call of Jesus is ignored today, tomorrow may never come. Indeed the life of those who reject the gospel may come to an end with abruptness: “*A man who remains stiff-necked after many rebukes will suddenly be destroyed – without remedy.*”

The kindness of God allows adversity and even causes adversity so that we will not be condemned with the world. “*When we are judged by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be condemned with the world.*” The woman with bleeding and a synagogue ruler were driven by adversity to seek a touch from Jesus. That was the situation in my life, as it has been with thousands of others. “*It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees.*” A great many

people only encounter Jesus after a major crisis has developed in their life.

Indeed, the Greek word *krisis* is literally translated as a decision time. That's what can happen when the winds of life blow against us. But a crisis time can be a blessing in disguise, forcing us to make a decision on the one choice having eternal consequences. It is choosing whether to give up our life so that we might save it: *"I tell you the truth...the man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life."*

There are no options to this choice. It is either a 'Yes' or 'No' decision. Many desire to straddle the fence, but Jesus demands a decision. And that decision is black or white. Gray is not an option, lest we be deceived. Yet many always attempt to soften this choice by compromise. So it is Paul warns about a coming of *"false apostles, deceitful workmen, masquerading as apostles of Christ."*

These false apostles are found throughout the church.. The salvation they hold out to the ignorant requires neither repentance nor sacrifice. *There is no cost to be saved! Just say this prayer after me!* Those who buy into this deception get exactly what they spend. They stay lost without eternal life.

The Jesus of the gospels says being a disciple is costly: *"Any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple."* Merchants of greed who fill many pulpits fear driving away customers by emphasis of Jesus' words. So they water down the parables that speak of salvation's true cost.

"The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it." Matthew 13:44-46

By describing Himself as a treasure hidden in a field, and as a pearl of great value, Jesus is telling us that the cost of discipleship is considerable. He teaches that the road to eternal life is not wide but narrow, and that *“only a few find it.”* Some teach most people will be saved, but that is in conflict with the teaching of Jesus. And dilution of the gospel leads to pollution in the church. Warnings are rarely heard about the coming wrath of God over sexual immorality, homosexuality, greed, anger and rage, pornography, and addictions of many types.

The faith of which Jesus speaks requires the hard work of building not on sand but on rock by becoming a doer of His words and not just a hearer. This is why Peter says it is hard even for the righteous to be saved. It is why Paul says we must go through many hardships to be saved. Saving faith avoids evil because of a refining fear of the Lord as well as because of devotion and love for Jesus.

Eternal life doesn't just mean being in the presence of God after resurrection from the dead. Eternal life is a state of righteousness, peace, and joy that exists during life on earth. Guilt for sin no longer hangs like a weight on one's shoulders, because there is surrender to the lordship of Jesus who already has paid the price for all sins, mistakes, and wrong decisions.

Do times of testing and temptation continue during life on earth for those with saving faith? Of course! But these trials have another flavor. The child of God realizes that struggles have spiritual benefit. They serve to draw a person into closer relationship and dependence on Jesus. God promises to work for the good in every situation for those who love him and are being conformed into the likeness of His Son.

Like the thief on the cross who repented, we can make a choice today. We have the same opportunity as the apostle Paul to turn from mistakes on the highway of life, and begin a new relationship with the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. When Paul tells us *“the righteous will live by faith,”* he is telling us saving faith is alive and active. Possession of eternal

life is conditional on a *living* faith, not on a decision made at a point in time past. It is those who continue to abide in Jesus and remain obedient to His teachings who will enter heaven.

Unfortunately, many are led into believing that saving faith is just *belief in truth*. But that isn't true. Demons believe in the truth about God, and James tells us that they shudder. Faith proves saving by what it does in and through a person. For while we are saved by grace through faith alone, the faith that saves us is never alone. James explains this very clearly.

“Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone.”

James 2:21,22,24 (underlining for emphasis)

A person is saved by what he does and not by faith alone. When faith is truly saving, it is expressed outwardly by the actions of a changed life. James is not telling us that we are saved by our actions. Rather he is saying that faith lacking in outward deeds that reflect an inner spiritual change is dead faith and not saving faith.

The good news of the gospel is that grace does more than save. Grace not only brings godly sorrow and repentance that leads to salvation. It also sets believers “*free from sin*” and causes them “*to will and to act according to [God’s] purpose.*” Grace provides the power needed for us to “*say ‘No’ to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age.*”. From the very beginning to the end, it is grace that works within those with saving faith so they can grow in Christ and endure to the end.

"Saving Faith"

This empowering with grace must be diligently sought through prayer, by study of God's word, through obedience to Jesus, and by remaining filled with the Holy Spirit. Jesus calls the initial experience of being filled with the Holy Spirit the gift promised by His Father. *"Wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit."*

It is baptism with the Holy Spirit, being filled with the power from on high, that makes it possible for us to become the witnesses that Jesus desires. *"You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you, and you will be my witnesses."* The Greek word *martyrs* translated as witnesses is the root from which the English word martyr is derived. This helps us to appreciate what Jesus is saying about our being witnesses.

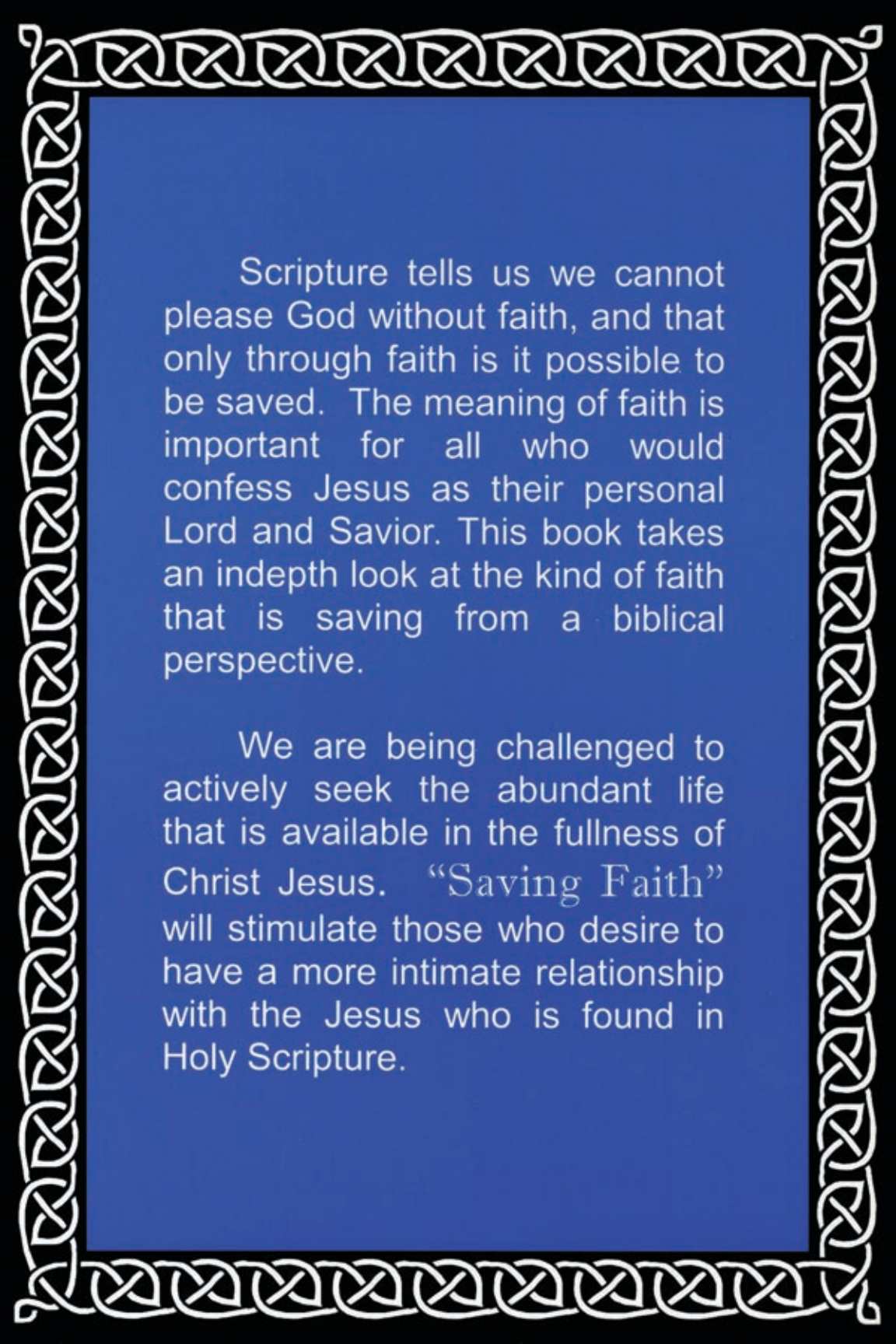
A martyr chooses to suffer or even die rather than deny his faith or the principles in which he believes.

This is what saving faith is all about!

Jesus is calling us to be martyrs!

And nothing less than that!!

"If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it." Luke 9:23,24



Scripture tells us we cannot please God without faith, and that only through faith is it possible to be saved. The meaning of faith is important for all who would confess Jesus as their personal Lord and Savior. This book takes an indepth look at the kind of faith that is saving from a biblical perspective.

We are being challenged to actively seek the abundant life that is available in the fullness of Christ Jesus. “Saving Faith” will stimulate those who desire to have a more intimate relationship with the Jesus who is found in Holy Scripture.