

If Anyone Does Not Provide for His Relatives

If a widow has children or grandchildren, these should learn to put their religion into practice by caring for their family and so repaying their parents and grandparents...If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever. -1 Timothy 5:4, 8

The church at Ephesus had a system whereby they took care of widows in need. Paul devotes a lengthy section of his letter to Timothy laying down some policy and procedures regarding this ministry to the widows of the church. If a widow was older (over sixty), had no means of support and no family to take care of her needs, it was the responsibility of the church to do so. But if there were those in the church who had a mother or grandmother who needed help, they, not the church, were to be responsible for supplying her needs. In practical terms, this would enable the church to take care of those who had no other visible means of support. In exemplary terms, it would mean that families would function as they ought and God would be pleased (see v 4).

A just and compassionate society will always take care of its elderly. But the primary responsibility to take care of those who can no longer provide for themselves lies with the family. This is what God expects. There are few greater scandals than when families will not take care of their young, infirm, or aging members. People talk about juvenile delinquency, but adults who are delinquent in caring for their dependent children and aging parents are guilty of a far greater crime.

There is a universal recognition of this principle. That is why Paul says, *“If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.”* If unbelievers understand this and take care of their own, how much more should those who claim to know God? You have denied the faith and should not call yourself a Christian if you will not take care of those in your family who are unable to take care of themselves.

The temptation for those in the church at Ephesus (and the temptation for those in western society today) was to let someone else take care of the needs of their aging parents. “Hey, the church has a list of widows that they care for. Let’s see if we can get Grandma on the list.” I’m not saying that we as Christians should not take advantage of social assistance, housing and programs that help provide for the needs of our aging relatives. But it is up to us to take care of those who took care of us—to the satisfaction of the Lord.

If unbelievers take care of their own, how much more should those who claim to know God?

An Accusation Against an Elder

Do not entertain an accusation against an elder unless it is brought by two or three witnesses. Those who sin are to be rebuked publicly, so that the others may take warning. I charge you...to keep these instructions without partiality, and to do nothing out of favoritism. -1 Timothy 5:19-21 [The following is adapted from the Policy and Procedures of Living Springs New Testament Church. The terms Elder, Pastor and Overseer are used interchangeably.]

In the New Testament, the elders were given the task of shepherding and overseeing the affairs of the church (see 1 Peter 5:1-2; 1 Timothy 5:17; Acts 20:28). Since the foundation of New Testament church government is trust, discipline and removal of elders is based on the principle of violation of trust and how much any violation has affected the ability of the sheep to trust the shepherds. The elders/shepherds of a church are responsible for guarding the trust given to them by holding each other accountable in their personal lives and ministries (this is why the New Testament pattern is to have a plurality of pastors over a church). Some may think it a conflict of interest for the elders to be self-governing. The truth, however, is that it is the highest interest of the elders to protect the sheep and maintain the trust of the eldership. If they are true shepherds, they will be the ones most able and willing to discipline a fellow elder who hurts the sheep or violates their trust.

So, what happens if an elder sins? First of all, any accusation against a pastor should not be entertained unless it conforms to the biblical principle of being established by more than one witness. Personal offense and vendettas are possible and cannot be allowed to undermine the trust of an overseer. On the other hand, if it can be established that there has been a violation of trust—that matter must be dealt with forthrightly. Normally when a Christian sins against another Christian the first step is to try and work it out one to one, and if the offending person repents that is the end of the matter (see Matthew 18:15). In cases where an elder is setting a bad example in personal life, doctrine or public ministry, correction must take place publicly because the wrongdoing was done publicly (i.e., Paul confronting Peter in Galatians 2:11-14). Paul’s exhortation to Timothy is that partiality or favoritism have no place in any of these deliberations (v21).

Keep in mind that all disciplinary measures should be redemptive, not punitive. The goal of any discipline or removal of an elder is restoration of trust of the sheep in their shepherds. Restoration to the office of elder may or may not be possible in the case of removal. That depends on the degree of the violation of the trust and what is best for the church.

The foundation of New Testament church government is trust

People Who Want to Get Rich

People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs. -1 Timothy 6:9-10

Have you ever been to a multi-level marketing business recruitment meeting? Look into the eyes of those assembled and what are you likely to find? Dollar signs. Or tune into late-night TV with its plethora of infomercials. Sandwiched between the programs that appeal to your sense of vanity will be the latest "rich in thirty days" method. It's not that I believe that multi-level marketing is wrong or that the latest wealth-building method won't work if you do—but these business opportunities are bound to appeal mostly to *people who want to get rich*.

Is there anything wrong with wanting to get rich? Well...yes. *People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction...Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.* The desire for money can take over a person's life. *Greed...is idolatry* (Col 3:5). The longing to be rich will cause us to do many things that we would not do otherwise—lie, cheat, steal, neglect our family, forego God's call on our lives, yoke ourselves with unbelievers, take on excessive debt, make unwise investments, sell our souls. The spectacle of lives and families shipwrecked in the wake of the love of money is all too familiar.

Is money the root of all evil, as the original KJV puts it? No, it is the love of money which is the root of all kinds of evil. Selfishness (from which the love of money springs) is the root of all evil. Is it wrong to be rich? Not at all. It depends on a person's attitude toward money. And it just so happens that those who want to be rich for the sake of being rich do not have the right attitude and have made themselves susceptible to *ruin, destruction and many griefs*.

Paul begins this discussion about money by saying, "*Godliness with contentment is great gain*" (v6). Those who have found contentment through their relationship with God already have that which those who want to get rich are ultimately pursuing: Satisfaction. The highest contentment is found in God. And for those who have found it, those dollar signs are strangely missing from their eyes.

***Is there anything wrong
with wanting to get rich?
Well...yes.***

God Did Not Give Us a Spirit of Timidity

God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline. So do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord, or ashamed of me his prisoner. But join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God... -2 Timothy 1:7-8

There are a number of things for which the Lord has little patience for. Timidity is one of them. The meek shall inherit the earth but the cowardly will find themselves in the lake of fire (see Revelation 21:8). *The kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing, and forceful men lay hold of it* (Mt 11:12). "*My righteous one will live by faith. And if he shrinks back, I will not be pleased with him,*" the Lord says (He 10:38). *For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline.*

Why is it that our timidity is not pleasing to the Lord? Because timidity shows a lack of faith and it is faith that pleases the Lord. Timidity and unbelief are linked. Consider the ten unbelieving (and timid) spies of Numbers 13 or the leaders of the Jews who would not confess their faith in Jesus for fear of the Pharisees (see John 12:42). This is why Paul urged Timothy, "*Do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord or ashamed of me his prisoner* and why Jesus said, "*If anyone is ashamed of me and my words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his glory*" (Lk 9:26).

The NIV translation of the Greek word "deilos" as "timidity" is more precise than the KJV, "fear." Deilos is different from "phobos," the more common Greek word with which we are familiar. Deilos connotes more specifically the idea of timidity or cowardice (see Revelation 21:8; Mark 4:40).

So, God did not give us a spirit of timidity. He gave us a spirit of *power* ("dunamis") so that we would not shrink back but *be strong in the power of his might* (Eph 6:10 KJV), as David was as he ran to the battle line to face Goliath. God gave us a spirit of *love* ("agape") so that the love of Christ would compel us (see 2 Corinthians 5:14) to go places and do things from which the flesh would want to shrink back. And he gave us a spirit of *self-discipline* ("sophronismos," literally: "sure thinking") so that we would not waver in unbelief.

There is no place in the kingdom of God for timidity. The surety and power of God's promises preclude it and the Spirit which he gave us knows nothing of it.

***The meek shall inherit the
earth but the cowardly will
find themselves in the
lake of fire***

Reliable Men Who Will Also Be Qualified To Teach Others

You then, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others. -2 Timothy 2:1-2

I have heard it said that the task of making disciples is not truly successful until there is a third generation of disciples. It is one thing to produce children but unless your children produce children, your legacy in the gospel will go no further than those you are personally responsible for. Unless there is reproduction of the faith to the third generation and beyond, your religion is dying and will be dead with your immediate disciples. That is why Paul said to Timothy, his dear son in the faith, *“The things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others.”*

This is the principle of multiplication. Paul begins by discipling Timothy. Timothy then teaches a reliable man who is also able to teach someone else. There are four generations of believers in Paul’s statement. This is exponential growth. The goal should not just be the addition of believers to the church but the multiplication of disciples. If I am a discipleship superman and personally disciple twenty people a year for forty years, I have fulfilled the great commission to the tune of 800 people in my lifetime. Not bad. But what if those 800 do not reproduce themselves? My work lasts only a short time. Conversely, what if I entrusted the gospel to just three people who were reliable enough to teach three others who in turn invested themselves in three others? If it took one year to produce each generation of new disciples, instead of being responsible for producing 800 disciples in my lifetime, in just twenty years I would have produced 3,486,784,401 disciples—over half the population of the world. You may say, “That’s purely theoretical; it is ridiculous to think that you could be responsible for discipling over three billion people in twenty years time.” Sure, it’s theoretical but it illustrates the truth of the power of exponential growth. If we would concentrate on equipping others to equip others, we may not get three billion in twenty years, but we may get a whole lot more than we got in the last twenty years.

It is natural for the gospel to produce life. Life begets life. It is a primary principle of the natural order. How else has the human race survived and flourished over its six millennia? Let’s reproduce ourselves to the third generation and beyond and see how Jesus will build his church.

The task of making disciples is not truly successful until there is a third generation of disciples

Who Correctly Handles the Word of Truth

Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.-2 Timothy 2:15

God has given teachers to the body of Christ for the express purpose of guarding sound doctrine and teaching what is in line with the gospel of Christ. The Scriptures are able to make us *wise for salvation* (2 Tim 3:15). The Bible is *God-breathed and is useful for teaching...* (2 Tim 3:16) but that teaching will only be useful if the Scriptures are handled correctly. The mishandling of the word of God will lead to all kinds of trouble and error. The “open-minded” might not think so but a bad piece of doctrine can actually lead someone to hell. There is such a thing as truth. The Bible contains the *word of truth* and we must learn to *correctly handle* it.

I once had a man tell me that you could believe in the kind of God that suited your tastes because the Bible taught us to “Love the Lord your God...,” (whoever that God might be). How do we avoid such error and *correctly handle* (the Greek is “orthotomeo,” an obscure word which literally means “to cut straight” but may well have meant “to distribute evenly”) the *word of truth*? Let me give you a few simple guidelines:

How do we correctly handle the word of truth?

-Spiritual things are spiritually discerned (see 1 Corinthians 2:6-16). We must exercise the mind of Christ in seeking to understand the Scriptures.

-Identify and be mindful of your biases as you handle the word of truth. As much as possible, try to be objective and fresh as you approach the task of understanding and applying Bible verses. Be open to the idea that there will always be some point of doctrine for which you need correction.

-The meaning of any scripture is first understood in its immediate context and is also interpreted in the light of other scriptures relating to the same subject. It is unwise to build any doctrine on obscure passages that are hard to cross-reference and do not lend themselves to definitive interpretation.

-The most helpful tool in Bible interpretation is an analytical concordance which allows you observe how the same Hebrew and Greek words are used in other passages of Scripture. You don’t have to be a Hebrew or Greek scholar to correctly handle the word of truth but it really helps to be able to handle a concordance.

The church is in need of those who can correctly handle the word of truth. Do your best to be counted among those who can be trusted to do so.

There Will Be Terrible Times in the Last Days

There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God—having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with them. -2 Timothy 3:1-5

We all know, whether instinctively or through a knowledge of the Scriptures, that *there will be terrible times in the last days*. Anyone who would deny this is out of touch with the witness of the Spirit, has forgotten the sordid history of the human race and doesn't take seriously the lethal blend of the world, the flesh and the devil. I believe that there will also be a glorious revealing of the kingdom of God in those same days. And judging from Paul's description of the condition of society at that time, it is not hard to imagine that *the last days* are upon us.

In a sense, we have been in the last days since the beginning of the New Covenant (see Acts 2:17 and Hebrews 1:2). The hope of Jesus' return was imparted to the church at the moment of his ascension (see Acts 1:11) and we have called out "Maranatha" ever since. Of course, Jesus gave us signs to know specifically when his return would be immanent (see Matthew 24 and Luke 21). Paul's depiction of the last days here in 2 Timothy certainly had application for his day, for after describing the ungodly behavior and attitudes of the people of the last days he tells Timothy, "*Have nothing to do with them.*" There were "terrible times" in Timothy's day and throughout the history of mankind. But Jesus indicated that as the end of the age came near, there would be an *increase of wickedness* (Mt 24:12). Here then, is where we can use 2 Timothy 3:1-5 as a barometer of last days' wickedness. It may be different in your part of the world, but it seems to me that the type of godlessness which Paul describes is on the rise. Sin is more blatant and moral restraint is less conspicuous. The love of self, the love of money, the love of pleasure, disobedience to parents, ingratitude, hedonism and powerless religion is on the increase

Whether this tide will be stemmed by a moral resurgence of some kind or whether it will be as in the days of Noah where the Lord will *make a sudden end to all who live on the earth* (Zeph 1:18), we can believe that *where sin increased, grace increased all the more* (Ro 5:20) and the *terrible times* of the last days will be accompanied by the timely revelation of the sons of God, the triumph of the church and the glorious return of Jesus.

Sin is more blatant and moral restraint is less conspicuous

I Give You This Charge

In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge... -2 Timothy 4:1

To give a "charge" is "to give instructions to or command authoritatively" (Webster). Paul's charge to Timothy is often used as the basis for an installation service for a new pastor or for a commissioning to Christian ministry—and rightly so. Let's take a look at the responsibilities that Paul expected Timothy to carry out in the ministry.

Preach the word: First and foremost is the ministry of the word. Along with prayer, this is what the early apostles devoted themselves to (see Acts 6:4). Preaching the word is not limited to exegetical sermons; it is preaching the Word of God, Jesus, whenever the opportunity arises.

Be prepared in season and out: This preparedness is likely connected with the preaching of the word. The Greek has to do with being ready to go at a moment's notice. The idea is the same as when Jesus said, "*Be dressed ready for service and keep your lamps burning*" (Lk 12:35).

Correct, rebuke and encourage: To raise-up healthy disciples (and children) we must do all three. Here is where many pastors fall short.

Keep your head in all situations: The Greek is literally "be sober" but is most often understood as exercising self-control. The NIV translation here is pertinent. Those who "keep their heads" prove to be the best leaders.

Endure hardship: Well over half of those who start out in vocational Christian ministry are out of the ministry in ten years and less than a quarter finish in the ministry. We should expect hardship and seek the grace of God to persevere (see John 16:33).

Do the work of an evangelist: Despite what some think, Timothy was an evangelist. But the work of an evangelist can often be neglected because of the demands of the ministry; hence Paul's exhortation.

Discharge all the duties of your ministry: Both Jesus and Paul were able to claim the complete discharge of their duties at the end of their lives (see John 17:4 and 2 Timothy 4:7). To do so is what it means to hear "*Well done, good and faithful servant*" (Mt 25:23).

It was in view of the appearing of Jesus and his kingdom that Paul gave Timothy this charge. May the Lord find us faithful to have discharged all the duties of our ministry when he returns.

Well over half of those who start out in vocational Christian ministry are out of the ministry in ten years and less than a quarter finish in the ministry

To the Pure, All Things Are Pure

To the pure, all things are pure, but to those who are corrupted and do not believe, nothing is pure. In fact, both their minds and consciences are corrupted. -Titus 1:15

A pure-hearted young man approached me after I had taught on knowing God. He said that the message was tremendously insightful and helpful. I thanked him for his encouragement but I knew that it wasn't so much my teaching but the state of his heart that allowed him to receive the blessing. *"To the pure, all things are pure,"* I thought.

It's true. *To the pure, all things are pure.* Not in the sense that pure-hearted people never see anything wrong with anything; but in the sense that everything they see is filtered through the purity of their hearts. The word for "pure" is the Greek word "katharos" from which we get the English terms, "catheter" and "catharsis." The Greek verb "katharizo" means, "to make clean." A pure heart will serve as a catheter for the soul, preserving it from bitterness, jealousy, unforgiveness and all things that defile.

The pure are sometimes seen as naive. But the Scripture says that we are to be *wise about what is good, and innocent about what is evil* (Ro 16:19). To be innocent about what is evil because of a pure heart does not mean that a person is oblivious to all things evil. The pure are actually very sensitive to the presence and practice of evil and can feel its effect more deeply than those without purity of heart. No, they may not understand the dirty joke but that's because they simply do not think in those terms. If you want to call that being naive, then so be it.

To those who are corrupted and do not believe, nothing is pure. You have probably known people who filter everything through their polluted minds and can't hold a conversation without using profanity. *Both their minds and consciences are corrupted.* These are the ones who are naive-naive about what is good. They don't think about what is *true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent or praiseworthy* (Php 4:8). They are *detestable, disobedient, and unfit for doing anything good* (Tit 1:16).

Notice that the difference between the pure and the corrupted is faith. Those who are pure...believe. *Those who are corrupted...do not believe.* Love sees and believes for the highest (see 1 Corinthians 13). In the best sense of the term, the pure are like Pollyanna, the epitome of optimism who always saw the good in everything. *To the pure, all things are pure.* As Tozer would say, "May their tribe increase."

A pure heart will serve as a catheter for the soul, preserving it from bitterness, jealousy, unforgiveness and all things that defile.

The Grace of God That Brings Salvation

For 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

Two questions come out of Titus 2:11-12: How is it that *the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men?* And, how is it that the grace of God that brings salvation *teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age?*

The answer to the first question may lie in the translation rendered by the NASB which says, *For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men.* It is not that every creature has heard the gospel and had the grace of salvation revealed to them. But the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all. In this same sense, Jesus is *the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the whole world* (Jn 1:29) and yet the whole world is yet to know it.

Grace enables where the law disables

The answer to the second question may be illustrated in a story from my early Christian life. Soon after I was saved, I was invited to a get-together with some guys from my not-to-distant party days. I knew that there would be alcohol and marijuana there, but I was praying for the salvation of my friends and wanted to share Jesus with them. As the joint went around, I would just pass it on without partaking. As I passed it for the third or fourth time, my friend Bob asked me why I didn't get high anymore. I had not really thought that question through but I answered from my heart. As everyone there listened, I told Bob that I had found a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and I didn't want to do anything that would mess up the connection that I had with him. What I was saying was that the grace of God had appeared to me and brought salvation and I didn't want to jeopardize a good thing. We have such a great salvation that, by all rights, it should preclude any pursuit of *ungodliness and worldly passions*, and it sets us up *to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age.*

Grace enables where the law disables. *For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature* (Ro 8:3) the grace of God is able to do. James Ryle defines grace as "God's empowering presence enabling me to be all that I was created to be and to do all that God called me to do." This is *the grace of God that brings salvation.*

Warn a Divisive Person

Warn a divisive person once, and then warn him a second time. After that, have nothing to do with him. -Titus 3:10

A pastor friend came to me with a problem. There was a man in his church who was against the practice of taking public offerings. The man believed that all giving in the church should be done privately. My friend had considered his viewpoint and had spoken with him on the subject, letting him know that it would continue to be the practice of the church to pass the offering plate during their worship gatherings. But the man continued to oppose the practice, going to others in the church to influence them in favor of his viewpoint. The pastor asked me what he should do. I told him, “*Warn a divisive person once, and then warn him a second time. After that, have nothing to do with him.*”

Divisiveness is a serious thing and we must take it seriously. In Jesus’ high priestly prayer in John 17 he says, “*I pray...for those who will believe in me...that all of them may be one*” (Jn 17:20-21). To cause division in the church is to nullify the prayer of the Lord. I am not talking about the differences to which Paul refers in 1 Corinthians 11:19 but those things which arise from *selfish ambition, dissensions, and factions* (Gal 5:20). These are the result of carnality and have no place whatsoever in the church. Division is a cancer. Those who cause it and will not repent must be cut off. That’s why Paul said, “*I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them*” (Ro 16:17).

In the early years of my ministry, a man in our church, reputed to be a pillar, was dissatisfied with the style of our worship. He would stand with his arms folded across his chest during worship, refusing to participate. He, his wife and another couple had a chance to share some of their “concerns” with us and we were attempting to be sensitive to their context. On a subsequent Sunday he made a scene during worship, walking out of the sanctuary in a huff to stand in the foyer in protest. Days later, after we as pastors discussed the proper remedy for the situation, I approached him and said, “Your action is clearly divisive and the Bible says, ‘*Warn a divisive person once, and then warn him a second time. After that, have nothing to do with him.*’ Consider this your first warning.” He said, “What right do you have to tell me what I can and can’t do?” I said, “Have you ever heard of pastoral authority?” At that point he knew that he would have to change his attitude or no longer be welcome to be part of the fellowship. He chose not to return to the church.

Division is a cancer. Those who cause it and will not repent must be cut off.

To the Church That Meets in Your Home

To Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker, to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier and to the church that meets in your home. -Philemon 1:1-2

Most people, when they think of “church,” picture a building, large or small, with an identifying cross, where Christians gather to worship on Sunday morning. Most of us know, however, that the church is not the place where people meet. Church is the people who meet. In Paul’s letter to Philemon, who was a Christian from the city of Colosse, he also addresses Apphia (presumably Philemon’s wife) and Archippus. And whether he is referring to the home of Philemon and Apphia or to the home of Archippus, he speaks of “*the church that meets in your home.*”

The church of the New Testament did not have a surplus of buildings. In fact, you can’t find even one in its pages.

But you can find homes where the church met. The church began in a house (see Acts 2:2). When Peter was arrested, where did the church gather to pray for him? To the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark (see Acts 12:12). When Saul of Tarsus wreaked persecution on the believers, he didn’t send a SWAT team to the First Church of Jerusalem located at the corner of Kidron and Siloam. In order to find the church he had to go *from house to house* to get them and drag them off to prison (Ac 8:3). When Paul preached in Ephesus, he taught them *publicly and from house to house* (Ac 20:20). The logical assumption is that these houses were the places where the church gathered on a regular basis. And, we find house churches in both Rome (see Romans 16:5; 1 Corinthians 16:19) and in Laodicea (see Colossians 4:15).

Now, the early church did find public places to gather. Every day, the church of Jerusalem gathered in the temple courts (see Acts 2:46; Acts 5:12). For two years, Paul met with the believers in and around Ephesus at a place known as *the lecture hall of Tyrannus* (Acts 19:9). And the early Jewish Christians would have still been attached to the synagogue as their gathering place. But it is interesting to note that, in the New Testament, you can’t find the church owning anything similar to what we know as a church building. And consider the church in China. They are virtually prohibited from having designated buildings. Has this stopped the church from prospering? Au contraire.

It sounds like I am against having church buildings. I’m not, necessarily. We do need a place to gather. But the early church did very well without them—and maybe we can learn something from that.

The early church did very well without church buildings

Perhaps the Reason He Was Separated from You

Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good—no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. -Philemon 1:15-16

Life has its twists and turns, its ironies and coincidences. Those which are good dawn in the heart of Providence rather than coincidence.

Who knows how Paul met Onesimus? Paul, the apostle of Jesus, in chains at Rome; Onesimus, a runaway slave from Asia Minor. Was their meeting a coincidence? Hardly. The fugitive slave of Philemon, Paul's friend from Colosse, comes face to face with the great apostle in Rome, a thousand miles from Colosse as the crow flies. And when it is all said and done the young man is no longer running—no longer a fugitive. He has found a home in the family of God and has become a dear son to the aging apostle.

Paul may have known this runaway slave when Onesimus served in the house of Philemon. After all, Philemon was Paul's *dear friend and fellow worker* (v1), though we don't know for sure if Paul had spent any time in Colosse. If he did, it is reasonable to assume that Paul would have been to the home of Philemon and would have met Onesimus. Paul may have known Onesimus, but it is clear that Onesimus would not have known the Lord because it was not until Rome that he became a spiritual son to Paul and a dear brother in the faith (see vs 10 and 16).

Exactly how Onesimus wound up in Rome is pure speculation. If he had known Paul previously and heard he was in Rome, he may have purposely travelled there to seek his counsel in a time of personal need and confusion. Perhaps their meeting was more of a "coincidence." Onesimus may have himself been a prisoner and the beneficiary of a divine appointment courtesy of the Roman penal system. Or he could have still been on the run—pursuing obscurity among the masses of the great city far from home, somehow coming into contact with Paul while there. However it happened—there can be no doubt that it was a "God-thing." Travelling half a world away, Onesimus found his destiny as a believer in Christ.

Paul puts it all in philosophical perspective for Philemon: *Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good—no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother.* Paul was sending Onesimus back to Philemon. The circle would be complete. The purposes of God would be fulfilled. Another twist. Another turn. Another irony. Another coincidence.

Was their meeting a coincidence? Hardly.

Are Not All Angels Ministering Spirits Sent to Serve?

Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation? -Hebrews 1:14

The angel craze has waned. "Touched by an Angel" is off the air. Publishers are looking elsewhere for the next bonanza of spiritual interest. And sales of angelic portraits and ceramics are down. Of course, this does not mean that angels are any less important. But what really is the truth about angels?

Perhaps the most revealing biblical description concerning angels is given in Hebrews 1:14: "*Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation?*" This says a lot. It says that angels are spiritual beings. It says that they do not act of their own accord but are "sent." It says that they were created to serve. And it says that the ones they serve are those who will inherit salvation—those of us who know, or will know, Jesus.

Cute little baby or feminine angels with wings and harps they are not

Angels are spirits. They are not flesh and blood. They cannot die (see Luke 20:36). They have no temporal physical needs like food or shelter. Even though their personas are masculine, they are asexual in the sense that they do not reproduce after their kind (see Matthew 22:30). They exist in the spiritual realm and can move among the first, second and third heavens.

Angels are sent. They come to the aid of God's people and mete out various judgments of God on the earth. They do the bidding of God. They are perfectly obedient. This was Jesus' inference when he taught us to pray that the will of God be done on earth just as it is in heaven.

Angels serve the people of God. In the Scriptures they protected Lot, killed the Assyrian army, shut the mouth of lions, delivered the word of the Lord, encouraged and strengthened both Jesus and Paul, rescued Peter from prison and did many other wonderful and fearful things.

One other thing I will mention. Most of the depictions we see of angels are poor and inaccurate reflections of the fearful creatures they really are. Cute little baby or feminine angels with wings and harps they are not. People shook with fear, fell down as though dead and were "sore afraid" in the presence of the angel of the Lord.

If angels are *ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation*, what does that mean for you? It means that guardian angels are not a myth. It means that those stories you have heard of powerful angels coming to the aid of Christians in trouble have validity. And it means that you have advocates and protectors in the spiritual realm—sent just for you.

He Might Taste Death for Everyone

At the present we do not see everything subject to him. But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone. -Hebrews 2:8-9

Walk into a public place; be it a store, a restaurant or even a bar and approach a stranger at random and ask, "Why did Jesus die on the cross?" Chances are that they will be able to tell you that Jesus died on the cross for our sins. This is the essence of the gospel and most people know it. They may not know all the intricacies or implications of "the atonement" but it is so fundamental to the gospel that the truth that Jesus died for our sins becomes apparent at even the most cursory look at the gospel story.

But it takes more than a glimpse of what Jesus did to truly appreciate the benefits of his death for those who trust him. Not only did he atone (make up) for our sins on the cross but he actually tasted death for everyone. The death that was ours as due payment for our wrongdoing and rebellion was literally experienced by Jesus on our behalf.

Jesus ate death

To taste something is to experience it. When it comes to food, you can see it, smell it, feel it and sometimes even hear it but you haven't experienced food until you have tasted it. Some things are enjoyable to the taste and others are repugnant. The most memorable meals are either especially good or especially bad. We savor the good and we loathe the bad.

Jesus ate death. He experienced it to the utmost. He did it so we wouldn't have to. The most vile, sickening, poisonous taste ever tasted was tasted on our behalf. He didn't have to eat it. Sin by sin, we heaped it up for nobody but ourselves. But because of the grace of God and the willingness of Jesus, he consumed that sin and tasted the death that was rightfully ours.

The inspired author of Hebrews points out that God has subjected all things to Jesus *yet, at the present, we do not see everything subject to him* (2:8). But what we presently do see is Jesus who *suffered death* and is *now crowned with glory and honor*. We see and remember what he did for us and the fact that *by the grace of God*, he experienced the putrid taste of death for everyone.

So, the next time you bite into that bad piece of meat, drink that sour milk, taste that moldy bread or have to swallow that awful medicine—times that nasty taste by ten-thousand and think of Jesus.

He Had to Be Made like His Brothers in Every Way

He had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted. -Hebrews 2:17-18

Perhaps the verse that best summarizes the grand theme of the book of Hebrews is found in 4:15. It says, *We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin*. The subject of Jesus' humanity and his role as a sympathetic and efficacious great high priest is first mentioned in Hebrews 2:17: *He had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted*.

The writer of Hebrews is clear. Jesus had to become like us *in every way* so that his empathy and atonement would

Was it possible for Jesus to sin?

not be lacking in any way. If Jesus was never tempted, if he never suffered, if he never knew heartache and joy and weakness and comfort—how could he relate to us? How could we relate to him? The role of the high priest was to mediate the sins of the people before a holy God. The high priest represented the people to God as well as represented God to the people. The high priest had to be "one of us." So, Jesus was made like us in every way.

Does this mean that it was possible for Jesus to sin? You tell me: Is it really temptation if there is no possibility to sin? "But wasn't he God?" you might ask. The whole point of the incarnation was that the immortal would be made mortal. The divine would become human. And the impervious would become vulnerable. What would have happened if Jesus had sinned? I don't know. Maybe the whole world would have gone down the toilet. All I know is that he didn't sin and paradise was regained.

When the Scriptures say that Jesus was made like his brothers in every way, does this mean that Jesus was not eternal but created? The whole of Scripture teaches otherwise. He was made like us in the sense that he was fashioned in our image from his state of eternal glory. Yes, he had an awareness of his heavenly glory and no, he was not born into sin, but he became exactly like us. And because he did, he became *a merciful and faithful high priest...making atonement for the sins of the people...able to help those who are being tempted*.

Encourage One Another Daily

See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness. - Hebrews 3:12-13

There is a mentality about church life operative in many Christians that relegates the cultivation of the things of the Spirit to the worship hour on Sunday morning. It's almost as if the pronouncement of the benediction rings some sort of subconscious bell that dismisses our spiritual faculties for another week. We can go on with our "normal" lives until we reconvene next Sunday or, if we are really spiritual, next Wednesday night.

The New Testament Church was not a one or even two day a week church. The church in Jerusalem gathered daily in the temple courts as well as in smaller groups in homes (see Acts 2:46). They didn't see it as a burden or a religious duty. They wanted—no doubt hungered—to be together to be built up in their most holy faith as they devoted themselves to *the apostles' teaching, to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer* (Ac 2:42).

Here in Hebrews, the church is exhorted to *encourage one another daily*.

If we want to be delivered from *a sinful, unbelieving heart* and if we want our spiritual life to flourish, we need daily encouragement. We need to be making *the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil* (Eph 5:16). When we turn to the fellowship we are turning to God. And when we turn away from God, guess what? We are going to avoid the fellowship.

The will of God for every Christian is that they be in fellowship every single day. Impractical? Infeasible? Out of the question? Not for the early church, evidently. This was their pattern and a key to their phenomenal church experience. Satan's plan is to make us *hardened by sin's deceitfulness*. But he can only do that if he is able to isolate us and keep us from the fellowship of the saints. That hardening will not happen if we have daily interaction with and encouragement from other Christians who take an interest in our spiritual well being.

We shouldn't think that we can stay spiritually healthy when our contact with the people of God is limited to once a week. We have to find time and place to be with believers—to build and be built in the faith. If your commitments and priorities won't allow you to receive regular, even daily, sharpening from fellow believers, change them. If you don't, you'll leave yourself open to being hardened and deceived by sin, and you will miss the fullness that God has for your life in the Spirit.

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Sharper than Any Double-edged Sword

For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. -Hebrews 4:12

"The pen is mightier than the sword," said Edward Bulwer Lytton, and in many respects, he was right. But more than that, there is a source of written and spoken truth that is not only mightier than the sword; it is a spiritual sword that *is living and active*, that *penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart*. It is the word of God.

For those of us conditioned by western empiricism, the nature of the word of God is outside our educated box. We have no frame of reference for the word of God—other than our own spiritual experience. How is it *the word of the Lord stands forever* (1 Pet 1:25)? How is it that the implanted word of God is able to save our souls (see James 1:21)? How is it that *the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible* (Heb 11:3)? How is it that the word of God is *living and active*? How is it that it penetrates the soul? The words Jesus spoke were more than just profound; they were probing laser beams of living light. "*The words I have spoken... are spirit and they are life*" (Jn 6:63).

The penetrating nature of the word of God could be seen when the gospel was unleashed on the day of Pentecost. When the people heard the word, they were *cut to the heart* (Ac 2:37) and three-thousand were saved and baptized. The word of God penetrates and *judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart*. When the prophet, Nathan, came to David concerning his affair with Bathsheba and his murder of Uriah, Nathan gave him the message from the Lord and said, "*You are the man*" (2 Sam 12:7). David became utterly convicted of his sin. The word of God exposed his heart. It is indeed mightier than the sword.

Those who have learned to wield *the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God* (Eph 6:17) know how to affect great change in people's lives. This is why a true prophetic word is so powerful—it is the word of God. This is why the evangelist who preaches the word of God under the anointing of Christ can see hundreds saved. This is also why a revelation from the pages of Scripture can set you free.

The pen may be mightier than the sword, but there is nothing more powerful than the word of God. Learn to use it.

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No One Takes this Honor upon Himself

No one takes this honor upon himself; he must be called by God, just as Aaron was. So Christ also did not take upon himself the glory of becoming a high priest. -Hebrews 5:4-5

A couple of years ago, we started in our church what we call a “Prophetic Team” made up of trusted individuals from within our fellowship whom we as pastors have given a green light to deliver corporate or personal prophetic words in the public setting. It is not as though no one else is allowed to prophesy—we encourage the church to earnestly desire the gift of prophecy and we allow for the general exercise of the gift in our gatherings. But the church knows that those on the team have the character and the track record in prophetic ministry to receive a special endorsement from the pastors. This team also meets monthly to pray and discern what the Holy Spirit might be saying to the church on certain matters.

It is ok to set your heart on a certain ministry but you cannot choose to take it up

When we first began the prophetic team, there were two people in the church whom we knew had prophetic giftings but we didn’t think were ready to be part of the team. Not long after we started the team, one of the persons approached me asking why he wasn’t chosen. I told him that his tendency to put himself forward when sharing a public word had the effect of taking away from the word of the Lord which he was sharing. I also shared that what typically took five or ten minutes to share could have been shared in a minute or less. The person did not receive what I had to say and remained offended about not being on the team. A little while later, I approached the other prophetically gifted person who was not originally asked to be on the team. I wanted to explain to her why she was not included. I told her that I thought that there were a few outstanding issues in her life that prevented us from giving her that special endorsement to bring corporate or personal words. She agreed, saying, “I know that I am not ready for that kind of serious responsibility yet.” It was at that point that I gained confidence that she would soon be ready. The next year she was asked to be on the team and her ministry has blessed the church.

Concerning the position of high priest, the writer of Hebrews says, *No one takes this honor upon himself; he must be called by God.* It is ok to set your heart on a certain ministry (see 1 Timothy 3:1) but you cannot choose to take it up. You must be called by God—and the church. Apostolic, prophetic, evangelistic and pastoral callings are just that—callings. Do not presume anything. Be prepared and patient and humble. If you are called by God—he will open the door in due season.

Let Us Leave the Elementary Teachings about Christ

It is hard to explain because you are slow to learn. In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God’s word all over again...Therefore let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity. -Hebrews 5:11-12, 6:1

There are many criticisms that can be leveled against the modern western church but there is one particular problem that seems to be endemic. We’re immature. We are loaded with people who have not gotten past (or even to) *the elementary teachings about Christ*. Week after week we continue to serve up baby food to people who, instead of having to learn *the elementary truths of God’s word all over again*, should be the ones doing the teaching. But no, they are stuck on milk, still not ready for solid food.

This same problem was evident in the first century as well. The writer of Hebrews (some say Paul, but we don’t know) wants tell the church about many truths of the faith but is reluctant because, “*It is hard to explain because you are slow to learn.*” Why were they slow to learn? Because they had never gotten out of the first grade. Some Christians never get out of elementary school. And the problem is not just with the fat babies who have been sitting in the pews for twenty years. Most of our churches don’t serve up much more than Enfalac for the people to feed on from week to malnourished week.

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I understand, first hand, the problem that pastors deal with. In our churches, we have a diverse crowd (hopefully) of young and not so young Christians. So, most of the time in our corporate gatherings we serve up something that everyone can digest: milk—and not much more. Even our “discipleship” groups have more to do with head knowledge than training in righteousness. But we underestimate our people. We have a young woman in our fellowship who has been a Christian for less than a year and is past the elementary teachings. She still needs emotional healing but she has been on solid food for sometime and it is amazing to see what she can digest—and how she can minister the word of God to people in wisdom and revelation. *Therefore let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity.*

It’s time to go to the next level—and there will always be a next level. You can continue to drink your warm bottle if you so choose. But who is going to teach the next generation of believers?

You Are a Priest Forever, in the Order of Melchizedek

...if another priest like Melchizedek appears, one who has become a priest not on the basis of a regulation as to his ancestry but on the basis of the power of an indestructible life. For it is declared: "You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek." -Hebrews 7:15-17

The writer of Hebrews makes the point that Jesus was not a descendant of Levi, the tribe from whom every priest was chosen, but he was a descendant of Judah, from whom no priest had ever come. Jesus' priesthood, therefore, was different from the Levitical priesthood. His priesthood was *in the order of Melchizedek*. In the Roman Catholic Church there are different "orders" of priests. The Franciscans take after Francis. The Benedictines take after Benedict. Jesus was not a priest in the order of Aaron, the first high priest in the line of Levi, but he was a high priest in the order of Melchizedek.

If not for this passage in Hebrews, the name Melchizedek might be relegated to the obscure recesses of some Bible trivia game. There is not a lot of mention of him in the Old Testament—just four verses: Genesis 14:18-20 and Psalm 110:4. But Psalm 110 is considered a messianic psalm, foreshadowing the Christ. Because of this, when the psalmist says, "*The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind: 'You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek,'*" the significance this mysterious figure found in the book of Genesis is magnified.

If there is one thing that the book of Hebrews communicates it is that the new covenant is far different and superior to the old. One of the ways that it is superior is that Jesus is *one who has become a priest not on the basis of a regulation as to his ancestry but on the basis of the power of an indestructible life*. What makes Jesus superior to the priests who were descendants of Aaron is that *death prevented [those priests] from continuing in office; but because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood* (He 7:23-24). In this sense, Jesus is like Melchizedek who was *without father or mother, without genealogy, without beginning of days or end of life* (Heb 7:3).

Perhaps Jesus and Melchizedek are more alike than we know. Perhaps they are one and the same. Who else in all of recorded history could fit this description? The mystery is not completely solvable but the point remains: Jesus is not a priest in the order of Aaron; he is a priest in the order of Melchizedek—a permanent high priest and the mediator of a new and better covenant.

The new covenant is far different and superior to the old

He Became a Priest with an Oath

He became a priest with an oath when God said to him: "*The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind: 'You are a priest forever.'*" Because of this oath, Jesus has become the guarantee of a better covenant. - Hebrews 7:21-22

If you or I make an oath, there is a chance that we might not keep it. That's why Jesus said that if we swear an oath concerning something that we are promising to do, it gives an opportunity to the evil one to bring us under accusation and condemnation if we fail to fulfill it (see Matthew 5:33-37). But if God swears an oath, it is more likely that the sun will not come up tomorrow that the oath will be unfulfilled.

In contending for the superiority of the new covenant ministry of Jesus, the writer of Hebrews points out that Jesus *became a priest with an oath when God said to him: "The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind: 'You are a priest forever.'*" Because of this oath, Jesus has become the guarantee of a better covenant. The ministry of Jesus was founded on an oath by God Almighty. Imagine entering the halls of heaven to make a request before the throne of God. Imagine that he then grants your request and says, "I swear that I will do it and will not change my mind." What is the chance that his promise will be broken?

The ministry of Jesus was founded on an oath by God Almighty

There is no possible way to underestimate the authority of the oath of the Lord. If the promises of God are sure, and the word of God is infallible, how certain would be a sworn oath of the Lord? When someone swears an oath, there is no longer any room for a change of heart or mind concerning the matter. This is why people swear oaths. This is what the swearing of an oath communicates. When the writer of Hebrews quotes Psalm 110:4 saying, *The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind: 'You are a priest forever,'* he is making the point that Jesus' ministry as high priest is set. God did not, would not and will not change his mind in the matter. "*You are a priest forever.*" Because of this oath, Jesus has become the guarantee of a better covenant.

Not that the Most High is ever irresolute, but when God swears an oath you know he means business. There is an unbridled passion in the bosom of God for the establishment of Jesus as the Great High Priest, *who has been made perfect forever* (v28). And so when it came time to appoint Jesus as such, God did it with an oath—and oath established in heaven and set for the ages.

Has Made the First One Obsolete

By calling this covenant "new," he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and aging will soon disappear. –Hebrews 8:13

A few years ago I was doing a teaching at our church regarding Jesus' parable of the old and new wineskins (see Matthew 9:16-17). We were comparing the differences between the old and new covenants (see page 9). We had a couple of newcomers that day, one of whom I could see was becoming increasingly agitated as the teaching progressed. When the observation was made that the Old Covenant brought death rather than life our irritated visitor could keep his peace no longer. He angrily rose from his seat and came towards me yelling, "Are you saying that the covenant that God made with Moses is no longer in effect?" I paused for a moment to assess whether he intended to assault me and said, "Yes, that is exactly what we are saying."

There will always be those who have a vested interest in holding on to that which has become obsolete and is nearing extinction

The writer of Hebrews said that the covenant of Jesus *is superior to the old one [for] it is founded on better promises* (8:6). *If there had been nothing wrong with that first covenant, no place would have been sought for another* (v7). What was needed was a covenant that would actually work to save people. The Old Covenant was flawless in precept but lacking in real practicality because the people were flawed. That is why God said *"I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel...It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers...I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts...they will all know me...I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."* (vs 8-12).

The Scripture then goes on to say, *By calling this covenant "new," he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and aging will soon disappear.* The writer to the Hebrews is saying that God has made the covenant with Moses obsolete, soon to disappear. This would be quite the controversial statement in some circles (as I discovered). But if something is new and better and meant to replace that which was not working then why would it be controversial? And if God has established a new and better covenant founded on better promises wouldn't it make sense to buy into the new thing instead of continuing to try to make the old thing work? Of course. But we know that there will always be those who have a vested interest in holding on to that which has become obsolete and is nearing extinction. 45rpm records, the ice box and the telegraph are no doubt still in use in many places but they are *obsolete and aging will soon disappear.*

Thank God that what couldn't save us was replaced by something better.

The Blood of Christ Cleanses Our Consciences

How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God! -Hebrews 9:14

How's your conscience? Do you know true forgiveness? How would you like your conscience to be clean and free that you will be able to serve the living God without reservation or hindrance?

Under the old covenant, the priests would offer up *gifts and sacrifices* (v9) on behalf of the people who would gather at the tabernacle or the temple to worship. They would come to find favor with God and be cleansed from their sins. But the sacrifices of bulls and goats left something to be desired. When it came to cleansing the consciences of the worshipers, the blood of animals shed on their behalf didn't do the trick. They would leave with their consciences still bearing the weight of the sentence of death. There was a measure of sanctification that was afforded—an outward cleansing. It was a temporary forgiveness that came through the shedding of the blood of goats and bulls (*without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sin* (Heb 9:22)). But how could the deep recesses of the conscience, that part of us that knows and testifies whether or not we stand justified before the Lord, be cleansed from guilt?

How could the deep recesses of the conscience be cleansed from guilt?

Of course, you know where I am headed with this—but hallelujah, it's true! If the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who were ceremonially unclean sanctified them so that they were outwardly clean, *how much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!*

The sacrifice of Jesus is able to cleanse the conscience. This is not some theoretical and useless notion. This is life-changing reality. I have experienced the power of this cleansing first-hand. And even though I would never want to take that cleansing power for granted, every time I fall short of the glory of God and confess my sin, my conscience is cleansed from those things which lead to death and I rise up to serve my God again.

How important it is to be able to say that what your dead works couldn't do, the blood of Jesus can and does do—cleanse your conscience. The reality of that experience is priceless. But then again, there was a price—the precious blood of Jesus.

Destined to Die Once, and after That to Face Judgment

Man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment. - Hebrews 9:27

Reincarnation. It's amazing how many people accept the idea in one form or another. But if Hebrews 9:27 is true, then reincarnation cannot be true in any form.

Webster's New World Dictionary defines reincarnation as "rebirth of the soul in another body." But the Word of God says, *Man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment*. Could it be any clearer? I am sure that the Holy Spirit included this truth in the Scriptures in sight of the proliferation of the doctrine of reincarnation. I can imagine him saying, "Let's completely refute the entire teaching of reincarnation in a dozen words or less." Absolutely. If you are destined to die only once, you cannot come back to die again, and again, and again.

Man is destined to die once—and no more. The word "destined" is translated elsewhere as "appointed." The root meaning of the Greek word has to do with something that is stored away or stored up. Paul spoke about the crown of righteousness that was *in store* for him in heaven (see 2 Timothy 4:8). It was waiting for him and would be his at the appointed time. Death is laid away and awaits us all. We are destined for it—but only once.

If you think about it, we can't all be reincarnated from some other person in a past life. There are more than six billion people alive on earth today—more people than the sum total of all who have lived and died on this earth previously. If reincarnation is true, then the person you are existed not only in one previous life but many. And it is funny how many claim that they are reincarnated from someone famous. But there are only so many Cleopatras and Napoleons to go around.

There are persons who are convinced they have been reincarnated because they have incredible and accurate knowledge about some life in another era. What this means is not that there is a reincarnation of a soul from a previous life, but that there is an incarnation of some familiar demonic spirit who has access to information regarding some past human life.

Part of the appeal of reincarnation is the lie that if I don't get it right in this life, I have a few more cracks in the ones to come. The doctrine is a cute way of avoiding the idea of a judgment. Sure, I may not advance as quickly up the ladder to nirvana if I go my own way in this life, but at least I won't have to worry about any serious reckoning when I die. But that's just it. You do have to worry about a day of reckoning because as sure as your appointment with death is the judgment that follows.

***If Hebrews 9:27 is true,
then reincarnation cannot
be true in any form***

He Has Made Perfect Those Who Are Being Made Holy

By one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy. -Hebrews 10:14

About a hundred and twenty-five years ago, before the Pentecostal movement began, the hottest theological issue in the church was the question of sanctification, or more specifically, entire sanctification. Could a person come to the point where they were made perfectly holy? Although the question is not regularly visited today (it seems a practical implausibility to most), the writer of Hebrews makes a statement that speaks well to the issue. He says that Jesus *has made perfect forever those who are being made holy*.

Grammar was not the most exciting subject for me in school, but the grammar of this statement is actually quite revealing and has very strong theological implications. There are two verbs in the sentence. The first is what we know in English as a past tense verb in the active voice and is translated *has made perfect*. Now, who has Jesus made perfect? *Those who are being made holy*. Notice the different tense and voice of this verb. It is in the present tense and in the passive voice (meaning the action is being done to it). So, it is saying that Jesus already has made us perfect and we are presently being made holy.

If the NIV is correct in its translation, it gives us a key insight into the nature of sanctification. Most translations, instead of saying, *those who are being made holy*, say, *those who are sanctified*. When you compare the two translations, the former gives a more acute sense of the present work of the Holy Spirit to make us holy. It is one thing to say "I am sanctified," and another to say, "I am being made holy."

The essence of the debate in the church a century and a quarter ago was whether holiness was progressive or punctiliar. Was it a process or could one be sanctified at a point in time through an experience of a second work of grace? I clearly remember the day that I was baptized with the Holy Spirit and with fire. But Hebrews 10:14 helps us to see that while the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross is sufficient to make us complete in every way and for all time, there is process by which we are being made holy. Our spirits have been (past tense) made perfect forever (see Hebrews 12:23) but our souls are presently in the process of being made holy (see Philippians 3:12). And the greater the consecration we have to live out of the spiritual completeness that has been given us, the more expedient will be the process of being made holy in every way.

***Our spirits have been made
perfect forever but our
souls are presently in the
process of being made holy***

No Sacrifice for Sins Is Left

If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment.... How...severely do you think a man deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God under foot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace? -Hebrews 10:26-29

If you don't think it is possible to lose your salvation, you haven't taken the warnings in the book of Hebrews seriously. I don't know any other way to interpret the above passage, and the one in 6:4-6 which says, *It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age, if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance, because to their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace.*

I believe in eternal security but I do not believe in "once saved always saved." There is a difference. My eternal future has been procured by the cross and rests securely in the hands of the one who took the nails for me. No one can snatch me from those hands (see John 10:28) and no external force or circumstance can separate me from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord (see Romans 8:38-39). With that being said, there is weighty testimony throughout the Scriptures that contradict the presumption that no one could fall away from the faith (see Ezekiel 18:24; Matthew 13:20-21; Luke 8:13; 1 Corinthians 9:27; 2 Peter 2:20-21). And of course, some of the weightiest is found here in Hebrews.

One argument that is made is that those who "fall away" are not true believers but had some kind pseudo salvation experience. But when the writer of Hebrews describes those who have *received the knowledge of the truth...been enlightened...tasted the heavenly gift...shared in the Holy Spirit...tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age* and who have been *sanctified* by the *blood of the covenant*, do you really think he is talking about someone who was never saved?

Please understand that it is very difficult to lose your salvation. Only if you *deliberately keep on sinning* over time with no regard for consequence or the fear of the Lord will the Holy Spirit cease to strive with your conscience. But according to the writer of Hebrews, there is a place of no return for those who fall away from God and cannot be *brought back to repentance* because it is a place where *no sacrifice for sins is left*.

There is weighty testimony throughout the Scriptures that contradict the presumption that no one could fall away

Faith Is . . .

Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for. By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible. -Hebrews 11:1-3

Because faith is so important, it is important to understand what faith is. And the best and most succinct definition of faith is found here in Hebrews 11:1. The New American Standard and New Revised Standard Version say: *Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.* The King James Version says: *Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.* The New Living Translation says: *What is faith? It is the confident assurance that what we hope for is going to happen. It is the evidence of things we cannot yet see.* And the New International Version says: *Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.*

The best definition of faith is found in Hebrews 11:1

The meaning of Hebrews 11:1, especially in the NASB, NRSV and NIV, is self-evident. It really needs no explanation. What is faith? It is *being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.* The writer of Hebrews then goes on to give many examples of the heroes of the Bible who lived by faith. They had a confident assurance that God's promises were true and did not waver in their expectation that what they did not yet see would come to pass. In this sense, then, another word for faith would be "confidence," which comes from two Latin words, "con" and "fideo," which mean "with faith."

I remember reading a story entitled "The Red Umbrella" which illustrates the nature of faith. A prayer meeting was called in farming community that was in need of rain. As a man was getting into his car to drive to a meeting with the other farmers to pray for rain, his young daughter asked where he was going. When he told her, she asked if she could go along. He said yes, but that they needed to leave right away. But instead of getting into the car, she ran into the house to get an umbrella saying, "If we are going to pray for rain, I'm going to need my red umbrella." She was sure of what she hoped for and convinced of what she did not yet see. And sure enough, she needed her umbrella that day.

Faith pleases God. In fact, *without faith it is impossible to please God* (Heb 11:6) because, as the children's song goes, "Faith is just believing what God said, he will do." *This is what the ancients were commended for* and would be our commendation as well.

Looking Forward to the City with Foundations

He was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.... If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. -Hebrews 11:10, 15-16

Do you ever feel like you are not at home here on earth? Well, you should. For Abraham and the other heroes of the faith, the desire to experience their heavenly home superseded whatever interest they might have had in an earthly one.

Abraham is given the largest display in the Hebrews 11 hall of faith. After all, he is known as *the father of all who believe* (Ro 4:11). He, like many others in this notable exhibition of spiritual luminaries, had a sort of nomadic existence in response to the call of God. In fact, when Abraham was called by God to leave his home, he *obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going* (v8). I

don't know how many of us would do that. I suppose a lot would depend on how attached we were to the places where we lived. We don't know what affinity Abraham had to his life in the Ur of the Chaldeas, but, by faith, he left there and *made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country* (v9). He, and his decedents for many generations, lived in tents as they continued to await the fulfillment of the promise of God. Why? Because they were *looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God*.

To Abraham, the Promised Land was not ultimately the promised land. He, and many others like him, *admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth* (v13). And *people who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own* (v14). No matter what you call home here on this earth, how can it compare to a place where the *architect and builder is God*? Jesus had no place to lay his head. But what did that matter to him? He was one of a long line of aliens and strangers who know their real home is in heaven—a city with foundations with which no place on earth could compare.

Do you consider yourself an alien and a stranger here on the earth? Are you looking for *a better country—a heavenly one*? Are you looking *forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God*? If you are, you will be among those who will not be disappointed, because *God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them* (v16).

To Abraham, the Promised Land was not ultimately the promised land

Through Faith

...who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies. -Hebrews 11:33-34

The role of faith in the life of the believer can hardly be overestimated. The fact that we are called “believers” should give us a first clue. *We have been justified through faith* (Rom 5:1); *God's work is by faith* (1 Tim 1:4); *we walk by faith* (2 Co 5:7) and *everything is possible for him who believes* (Mk 9:23). These are just a few of the hundreds of scriptures that speak of the constitutive function of faith for anyone who wants to do anything in God. Everything that was, is and will ever be accomplished in the kingdom of God is done through faith.

Why is that? Because faith honors God and God honors those who have faith in him. God has chosen to put an unmistakable witness of himself in every person's conscience and yet has also chosen to make himself obscure to a degree. So, in order to know God, one must, by faith, be diligent to seek him. When God chooses to reveal himself to those who have been faithful to seek him, he continues to require them to exercise faith for the things that he then calls them to do—things that cannot be done without the enabling resources of heaven.

So, what shall we say about Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Rahab, Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets? What does the writer of Hebrews say? That *through faith* they were commended as righteous, responded to God's call, obeyed God's word, predicted the future, conquered kingdoms, administered justice and gained what was promised.

God's work can only be accomplished through faith. It is the only way to do the impossible. If what you do is your own idea and you can accomplish it without God, how does that honor God? Plenty in this world—and in the church—gets accomplished outside of God, but it is *through faith*, and through faith only, that God advances his kingdom through us.

Robert Schuller has observed that the person without faith says, “I'll believe it when I see it,” but that God says, “You'll see it when you believe it.” How true. God works through faith because God is honored by faith. What are you accomplishing *through faith*?

Faith honors God and God honors those who have faith in him

No Discipline Seems Pleasant at the Time, but Painful

Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it. –Hebrews 12:10-11

We need to persevere under discipline *for what son is not disciplined by his father* (v7)? Of course, *no discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful*, but if we will submit to that discipline—and even the pain—we will be submitting to God, and, in the process, much good will result.

The writer of Hebrews refers back to Proverbs 3:11-12 which says *to not lose heart when the Lord rebukes you because the Lord disciplines those he loves*. Sometimes we can be disheartened when the Lord’s rebuke comes. We can be resentful of the pain and resist the process of his discipline. But we need to persevere. We are not to lose heart. *We have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live* (v9)!

***We need to persevere
under discipline***

When the Lord appeared to Saul of Tarsus on the Damascus road, he said to him, *“It is hard for you to kick against the goads”* (Ac 26:14). He was referring the fact that Saul’s persecution of the church was like oxen kicking against the sharp goads which prodded them along the way they were supposed to go. An ox would only injure itself if it did so. Resisting the Lord’s discipline is like that. It doesn’t do us any good to *kick against the goads*. If the Lord is using goads to discipline us along the way, it is *for our good, that we may share in his holiness*.

The NIV translates verse seven, *“Endure hardship as discipline,”* but it is probably better translated, *“Persevere in (or under) discipline.”* To submit to that discipline is not always easy. It can be hard—even painful. I know. There was a certain suffering to which the Lord called me to submit that I resisted for years. I kicked against the goads. It seemed too painful to me. But I was not freed from that pain and I did not take the next step into my destiny in God until I finally submitted to the discipline of that suffering. You see, at the end of his life it is the fool who will say, *“How I hated discipline! How my heart spurned correction”* (Pr 5:12).

The Lord has a very good reason for the discipline that we undergo. Eventually, that discipline *produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it*. So, don’t lose heart. Persevere under his discipline. In the end, you will be grateful.