



“SOUL FOOD”



“SPIRITUAL”

Food for Your Soul:
Vol II.

A Book of Devotional Readings to Feed the Soul

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A LEGACY THAT LASTS

Scripture: James 4:13-15 (NKJV): ¹³ Come now, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will^[a] go to such and such a city, spend a year there, buy and sell, and make a profit”; ¹⁴ whereas you do not know what will happen tomorrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away. ¹⁵ Instead you ought to say, “If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that.”

This is both my favorite and least favorite time of the year. I enjoy the holidays, the feeling of camaraderie, and the good food, fun and fellowship that are enjoyed at this special time of the year. This time also brings about sadness as death makes and end-run to call as many home with him as possible. When death strikes someone close to us, we come face-to-face with our own mortality. We realize we will not live forever, and many begin to wonder what legacy they will leave behind. Will they be remembered as the best, there is, was and will ever be? Will they be remembered as being shrewd and clever in business, while amassing fortunes. Perhaps they will be remembered as a spiritual giant, that introduced so many to Christ, the Grand Canyon could not contain all they contacted. Whatever legacy we leave behind is not something we can guarantee we will be able to take care of tomorrow. We can't even guarantee we can work on our legacy later tonight. All we have is right now, this moment to work toward a legacy that lasts.

We often lament the choices of the past and think about how we would have done things “yesterday” to enjoy a better today. I have discovered, I would have made the same choices, because even though information was available, I thought I was making the best choice at the time. I have also discovered, our “yesterday” seems so much sweeter as we move forward and face the challenges of today and tomorrow. When we actually lived in “yesterday” we often couldn't wait for the time when we would be in our “today”. It has been said, “Today is the first day of the rest of your life”. I never fully understood the meaning of that phrase until I came to realize it spoke to the idea of I can't change what I did yesterday, but today can be a new beginning. I can only control or affect what happens right now, by the choices I make. I choose to give Christ my best, and lay up treasures in heaven, If I give God my left overs and I will definitely reap what I sow. I learned the hard way, the choices I make today won't change my yesterdays but will definitely impact my tomorrow. I can choose to live for Christ with every fiber of my being, so whenever I am called home, I know that I fought the good fight, I finished my course and kept the faith, or I can do what I have to do to get by. Personally, since I know I will have to account for my actions or inactions, I would rather know I did the best I could at all times, every day, so when that tomorrow comes where I stand before my maker, I will hear Him say “well done my good and faithful servant.

Key Thought: We are not guaranteed tomorrow, so never put off tomorrow what we can do today, Only what we do for Christ will lasts, and we must remember, **TODAY WAS YESTERDAY'S TOMORROW!**

ARE YOU WAITING TO BE CALLED?

Scripture: 2 Chronicles 7:11-14. ¹¹ Thus Solomon finished the house of the Lord, and the king's house: and all that came into Solomon's heart to make in the house of the Lord, and in his own house, he prosperously effected. ¹² And the Lord appeared to Solomon by night, and said unto him, I have heard thy prayer, and have chosen this place to myself for an house of sacrifice. ¹³ If I shut up heaven that there be no rain, or if I command the locusts to devour the land, or if I send pestilence among my people; ¹⁴ If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land.

When my family lived in Alaska, this passage of scripture became near and dear to my heart. Our Pastor dedicated a month to preach and teach on nothing else but this passage of scripture. I don't know what the motivation was; a revelation from God; a desire for the congregants to understand the providential care of God; or just perhaps to bring us all into the knowledge of God's continual invitation to be a part of His family and the benefits contained wherein. Whatever the reason, I was blessed by this month long meditation on one of my favorite passages of scripture as I saw three things in this prolific exchange between the Father and Solomon; the people, the conditions and the results.

God gave Solomon key information to distinguish who would find themselves "covered" by His protection, love, and care or left to face the harshness of life alone. God identifies not only His people, but people called by His name. In our society today, many people claim to be "spiritual", but hesitate to identify with any particular denomination, faith or belief. I have discovered motivations for not declaring a "spiritual" affiliation run from a desire to not offend anyone to not wanting to be held captive to the traditions, polity and policy of any one religion or denomination. If a person's goal is just to remain "spiritual" this attitude is acceptable, but if a person really wants to be considered a child of God, you have to be willing to be unashamedly identified as one of His children. Most teenagers are embarrassed by their parents, but have no problem going to them for protection, money and other wants or needs. Is this how we want to treat God? We learn this attitude is not acceptable to God as we next see the conditions to have access to all that He can, and will do for us.

God wants us to humble ourselves, which simply means acknowledge, who is really the boss...Him. He then wants us to talk to Him, get to know Him and stop doing evil. When we do these things, then He will show up and show out beyond our expectations. He will hear our prayers, forgive us for anything we may have done and heal our land. Our land could represent actual land or symbolize a situation in our life that needs healing. The idea of what exactly is "land" is not as important as the fact that God would heal the land whatever it may be. This is a promise, but the problem is many have not taken advantage of the promise because they either are waiting for an engraved invitation or assume the promise is for everyone but them. That is not the case! The promise is there for anyone that follows 2 Chronicles 7:14 and has Accepted Christ as their Savior, Believe He died and Rose, and Confessed to God their Sins!

Key Thought: Many miss out because they are waiting for God to specifically call them. He calls to us every day, so if we are waiting for the call, it has already come!

ATTITUDE OF GRATITUDE

Scripture: *1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 (KJV)* ¹⁶ Rejoice evermore. ¹⁷ Pray without ceasing. ¹⁸ In every thing give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you.

I have discovered that very few things in life will go the way I planned. I was supposed to be an internationally known singer by now; basking in the afterglow of the platinum albums and the riches I have amassed over the years. I should have been a celebrated Christian author who is continuously sought to lecture on matters from spirituality to punctuality in God's service. My health should be synonymous with the stereotypical "picture" of perfect health. The church where I pastor should be so over-crowded with hard working parishioners; we had to expand the sanctuary to the size of the Lea County Event Center just to hold Bible study. These are all the things that were in my plans, but Glory be to God my plans are simply "my plans" and not necessarily God's plans.

If I was an internationally known singer, I might be lured to seek more fame and fortune than the praise and worship found in the presence of the Lord. If I was a celebrated Christian author, I would probably spend more time reliving and talking about my past successes instead of looking forward to what God would have me do next. If my health was "picture perfect", I would be tempted to do things in my own strength instead of leaning and depending on God's strength. If our church membership had grown to the level of needing the Lea County Event Center to just hold Sunday school (in the less than two years I have pastored there), we may be tempted to become like a Christian game show where everything is done to draw bigger crowds than teach the uncompromised word of God. There are many things I could wish for and even be discouraged about, but I have decided to adopt an attitude of gratitude; I REFUSE to dwell on what I DON'T HAVE, but will concentrate on what I DO HAVE.

I have discovered it is not about anyone else in the service of God, but God. We should seek the pleasure and purpose set forth by God. My singing is joined with the others in the church where I serve, and all across the country where worship services occur, to sing praises to a God that goes beyond being worthy of our praise, love and worship. God has done, is doing and will do more than we can ever hope or even imagine when we focus on Him. When God inspires my writing, His message goes forth and if a sermon He has inspired and penned through me helps one person, then that is one more person we can count "SAVED" like those that are saved from potential drunk driving incidents. Our church membership is growing in numbers, but more importantly members are growing in CHRIST! I have found when I spend more time looking at what God has done, is doing and will do, I don't have the TIME to think about what I THINK God should do, or should have done! I have found blessings beyond belief in my personal life that I have no words to express my heartfelt gratitude. I have seen God moving in the lives of the church members and once again, there are no words to express our appreciation. God is moving, has moved and will continue to move...the question is this; are we ready for the movement God will make in our lives?

Key Thought: If we took a simple look at our lives, we will discover we have too many reasons to be grateful to God and no reasons to be ungrateful. After all, who would send their Son to die for a group of people who many who will not even take the time to say "THANK YOU?"

ATTITUDE ON GOD'S MAGNITUDE

Scripture: *Psalms 46:1-10 (KJV) 46 God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. ² Therefore will not we fear, though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea;³ Though the waters thereof roar and be troubled, though the mountains shake with the swelling thereof. Selah.⁴ There is a river, the streams whereof shall make glad the city of God, the holy place of the tabernacles of the most High.⁵ God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved: God shall help her, and that right early.⁶ The heathen raged, the kingdoms were moved: he uttered his voice, the earth melted.⁷ The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. Selah.⁸ Come, behold the works of the Lord, what desolations he hath made in the earth. ⁹ He maketh wars to cease unto the end of the earth; he breaketh the bow, and cutteth the spear in sunder; he burneth the chariot in the fire. ¹⁰ Be still, and know that I am God: I will be exalted among the heathen, I will be exalted in the earth.*

Life is hard enough without our complicating the matter by trying to be more than we are. There are many things we can do, and Mama always said I can be whatever I set my mind too...but there is one thing I can never do and one person I can never be...The things of God or be God. We get ourselves into some “messes” when we try to handle things that should have been turned over to God long ago. We get ourselves caught into believing our own press, when we reflect upon how strong we used to be or trying to be (all by ourselves) as opposed to how strong we can be in the power of the Lord. His strength is made PERFECT in our weakness.

I have discovered we become focused on “self” when we focus on our “self-view” or how we view our measurement to the standards set forth in our minds. We then compare our self-view to the world-view or the standard set forth by the world. We become so involved with what others IN THIS WORLD has to say, we lose focus on the ONE WHO CREATED THE WORLD and what HE has to say (or said).

God does not need us for anything or to do anything. HE WANTS us to be in relationship with Him. He wants us to lean and depend on Him. He doesn't care about our past without Him. He is not concerned with our present where we have failed in spite of His attempts to draw us to Him. God's concern is that we start RIGHT HERE and RIGHT now to let him BE GOD ALL BY HIMSELF.

He will be our refuge, our strength, or whatever we need to serve the higher calling of Jesus Christ and share the gospel wherever, whenever, however, to whomever we are given the opportunity. God adopted us into His family when we gave Him Lordship over our lives. THAT MEANS HE CHOSE US IN SPITE OF US, and still, without regard to our past messes; He desires to currently and in the future bless us! There are no phrases to describe the love, grace, mercy and awesomeness of God other than if you want to get the best from life...give your life over to Him and BE STILL, KNOWING HE IS GOD!

Key Thought: We often make things much harder than they have to be when we attempt to accomplish things in our life we should have turned over to God. God is all powerful, all knowing and is everywhere at the same time. Why not just look to the creator of EVERYTHING, follow his LEAD and just LET HIM BE GOD! You will be ecstatic about the results!

ATTITUDE OF SERVITUDE

Scripture: *Mark 10:42-45 (KJV)*⁴³ *But so shall it not be among you: but whosoever will be great among you, shall be your minister: ⁴⁴ And whosoever of you will be the chiefest, shall be servant of all. ⁴⁵ For even the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many.*

There is a malady that affects the lives of many experienced Christians, and if not treated, it grows worse with each passing day. This malady is recognizable by one key symptom; the victim begins to think they should be served in the church instead of serving. There are three things that generally cause this sickness to be contracted and although it is curable, the victim has to want to be cured.

The first thing that brings about this attitude of one feeling they “deserve to be served” is their past performance. They may feel because they were around when Christ walked the earth, and baked the bread for the Last Supper, they have authority based on seniority and no longer need to participate in the Kingdom building work. The interesting thing is this; Christ was on the cross and STILL WORKING! He made sure His mother was taken care of; the repentant thief would accompany Him; interceded for those that were killing Him, gave us access through Him to the Father, and the list goes on and on. If Christ worked until the end, we should do the same until we are CALLED HOME to glory.

The second thing that may bring about this condition is a perceived position, which gives perceived power, backed by plentiful plaudits. A person believes because they hold a particular position they have WORKERS and no longer have to WORK! The Bible says the harvest is plenty but the laborers are few. I have often wondered if the reason for the few laborers is based on the fact there are too many people trying to be COACHES in the work of Christ and not enough people working on the field? A person can easily believe they deserve to be a COACH when too many people extol their greatness. We must always remember we will never come close to the best there is, the best there was and the best there will ever be...JESUS CHRIST. Our goal is to have Him pleased with our work, not just how we manage, supervise or boss others.

Christ came to serve, and a review of His ministry shows He was the epitome of a Servant Leader. He worked and served even when no one else understood what He was doing or why. He stayed in constant contact with the Father, and even when the job ahead was distasteful, painful, deadly or just untenable, Christ’s attitude can be summed up in His words uttered in the Garden of Gethsemane... “NOT MY WILL, BUT THY WILL BE DONE!” Can you imagine what the world would be like if every Christian looked to God with the same purposeful thought and attitude of servitude...Father NOT MY WILL, but THY WILL be done!

Key Thought: If we want to have success in our service to God, we must have an attitude of servitude, meaning we should not look for the position of power, but the position God has for us to further the cause of Christ. Christ said if we lift Him up, HE will draw all men to Him! A true servant of Christ longs to hear these words at the end of their journey... “Well Done thy GOOD AND FAITHFUL SERVANT...”

A WORKER PLEASING TO GOD

Scripture: 2 Timothy 2:15 (KJV) ¹⁵ Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.

We have a problem amongst Christian circles in which subject of how to please our Heavenly Father appears to be shrouded in a veil of mystery. We see tons of spiritual self-help books on the market; all full of Gnosticism, or “Secret Knowledge” which supposedly will allow us to break the plateau of our service and reach a higher level of spiritual maturity. The interesting thing about the matter is this; we often look to every book about how to get close to God except the “Book” that was specifically written to reveal the heart, mind, ways and personage of God. Some call it “Basic Instructions Before Leaving Earth”; some call it the “Good Book”; others call it the “Word of God”. Whatever term we use, the fact does not change that the Bible contains all the knowledge we need to get in a closer relationship with God. The Bible tells us about prayer, fasting, service, worship, even tells us in simple terms, if we draw nigh to God he will draw nigh to us. There is no “secret” on how to get close to God, or even how to please God; it is all in “black and white”; contained in the greatest love story ever told; THE BIBLE.

The great author George Orwell wrote a book in the 1940s called “1984”. The book portrayed a bleak future for the year 1984 in which one of the thoughts promoted by the government was “ignorance is strength.” That thought process may have worked in the fictional book 1984, however in the life of a Christian, Hosea 4:6 tells us we can be destroyed by a lack of knowledge. We must “know” the word of God, to keep the world from having us “ignorant and weak” when facing the challenges of daily life. We must then “show” not only we truly believe in and on God, but “show” how God is in our lives, supplies all our needs according to HIS riches in heaven, and more importantly, if He is willing to do it for us, He will do the same for others when He is invited into their life. The beautiful thing about God, among the many is this; when we invite Him in, give full access and control of our life to Him, then we can grow in His will, way and words. It is like opening one of those cute little boxes that contain more and more treasures inside as you open one box to the next. The more we get to know Him, the more we start to wonder how we ever survived without Him! So let’s just say; a person is still having problems cracking the “code” on how to get closer to God, how to know God, or even how to please God. We get to know Him and get closer to Him when we work to please Him. We please Him when we study His word, which explains His expectations; our limitations; what He has done, doing and will do to help us along our spiritual walk. When we study, meditate, pray and seek guidance from God on His word, we are then given the ability to separate God’s truth from the world’s fiction. We are able to decipher between God’s promises and the devil’s lies. WE THEN GAIN ACCESS TO THE KEYS TO THE KINGDOM BY STUDYING HIS WORD, FOLLOWING HIS WORD, LIVING HIS WORD, WHICH MEANS WE PLEASE HIM BY BEING A LIVING EXAMPLE OF HIS WORD!

Key Thought: When we study God’s word, meditate on God’s word, and follow God’s word, we find we are not in this journey alone. We discover God will put things in our lives to help us Know Him, Show Him and Grow within Him. All we have to do is put the work in and watch the Holy Spirit begin to come out in us!

BACKING DOWN THE BULLY

Scripture: James 4:7-8a⁷ Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. ⁸ Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you.

As the oldest child in my family, I was always the first to experience things in school. I didn't have an older sibling, so when challenges came my way, I had to usually face them alone. One thing that every child will sooner or later experience is a run in with a bully. When I became an adult, I became a police officer because of the "bullies" I had seen and experienced throughout my life, so I could try and level the playing field. I have studied bullies and just about every bully situation I have been subjected to, or witnessed has always been preceded by a lot of talk by the antagonist. You see, I discovered bullying tactics are not effective if the victim doesn't; 1) Understand why they are targeted; 2) Everyone hears who is the target; and 3) What will happen to the victim as a result of being the target; which in turn embarrasses, humiliates and shames the target. This causes the target to believe there is nothing he or she can do about their future fate but accept it, brace for it and deal with being the targeted victim. Some bullies even want their victim to beg for mercy or leniency, even though there is no intention by the bully to take this plea into consideration. In fact, the only time I have seen a bully back down is when they were intimidated by something or they discovered they could no longer intimidate. I have discovered the more the bully talks, the more pumped up they become and actually began to believe they can accomplish what they have purposed to do. Ever try to reason with a bully? Ask them why or what brought about their focus on the target? They will talk around the subject, but will seldom admit they are bullying those who they are confident they can beat so they can build up their self-esteem instead of taking the chance of picking a fight and being beaten themselves. The devil will do the same thing in the life of the believer. There doesn't have to be anything in particular a person did or failed to do, it's all about him believing he can bully you. The devil doesn't need you to back down on everything...just some things. You don't have to stop going to church, just never get fully committed to church. You don't have to fully understand your Bible, just never try. The list goes on and on. The devil will bully us into doing things, saying things and even questioning things because we become so unsure of ourselves that his talking causes us to question what we know. We let him talk around matters, but how often do we point blank make him get to the heart of the matter. When the devil tries to bully you into lessening your commitment to church...asks him what did Jesus and his cross work do to him? What power do he really have over you that God doesn't allow? Is he jealous that you can live eternally with the Father because you made the right choice, but he can't because you made the wrong one? I have noticed when a bully sees talking to you and about you doesn't work, they will prance, primp and peacock to make themselves look tougher than they are. They will walk with their chest out, giving you threatening looks, while making gestures about what they are going to do to you. They walk around trying to instill fear within you, but the fear they try to get you to feel is nothing more than false evidence appearing real. There was a little Hebrew boy, the runt of the litter that listened to talk of a big bully walking around talking about how bad he is, how bad he was and how bad he will always be. This Hebrew boy was David, and he decided to let God surround the situation and he not only backed down the bully, he took out the bully in the name of God! Don't let the devil tell you how tough and big he is, tell the devil about how tough and big your God is!

Key Thought: James tells us...SUBMIT TO GOD, RESIST THE DEVIL AND HE WILL FLEE!

BE GROWN

Scripture: *1 Corinthians 13:11* “When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things.”

As I grew up, I never gave much thought to being an adult; only what I would be allowed to do when I got older. Until I turned eight years old, I was an only child. All things purchased were just for me. All things planned involved me. At the age of eight, I got a younger brother. Things changed, but the difference in ages still allowed me to do most of what I wanted to do. The following year I got a younger brother and sister...twins! For the first time in my life I started thinking about the day I would be grown and not have to assist in the caretaking of babies. I had an idea of the freedom, but no concept of the cost. Many Christians want to be known as spiritually mature Christians; make decisions and be considered a leader in the church, but are not cognizant of what is required if you want to be a church leader. In the beginning of their Christian walk, they saw other leaders and assumed based on their perception of successes and failures, with a little training; they could easily surpass anything accomplished by the leaders. We had a young man that recently had a spiritual experience, and he is consumed with fire for the Lord. Although he has been in church, and even worked in church, he is still a “baby” in the ways of the Lord. He became distraught and disgusted with a series of sermons because he only had a “micro view” of the information the preacher was imparting, instead of having a “macro view” of the whole series. He felt the preacher was taking it “easy” on the congregation and needed to focus more on fire and brimstone. I had to explain to him the entire concept, and what he heard was only a part of the entire message. That day he discovered, whether he accepted or not, he was still in the beginning of a committed relationship with the Lord. He saw what was done, but not why. He moved from the beginning of a relationship of spiritual growth toward the middle. The Christian in the “middle” is like a teenager; they have some adult concepts and a modicum of adult understanding, but are seldom equipped to make comprehensive adult decisions. They may be able to lead an evangelistic event. Teach a class. Maybe even preach a sermon or give a Christian lecture, but this is all under the watchful eye of a more experienced Christian. The efforts are supervised, much like a teenager, until maturity has been demonstrated, to wit; the ability to make sound decision by weighing the benefits versus the disadvantages. This frustrates the person in the “middle” because they feel they can duplicate, replicate or imitate, along with improving what was done in the past. The problem that arises is this attitude is seldom coupled with an understanding of why things were done a certain way and the cost associated with doing things a different way. The understanding of variables present before that may not be present now is seldom considered before moving forward with a plan that if not properly vetted is doomed fail. The adult or mature Christian weighs all information carefully before deciding anything. They understand all things are permissible, but not all things are beneficial. They understand to move forward into the future, you must know where you are in your present and have an understanding of what and why things happened in the past. In essence, put away the childlike thought processes where many mistakes are expected and BE GROWN where mistakes are minimal. BE GROWN and accept responsibility for choices, and make the right CHOICE, SEEK FIRST THE KINGDOM OF GOD!

Key Thought: If we want to be grown with the advantages, then understand there are also disadvantages that must be accepted. If we want to BE GROWN, THEN BE GROWN!

BEHIND ENEMY LINES, PART 1: SLEEPING WITH ENEMY

Scripture: Ephesians 6:10-12: (KJV) ¹⁰ Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might. ¹¹ Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. ¹² For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.

Many times we look for the enemies in our lives to be easily identified like in an old western...white hats are the good guys and black hats are the bad. Life is seldom that simple. Many times the hats worn by our enemies are shades of gray. How white or black the hat actually is will be determined on how detrimental the enemies actions are to our overall plan of success. This is caused by the simple fact the intention of your enemy may have initially been initiated by a friend. An example would be, a friend decides to surprise you with a baked treat but forgets you are allergic to nuts. A friend becomes an enemy if you have a near death experience by something a true friend should have remembered. This happens when you remember this same friend helped you recover from a similar experience, and you begin to wonder if they are truly a friend or foe. Quite often we are literally sleeping side by side with the enemy because others always seem to have a better understanding (at least in their mind) of what is better for you than you. Your spouse decides you need to be motivated to leave a friendship, so they make sure you see your friend in a bad position. Your children decide you really don't know what they are going through, so they seek help from someone that uses that information against you. A friend becomes an enemy when the focus on Christ and true love for you is replaced by a focus on what they want and believe is best for you. If you want to withstand an enemy that has previously been close to you, you must remember your allegiance. If you are a child of God, your allegiance is first to Him and what He wants versus what others may want. God will always lead you to the righteous decision, not the convenient one. The next thing one must do when they discover they are literally sleeping with the enemy is know their standard. If your standard is the standard set by God, then don't change your standard! The world wants you to compromise, lighten up and loosen up to worldly standards, but sticking to God's standards always win in the end. The last and most important thing a person must remember when dealing with the enemy is to actually know your enemy. Many times we think our struggle is with our spouse, our children, our sibling or co-worker, but quite often it is a battle being waged on the spiritual realm. We seldom "fight" against flesh and blood but against perceptions, institutions, traditions and beliefs. More importantly, we are often battling with spirits that are operating through a person. The thing we must be careful of is this...is the spirit we are battling against in us or someone else. If the spirit is in someone else, then what is in us...the spirit of God or the spirit of the world? Sometimes when we sleep with the enemy, the enemy might be the enemy within ourselves!

Key Thought: Sun Tzu the great Chinese military tactician teaches to defeat your enemy, you must know your enemy. The devil will use whatever he can against you so never forget the battle is not ours but the Lord's!

BEHIND ENEMY LINES, PART 2: DRESS FOR SUCCESS

Scripture: Ephesians 6:13-18 (KJV) ¹³ Wherefore take unto you the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. ¹⁴ Stand therefore, having your loins girt about with truth, and having on the breastplate of righteousness; ¹⁵ And your feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace; ¹⁶ Above all, taking the shield of faith, wherewith ye shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked. ¹⁷ And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God: ¹⁸ Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication for all saints;

My granddaughters love to get dressed up. They enjoy nothing better than Grandma making sure their outfits are JUST RIGHT to present themselves as the little fashion divas they are. As I would watch them model their outfits, I began to think about what we wear gives others the impression of who we are, at least for that moment in time. I was once told to always dress for the job you want, whenever possible, not the job you have. As a high school senior that statement became a truth to me. The job I had at the time was being a dishwasher at a popular hotel. I went to school in a shirt, tie, coordinating pants and sweater and discovered an interview at a bank had been arranged for me through the school work study program. I had no idea about the upcoming interview, but based on the way I was dressed the teacher thought I had received her message. I got the job and no longer worked as a dishwasher, but held a variety of positions in a bank. I dressed for what I wanted, not for what I currently had. Many new Christians want to have a closer walk with God, but are afraid that they are “damaged goods” and there is no hope for them. One of the many beautiful things about God is that where man looks at the outside, God looks at the heart. God sees what you can be with Him, and is not concerned about what you were without Him. A new military recruit is issued a uniform to identify them as a part of a particular service and all that goes with that particular service. Christians have a uniform that not only protects us, but identifies us as allies to other believers. In essence, what we wear is more than a fashion statement, but identifies who we align ourselves with! The Apostle Paul describes the Christian uniform in the familiar attire worn by a soldier in that time. The soul was once believed to reside in the belly area, so loins girted about the truth is the same as saying your soul is filled with truth. The breastplate protects the heart, and when it belongs to God, what more needs to be said. Feet walking in the word is brings to mind walking the footsteps of Jesus, the living word. The shield protects against things coming at the soldier and faith could easily be described as fully accepting identity through Him (Jesus). The helmet protects the head; for the Christian the head is protected because it is focused on salvation. The sword is one of two offensive weapons in the gear and that is the word of God coupled with continuous prayer. Prayer simply put is staying in constant communication with the Father. The Christian fashion statement is one of a person ready, willing and able to serve God to the fullest!

Key Thought: What you wear is more than a fashion statement it could be the very thing that could save your life and your soul. Put on the FULL ARMOUR of God to withstand the devil!

BEHIND ENEMY LINES, PART 3: PRISONER OF WAR

Scripture: *Ephesians 6:19-20: ¹⁹ And for me, that utterance may be given unto me, that I may open my mouth boldly, to make known the mystery of the gospel, ²⁰ For which I am an ambassador in bonds: that therein I may speak boldly, as I ought to speak.*

At one time or other in our lives, we have felt we were a victim of circumstance. No matter how hard we tried to prevent or stop a situation, our efforts were all in vain. We became captive to something that was beyond our control; in essence we became a prisoner of war in a battle we never fully realized the level on which it was being fought. The Christian often finds themselves a “prisoner of war” in the eternal battle between good and evil. We try to do the right thing, for the right reasons...the way God would have us do it, yet we still find ourselves “caught up” in the very things we have tried hard to avoid. We avoid even the appearance of unfaithfulness to our spouses, and then our best friend confides about their unfaithfulness, and now a communicable disease has been contracted they are asking us what they should do. We pay our taxes as we should, and discover the company we work for has been involved in several tax evasion schemes. We follow the spiritual leader that appears to be anointed and appointed, but discover might as well be the anti-christ when not in a church setting. We are faced with a hard choice...how do we react? We all have been told don’t let our circumstances dictate our choices, but our choices dictate our circumstances, but that is easier said than done. As a Christian it is actually easier than others may experience, because we have Christ, but we still have to decide how we will respond. Will we be a puppet, a pessimist, or a true prisoner of war?

The puppet becomes a tool of the enemy. The puppet says, does and acts the way the enemy desires in hope their lot will be a little easier in life. They “go-along-to get-along” believing things will be better for them if they do what is “trending” than what is right. The pessimist believes things will never get better, and spend their whole time saying “how long Lord, how long?” I am so tired of this never ending situation. Every time I think there is a light at the end of the tunnel it turns out to be a train. How long? We can complain, but I have found complaining with no corrective action seldom does anything but make people not want to be around you.

Now the Apostle Paul decided to make the best of his situation. If he was going to be a prisoner of war anyway, why not use it as a platform for the goodness of God and an entrenchment in the ways of Christ. I have discovered when the devil thinks he is about to break you and cause you to give up on Christ, the best thing you can do is begin to dictate your response to the circumstances instead of the other way around. You are being persecuted for doing the right thing, then highlight your integrity, which in turn highlights the lack of others. People ridicule you because you don’t indulge in the pleasures of the world...highlight the fact God supplies all your needs, so you don’t need the stuff of the world because you have God.

Key Thought: When the circumstances of life take you prisoner, you can be a puppet, a pessimist, or a true prisoner of war...never renouncing your allegiance, but standing firm that God will one day provide a way of escape from your situation.

BELIEVER DID YOU KNOW? A CHRISTMAS STORY

Scripture: Isaiah 9:6-7: (KJV): ⁶ For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace. ⁷ Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgment and with justice from henceforth even for ever. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform this.

Matthew 1:18-25 (KJV) : ¹⁸ Now the birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise: When as his mother Mary was espoused to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Ghost. ¹⁹ Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not willing to make her a public example, was minded to put her away privily.

²⁰ But while he thought on these things, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a dream, saying, Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost. ²¹ And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name Jesus: for he shall save his people from their sins. ²² Now all this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying, ²³ Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us. ²⁴ Then Joseph being raised from sleep did as the angel of the Lord had bidden him, and took unto him his wife: ²⁵ And knew her not till she had brought forth her firstborn son: and he called his name Jesus.

Christmas is the time of year when we celebrate the birth of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. We look at the gifts that were brought to Him, the gathering that came for Him and the homage paid to Him and become full of what we call the Christ-Mass or Christmas spirit. We think about how God sent His only begotten son through the Virgin Mary and an earthly father in Joseph and become awed about how God thought of every detail. The interesting fact we seldom think about is the implicit that became explicit with the simple birth of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. The baby came, but the baby coming was fulfillment of numerous prophecies made long before Mary or Joseph was even born. This prophecy fulfillment speaks to the believer specifically as testament that although things may take hundreds of years, God show God keeps His word. We also understand God operates on perfect time instead of our time. The fulfillment of these prophecies also changed the world. A king can come from what is considered to be commoners, which in the realm of Christ. His humble beginnings give each person the ability to “Choose” Him versus being “forced” to acknowledge His sovereignty because He inherited the throne. Christ coming not only changed the world, but ensured nothing would ever be the same. The ability of those in power to “withhold” their version of salvation from those they figured unworthy was ended. Now the common man can get to know God for himself. No more priests to go before us except the High Priest of Jesus. No more Pharisees and Sadducees putting us to death because of their interpretation of the law! Christ became the bridge for us to cross over to a true relationship with God...IF WE CHOOSE! Christ is the perfect gift, and His love, grace, mercy; along with the other things to numerable to name are gifts that keep on giving! This year, try being thankful for the gift of Christ, give the gift of the gospel of Christ and let's not lament what we THINK we should have!

Key Thought: Christ is the perfect gift and salvation is a gift that keeps on giving. What will you share this year?

BRAVE NEW WORLD

Scripture: Rev 22:1-13 (KJV) *And he shewed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb. ² In the midst of the street of it, and on either side of the river, was there the tree of life, which bare twelve manner of fruits, and yielded her fruit every month: and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. ³ And there shall be no more curse: but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it; and his servants shall serve him: ⁴ And they shall see his face; and his name shall be in their foreheads. ⁵ And there shall be no night there; and they need no candle, neither light of the sun; for the Lord God giveth them light: and they shall reign for ever and ever. ⁶ And he said unto me, These sayings are faithful and true: and the Lord God of the holy prophets sent his angel to shew unto his servants the things which must shortly be done. ⁷ Behold, I come quickly: blessed is he that keepeth the sayings of the prophecy of this book.*

⁸ *And I John saw these things, and heard them. And when I had heard and seen, I fell down to worship before the feet of the angel which shewed me these things. ⁹ Then saith he unto me, See thou do it not: for I am thy fellow servant, and of thy brethren the prophets, and of them which keep the sayings of this book: worship God.*

¹⁰ *And he saith unto me, Seal not the sayings of the prophecy of this book: for the time is at hand. ¹¹ He that is unjust, let him be unjust still: and he which is filthy, let him be filthy still: and he that is righteous, let him be righteous still: and he that is holy, let him be holy still. ¹² And, behold, I come quickly; and my reward is with me, to give every man according as his work shall be. ¹³ I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last.*

We live in a time where we are continually reminded of how fragile life truly is. The news is always filled with stories of lives tragically ended for various reasons, but with the same result... a life ended much too soon. We live in a world where the values of the old shows like "Leave it to Beaver", "The Waltons", and many others have fallen to the wayside to be replaced with an attitude of survival of the fittest. Family values have been replaced with what show can provide the biggest shock factor. As Christians, we are supposed to be agents of change in the world, but often we wonder how much longer will this world last before it tears itself apart.

Non-believers generally believe that when this world is over, if it ever ends, that is the end of the story. The good news for the believer is this; things may be bad now, but there is going to come a time when all of these things we deal with now will just be a forgotten memory. The believer can take joy in knowing this world will pass away to be replaced with a better, more beautiful, brave new world. This world will not only be full of splendor and wonder, but also usher in a new way of living. This new world will exist without tears, crying or dying. We will not have to worry about the electricity bill, because the whole place will be illuminated by the glory of God! This world will be awesome, but this new world is not for everyone. I have discovered only in the dictionary can you find success before work. The Bible tells us if a man won't work, a man won't eat. Simply put, if a person wishes to "live" in this new world, and not just read about it, they have to put some work in. The beautiful thing about this work, is the work is the same task for all Christians...the Great Commission. We may all be asked to do the work differently, based on the talents God has placed in us, but the goal is the same...everyone we come in contact with has an opportunity to get to know God for themselves!

Key Thought: If we want to be a part of the new world order, make sure when the Lord comes, or when asked what have you done; you can say you spent your time being about your Father's business!

CASE OF THE UGLY SINNER

Scripture: *1 Peter 2:9 (KJV) ⁹ But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvelous light;*

One of my favorite childhood stories is the one about the ugly duckling that turned out to be a beautiful swan. I read with sadness how from his very birth he was ridiculed for being different. My heart wept as he tried to conform to what a duck should be, but failed miserably. He was picked on, laughed at, and in some versions even kicked by the children of the farm. This ugly “duckling” after trying to “fit in” as a duck, gave up and left. He then tried to “get in” with other groups and even a “pseudo” family or two; no luck. The abuse continued. One day he looked up and saw the most beautiful creatures, only to discover after even more hardships, there was a reason he was an ugly duckling...he was created to be a beautiful swan!

Many Christians quickly discover they no longer look “beautiful” wearing the mantle of sin. As an unrepentant sinner, they could be the life of the party, the belle of the ball, and have no remorse about anything they did or anyone they hurt. Once Christ has been accepted as your Lord and Savior; you feel very “Ugly” when you try to fit in with the ways of the world. A Christian may decide the crowd they no longer feel they can “fit in” with can be replaced for a different crowd. The new Christian forgets the old crowd knew you, and even though you didn’t fit in, they accepted the fact you were different and used that information to make themselves look better. A new group that you may try to “get in” will expect the new Christian to conform to their ideology and methodology about dealing with life issues. The problems becomes worse. Just like the “ugly duckling” a beautiful saint can no longer pass as a dashing sinner because of the light of Jesus shining through them. The light of Jesus casts illumination on those things hidden which makes the sinner look and see how ugly the stain of sin really is.

A Christian that has been washed in the blood of Jesus Christ soon discovers they no longer fit in with the unrepentant sinner because their values have changed, their allegiance has changed...in fact their whole life changed when they surrendered to Christ. A Christians doesn’t look good in sin, but looks positively “beautiful” when radiating Christ.

One of the many wonderful things about Jesus is this; He will call you out, cause you to look at Him and allow you to look beyond what you see, to see what He sees...a being created for HIS PLEASURE AND HIS PURPOSE. A person when compared to the citizens of a sin sick world will look a little peculiar. A Christian that may be shunned by the world is chosen by God. A child of the most high King that no longer has to “fit in” or try to “get in” to the nation of the world because they became a part of the New World Order, a Holy Nation led, presided over, sustained and thriving because of God himself!

Key Thought: Whenever we look in our spiritual mirror, we must not compare ourselves to how we look against the world, but how we look in the building process of what God is calling us to be. A true Christian will never look “right” in world trappings, but when the light of Christ shines through, a child of the King will always be beautiful!

CHRISTIAN CHAMELEON

Scripture: *1 Corinthians 9:19-23: ¹⁹ For though I be free from all men, yet have I made myself servant unto all, that I might gain the more. ²⁰ And unto the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might gain the Jews; to them that are under the law, as under the law, that I might gain them that are under the law; ²¹ To them that are without law, as without law, (being not without law to God, but under the law to Christ,) that I might gain them that are without law. ²² To the weak became I as weak, that I might gain the weak: I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. ²³ And this I do for the gospel's sake, that I might be partaker thereof with you.*

The chameleon has always fascinated me. A chameleon can change its appearance dependent upon the situation they face. They can either blend into their environment, or stand out; all based on how they perceive the potential “threat” they will have to deal with. A chameleon facing danger may adopt the colors of the surrounding area so it is “camouflaged”, and if you don’t look closely, you would never know it is there. I have discovered many Christian live their lives as chameleon in terms of their Christian walk. The Christian that feels “now is not the time to promote Christ” will blend into the background, hoping no one sees them for the Christian they claim to be. When they want everyone to notice their “Super Sainthood”, they will rip open their shirt, baring to the whole world the big “Cross” on their chest, while shouting “I CAN DO ALL THINGS THROUGH CHRIST (unless there seems to be no other Christians around)! The key is simply this, we don’t have to shout our Christianity, we can simply let the light of Christ stand out and shine through us. Christ said if HE be lifted up, HE will draw all men to him. As a result, I have discovered three general characteristics of Christian personalities when it comes to representing the Gospel of Christ. The these chameleon type characteristics a Christian may display I discovered through a Christian service called “E-mail” ministry.

The three characteristics are not all inclusive but very general in nature. The characteristics we will discuss are the “Carrot” Christian, the “Hard-boiled Egg” Christian and the “Coffee” Christian. The Carrot Christian tends to become like a carrot when faced with the “heat” of a given situation. When cooked in the fires of life, the Carrot Christian that started out hard and rigid becomes soft and flexible. Conversely, the Hard Boiled Egg Christian starts out soft and fragile, but as “life” happens, they become hard to protect their former soft goeey center. Then of course there is the “Coffee Christian”. They Coffee Christian experiences the heat of the boiling water of life, just like the carrot and the egg. The carrot gets soft as the water begins to boil and the temperature increases. The egg becomes hard as the water boils and gets even hotter. Well, the coffee...it changes the water from “Hot Water” to a tasty “Beverage” that can be consumed as is, or with a little cream and/or sugar. This same “beverage” can be used to warm someone up, wake some one up or be used as an excuse to fellowship on any given day. You see, unlike the carrot and egg who is changed by their situation, the coffee changes the situation. So the question that begs to be asked...are you a Christian chameleon, reaching the masses where they are to present Christ or do you fade in the background as a Chameleon Christian until you know it is safe?

Key Thought: There is nothing wrong with reaching someone where they are, but be sure that you help cause a Christ-centered change in their situation and they don’t cause a world focused change in yours!

COST OF DISCIPLESHIP, PART 1: LEARN, LIVE IT, LOVE IT!

Scripture: Mark 8:31 – 33 (KJV) ³¹ And he began to teach them, that the Son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected of the elders, and of the chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. ³² And he spake that saying openly. And Peter took him, and began to rebuke him. ³³ But when he had turned about and looked on his disciples, he rebuked Peter, saying, Get thee behind me, Satan: for thou savourest not the things that be of God, but the things that be of men.

Teaching is one of the most powerful and noblest professions I can think of. A person that wants to influence or change the future; teach. A person that does not like how things are currently being done, and has a better way to do it; teach. Someone who is concerned if the children of today will be ready for the leaderships positions and roles for tomorrow, once again teach. A Christian who believes the youth of today holds the keys to the future of the New Testament tomorrow...we must teach!

In our passage of scripture, we see the ultimate teacher is teaching once again. I have discovered teaching only occurs when: the teacher is prepared and knows the subject well enough to actually impart some information and learning must occur to say someone has been taught. This means the student has a part as well; the student must be prepared to receive the information and must at least have a modicum of understanding. Christ did His part, and had been doing His part as the “teacher” for quite some time, but the disciples were having trouble doing their part as the student.

Some of these problems were the result of the disciples being challenged to think outside of the “box” of all they thought they knew about God. There were also issues brought about because they did not “fully” understand who Christ was and what He came to earth to do. The disciples had to “learn” who Christ was to fully understand their role as His disciple.

We must come to learn Christ is ALL..and ALL TO HIM we owe, if we are truly going to be His disciples. Once we LEARN who Christ truly is, and who He should be to us, we find it easier to live out what He has taught us and shown us by His lifestyle and the word. When we learn about the true Christ, His work, His Will and His way for our lives, we begin to live and walk worthy of the vocation in which He called us. We can then truly began to LOVE what He has done, is doing and will do for our life and in our life.

We discover we no longer have to look at things from the view of someone defeated, because of Christ we get to share in the victory. We “learn” all power under heaven and earth is in Christ’s hand, and we have access to that power as we study His word. We began to “Live” for Christ and find during the times we feel discouraged we have a true friend in Jesus. We then began to “love” and not to worry if we are loved. We don’t have to be concerned about our final destination, we have a place with Him in paradise.

Key Thought: When we learn about Christ, it is easy to live for Christ. When we learn about Christ and live for Christ it is easier for us to love, be loved, understand the depth of His love and understand how love conquers all!

COST OF DISCIPLESHIP, PART 2: IN HIS FOOTSTEPS

Scripture: Mark 8:34 (KJV) Mark 8:34: ³⁴ And when he had called the people unto him with his disciples also, he said unto them, Whosoever will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me.

Many claim to be followers of Christ, but you can't help but wonder if they are boldly walking in His footsteps or following Him covertly, like someone would tail someone in a spy movie. When you follow someone, even the most casual observer should be able to see you are traveling with that person, versus you just happen to be going the same way. Christians often believe they can claim to follow Christ, but developed their own "path" in which to follow Him. Unfortunately, to truly follow Christ, one of the first thing a potential follower must realize is this...IT IS NOT ABOUT THEM BUT ALL ABOUT HIM.

In our scripture, we see Christ starts out with a choice that must be made. A person must first choose to follow Him, and if they do, then Christ provides the recipe for success. As Jesus had a choice to do the Father's will, or do His own thing, we must also chose...follow the choice of Jesus and do what the Father wants, or follow our own will and do what we want. Jesus chose to do what best benefitted all...endure the shame, endure the humiliation, go to cross and be a sacrifice for us. When we chose to follow Christ, we find that is just the beginning. We must then refrain from thinking about what best suits "us" and what will best suit "all of us" . When we deny ourselves, we no longer consider what is most comfortable or convenient for the privileged few, but what is best for all in the cause of Christ. The last part of the scripture tells us to do something that is a show stopper for most...picking up our own cross to follow Jesus. The cross may be the burden of a wayward child. Our cross may be an insensitive or selfish spouse. Our cross may be a physical ailment or malady. Our cross may be a host of things, but the question is this; does it stop us from following Christ or just make it a little more difficult. Christ carried His cross even after all medical evidence points to the fact He should have died long before He got to Calvary. Christ had a little help along the way, and He stands ready, willing and able to help us along the way. When we follow Christ's choices, the cost of discipleship doesn't seem so high...he has already paid the highest price for us. When we follow Christ's steps, we find the path is easier because he has already blazed a trail for us. When we follow Him to the cross, we understand how much He loved us, is there for us, and how even death could not keep Him from coming back for us!

Many times we look at our life and figure ours is so much worse than someone else's. There is no way we can make the choices that Christ made, but we can with His help. We believe there is no way we can follow in His footsteps, but we can because He made the path straight for us. We assume there is no way we can bear our cross, but when we look at ours compared to someone else's, with no clue as to which cross is which, we may discover our cross may not be comfortable, but with Jesus it is bearable!

Key Thought: The cross is an international sign of blessing and Christ's victory over death. If you are looking for answers to whatever ails you...follow the choices of Christ, in the footsteps of Christ and follow Christ to the cross! As the song says; For Down at the cross, Where my savior died; Down where for cleansing from sin I cried, There to my heart was the blood applied; Singing...GLORY TO HIS NAME!

COST OF DISCIPLESHIP, PART 3: LIVING TO DIE, DYING TO LIVE

Scripture: Mark 8:34 (KJV) *Mark 8:35: ³⁵ For whosoever will save his life shall lose it; but whosoever shall lose his life for my sake and the gospel's, the same shall save it.*

The Bible says that Christ came that we might have life more abundantly. The idea of “abundant living” has taken the Christian world by storm, and has developed into a phenomenon called “Prosperity Preaching”. Christians are told if they do this, or do that, they will gain riches, fame, fortune, or just about anything that can be “loosely” tied to the idea of Christian living. A person that may not be doing so well is said to not believe in the promises of God.

We must be very careful when casting general judgments on a person because they are not living the way we think they should live or even how they think they should. We must always remember to consult the creator; God may have allowed us to go through something to prepare us for something else, or we might discover we are going through something because of ourselves or someone else. We have to learn the difference between living and existing. We can be alive with all the money in the world and still not be living; just existing. We can have no money at all, but with a purpose, goal and direction, we are living life to the fullest as we experience the wonder working power of God in our lives and those around us.

We must periodically ask ourselves, especially when we get caught up in the rat race of the world; are we truly living as God intended, meaning having a purpose to our life, or are we just existing; no plan for the future or goals other than to just make it through the day without bloodshed, injury or additional pain.

There are many people that are just living to die. They were born into this world planning their funeral. Everything they do is pointed toward the day they die. Every decision they make is focused on leaving an earthly legacy for the history books, to have a building or statue named after them, or so everyone will remember them, have a wistful look on their face and claim they were one of the great ones. A person can spend so much time trying to leave something behind after they die, they can easily forget to actually live.

Christ tells us if we truly want to live our life, we have to be willing to lose it. There is a saying that was supposedly on the walls of the military police dining hall in Saigon, Vietnam, during the Vietnam conflict; “You have never lived until you have almost died. For those who fight for it, life has a flavor the protected will never know.” With that being said, until you have made the resolve you will give up your life (as you know it) for Christ and die to self, you will never know the full power of living for Christ. You have to let the old YOU die, so the new YOU can truly live and operate in and with Christ.

The journey is not easy, and for many the cost is for discipleship is high, but we must always remember the price that was paid on Calvary, and the return on our investment for the cost...1 cross + a few nails=4Given!

Key Thought: When we give our lives to Christ, and die to self, our status has changed! We are no longer living to die (physically and spiritually), but have died to live eternally with Christ the King!

COST OF DISCIPLESHIP, PART 4: RETURN ON HIS INVESTMENT

Scripture: Mark 8:34 (KJV) *Mark 8:36-37: For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?³⁷ Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?*

Every Resurrection Sunday, also known as Easter, churches across the nation celebrate this cornerstone of the Christian faith; the Risen Christ. Preachers, teachers, priest, lay leaders and all that are called upon, teach and preach the story of Christ coming out of the grave. The listeners are reminded of all Christ endured, and in spite of man's best effort, Christ still emerged victorious.

The risen Christ is an awesome evangelistic tool for those who have never known Him as their personal Savior, but sometimes we forget to "evangelize" those that are already in the church. We assume because they are in church they are committed to Christ "a little" at least. I have discovered a person coming to church is not always an indicator they have a true relationship with Christ. People may come to church for a variety of reasons and Christ may actually be the least of them. We must remember that if a fire is not fed, it will eventually smolder and ultimately go out. We must remember just because we are "in" the church house, that is not where our service ends, but actually begins.

If we were to look at our Christian service in terms of profit loss and profit gains for Christ, where would we stack up? Many things we do in life are weighed against the constant standard "How will this benefit me? Will this be worth me investing my time, talent, money and energy? Will I get an acceptable if not exceptional return on my investment?" I have heard many people say that if they get involved in something, it must benefit them in some fashion. The basic premise of men's ministry is founded on that principle; a man does not mind being involved in something AS LONG as they feel it is not a waste of time. Christians and non-Christians alike chase the American dream of pie in the sky, living comfortably, and retiring at a young age. We consult the "money people" to invest in certificate of deposits, life insurance policies with cash surrender values, and the stock market. We "invest" in these mediums with the hopes of a maximum return with a minimal of capital investment. We do this as a hedge against a potential profit loss. No one wants to discover they have spent their whole life savings and instead of an infinite profit gain, an unrecoverable profit loss is experienced. We bring that same attitude, more often than not, into our service to God. The average person works forty hours a week. God only asks for ten percent. Are we giving Him His ten percent...willingly and cheerfully?

We give a minimum investment and expect maximum returns and a minimal loss. We forget it is not about what we can get out of our service to God, but what we already have if we have accepted Jesus as our personal savior...ETERNAL LIFE WITH THE FATHER. Christ gave His all, a love and life investment so we could be reconciled back to God. HE INVESTED His blood, sweat, tears and very flesh with a MAXIMUM INVESTMENT of HIS WHOLE BEING. When you look in the mirror, ask yourself this question; WHAT IS THE RETURN ON HIS INVESTMENT IN YOU? Is Jesus getting a minimal return, which if the roles were reversed you would be asking the question, "Why did I waste my time?" Is Jesus getting the very best you have to offer? Is Jesus getting a return on His investment in YOU that leaves Him with no reservations about investing even more of Himself in YOU!

Key Thought: If Christ did a spiritual audit to determine if He has suffered a profit loss, or gain with the sacrifice of his life and blood investment in your salvation, what would the audit reveal? Have you taken advantage of what He did and made sure all you did was pointed toward gaining others for Him, or would you be a write off as a "loss" because He sustained a "profit loss" with you?

COST OF DISCIPLESHIP, PART 5: STAND UP OR SIT DOWN

Scripture: Mark 8:38 (KJV) ³⁸ *Whosoever therefore shall be ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation; of him also shall the Son of man be ashamed, when he cometh in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.*

As a Christian, we are given daily opportunities to show not only are we NOT ashamed of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, but we are PROUD to be identified as being a part of His family. We are given daily chances to not only talk about the goodness of God, display the transforming power of God, but to extend the love of God as we go about our daily routines.

Unfortunately, many Christians live a lifestyle that puts their identity with Christ in question. These so-called ambassadors for Christ cannot be distinguished from their worldly counterparts when not in a church setting because their demeanor, actions and language does not show they are willing to STAND UP for Christ. They “go-along –to- get-along”, hoping to not offend anyone and always remain politically correct. The problem with this thought process is this; a failure to STAND UP for Christ, be it in actions, language or demeanor, is the same thing as SITTING DOWN or being ASHAMED OF THE GOSPEL OF JESUS CHRIST. The book of Revelation is full of warnings of what will happen when Christ returns. Scripture even states that Christ will bring His reward with Him; you’ve been doing good, great... a spiritual gold star for you. You’ve been doing badly; well, that is a different story.

Ever met someone that was not fully committed to a cause and how they felt was determined on which way the wind was blowing on a particular day? Ever had a parent tell you to stop doing something or start doing something because you are embarrassing them? Imagine how Christ would feel if He commented on everything we did every day? Would He encourage us to continue to STAND UP for Him, or tell us we might as well go somewhere and SIT DOWN? I would rather be guilty for not doing anything for the cause of Christ than not doing the very best I can. I have discovered the old adage is true; a person that won’t take a stand for anything will fall for most everything. In the terms of the Christian arena; failure to take a stand for your faith is the same thing as being embarrassed or ashamed of your faith. This is not saying a Christian should proclaim and profess their faith on the rooftops or scream how good God is at every public gathering. A proud parent does not have to say a word; their demeanor, their presence, the look in their eye lets a child know their parent is proud. There is nothing wrong with professing your faith, but living your faith has more impact! Your demeanor, your presence, the look on your face and eyes should let people know you have decided to make Jesus your choice. If you can’t do that, then perhaps as the old people would say...”IF YOU DON’T WANT TO GET IN TROUBLE, YOU BETTER GO SIT DOWN SOMEWHERE!” Our goal as a Christian is to press toward the mark of the higher calling of Jesus Christ and make Him proud!

Key Thought: Countless so-called Christians claim they are ambassadors for Christ, but this identification is only given when around other professed believers. Christ stands up for the believers daily, showing He is not ashamed to say we are in His family. Can the same thing be said for you?

DESTINATION RESERVATION

Scripture: Galatians 6:7-10 (KJV) ⁷ Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.⁸ For he that soweth to his flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption; but he that soweth to the Spirit shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting.⁹ And let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not.¹⁰ As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith.

There is an old joke about how everyone wants to get to heaven, know about life after death, and even wonder if their pets will be in heaven, but no one is in a “rush” to find out. I personally am content to “wait” until the Father calls me home. I am not too concerned with the idea of life after death; the Bible answers that for me. I am not concerned with what heaven looks like; my Father will be there and that’s good enough for me. I especially like the idea of being around my “Father”, the one that I am called by His name, because all the things I have felt the Bible didn’t address, I can ask Him. The idea of being in the presence of God is awesome, but I have discovered for a trip of this magnitude, you have to confirm your destination reservation. Many supposed “Christians” assume because they acknowledged Christ that acknowledgement is the same as accepting Christ. These poor souls assume Christ has already made the travel arrangements for them and reserved their “mansion” in heaven. The Bible tells us to “accept” Christ as **OUR** Lord and Savior, not just acknowledge He is **A** Lord and Savior. We must believe on and in Him, along with acknowledging and confessing our sins to Him. In essence, we fool ourselves if we believe accepting Christ is the last step we need to make to get into heaven, Christ is the first step. The Bible tells us there will come a time where there will be much weeping and gnashing of teeth. Imagine thinking your company has confirmed all your travel arrangements, only to arrive at the airport and discover your flight was never reserved. That obstacle is overcome, only to discover your rental car suffered the same fate. You arrive at your desired destination only to discover your company failed to confirm and ensure your reservations were “all good”, now you have no place to stay and the whole purpose of the taking the trip is lost, because those reservations were not made either. There are so many souls that will be disappointed because they lived a life that acknowledged Christ but did not show acceptance of Christ. Christ said if you love Him you will keep His commandments. There will be great disappointments when those that thought they found a loophole into heaven discover it was just a shortcut to hell.

Quite often, a true Christian looks upon those that are playing “Russian Roulette” with their final destination, and wonder if all the good they try to do in building up Christ’s kingdom is worth the effort. We go out and share the “Good News” only to have it perverted and watered down by pseudo Christians. We do “Good Works” only to have someone pull Christ down instead of lifting Him up. When we are about our “Father’s Business”, we can’t afford to stop just because we don’t see an immediate impact. We may plant good CHRIST-CENTERED seeds, although we may not see them bloom in our generation, these seeds may germinate and take over the world like peppermint planted and taking over a whole lawn...leaving a sweet smell and acting as a deterrent for things that would destroy the lawn. Our reward is not now, it is later in heaven. That is when we will truly be able to reap and enjoy what we sowed!

Key Thought: Be careful what you plant, because planting the wrong thing and hoping for a crop failure often backfires. Plant the right thing and enjoy the harvest!

DEVIL'S RIGHTS ADVISEMENT

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 4:7-10 (KJV): ⁷ But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us. ⁸ We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; ⁹ Persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed; ¹⁰ Always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our body.

The devil wants us to believe that he has all the power, and all the rights to do whatever he pleases in a Christian's life. He wants us to think that if God does not directly intervene in a given life situation, we have no choice but to let him have his will and his way. There is only one entity that has the "right" to do as He pleases in our life, and that is the Triune God. All others will only be able to operate under the power we give them, or acknowledge their perceived "right" to do a given thing in our life. Satan is the master of identity theft, and if we are not careful he will take our identity as part of the royal priesthood and have us believing we are the lowest form of a life; a mere oxygen thief! We will start to wonder if God will even be interested in a waste of skin as us. We forget who we are in Christ, and subsequently forget all the promises made to us as a child of God. Satan wants us to become so overwhelmed with life that we begin to feel defeated, discouraged and ultimately destroyed. If we are not careful and allow him to cause us a spiritual identity crisis, where we wonder "Who We Are, he will then help us question "Whose We Are?" We will begin to wonder if we truly are God's creation, why would he let Satan treat us so badly. After all, every movie we have ever seen tells us when the common folk realize the power of the King, the children are left alone. So could it be we really are not a child of God, and have been fooling ourselves all this time? Could it be there was a mistake, and we were "switched" at spiritual birth to not become a new creature in Christ, but just a newer version of ourselves? When we began to wonder who we are, whose we are is the next logical progression in a series steps designed to be a hostile takeover the devil attempts in the life of the believer. We relinquish more power to him than he definitely deserves, and he ever had before we came to Christ. He works hard to keep us blinded to the fact when we know God is our Father, and we act accordingly, there is nothing else we have to question about our identity. Satan knows if we ever figure out what he is up to, we will not only remember who we are, whose we are, but who God is. I used to read the scripture that says No weapon formed against me shall prosper. I always thought it was a beautiful scripture, and had preached from it several times. It is amazing how God can give you new revelations on even the most familiar of things. One day He opened my eyes to the idea of why no weapon formed against me shall prosper...He made the man, who made the weapons, so He controls both the man the weapon! That reminds me of who God is...the Alpha and the Omega! The Creator, the Great I Am. There are no words to adequately describe God other than He is God! Once a believer realizes who he is; a new creature in Christ. Whose they are; a child of God and fully understand who God is; the Great I Am, it then becomes crystal clear...the devil has no rights other than to remain silent in our life. I have discovered as a retired policeman, you still have to sometimes advise people of their rights, especially the devil. We have to tell him so he understands that anything he says (or does) will be used against him...used against him to strengthen our resolve to embody the words of Joshua 24:15 "AS FOR ME AND MY HOUSE WE WILL SERVE THE LORD!

Key Thought: We often give the devil more freedom or rights in our life than what were ever intended. Sometimes we have to advise Satan exactly what rights he has in our life...mainly to understand that anything he says, or does will be used against him. His words and deeds will strengthen our resolve that God is definitely the ONLY CHOICE FOR US!

DOES HE REALLY KNOW YOU?

Scripture: Acts 19:11-16 (KJV) ¹¹ And God wrought special miracles by the hands of Paul: ¹² So that from his body were brought unto the sick handkerchiefs or aprons, and the diseases departed from them, and the evil spirits went out of them. ¹³ Then certain of the vagabond Jews, exorcists, took upon them to call over them which had evil spirits the name of the LORD Jesus, saying, We adjure you by Jesus whom Paul preacheth. ¹⁴ And there were seven sons of one Sceva, a Jew, and chief of the priests, which did so. ¹⁵ And the evil spirit answered and said, Jesus I know, and Paul I know; but who are ye? ¹⁶ And the man in whom the evil spirit was leaped on them, and overcame them, and prevailed against them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded.

There are many who believe if you scream something loud enough, repeat it often enough, and try to imitate or duplicate what you have seen enough, it will become true. A close inspection of our churches today will reveal there are many who claim to be Christians because they have told everyone they are, many times, so they have convinced themselves it must be true. Sorry to say, going to church and claiming to be a Christian does not make it any truer than going out on Halloween and wearing a Superman costume does not make you Superman.

We live in a society where if we look the part...if we sound the part...then we must actually be what we claim to be. We have told since we were young, if it looks like a duck, quack like a duck, walks like a duck then it must be a duck. Sometimes it may have all the visible attributes of a duck, but it could be a swan imitated a duck, or trying to duplicate what it has seen a duck do. We have all heard the story of the ugly duckling that was actually a beautiful swan. If we take a different spin on it, we would see that many times we think we have a beautiful swan when in actuality it truly is an ugly duckling.

The focus on Christianity in mainstream society has shifted to imitating what we believe a Christian should be, when unfortunately that does not always fall in line with what Christ has called us to be. We look at how Charles Spurgeon lived, Dr. Tony Evans or Billy Graham and if we imitate them, we are now a Christian...wrong.

We see that imitation doesn't work, so we then try and "duplicate" everything they have done in their life, with the idea that if we can make the same choices they made, we will become the Christian they are...wrong again.

Jesus invites each of us to be in a relationship with Him; not to be just like everyone else, but to use what is in us for His purpose. As we abide in HIM, HE ABIDES IN US! BEING A CHRISTIAN ONLY SERVES AS AN ACCURATE DESCRIPTION, ONLY IF YOU HAVE ASSIMILATED, AND ARE STILL ASSIMILITATING JESUS IN YOU, MEANING TRULY...GREATER IS HE IN YOU THAN HE THAT IS IN THE WORLD.

Key Thought: Being a Christian is more than just saying to the world "I am a Christian". Proof is required; your lifestyle, your character, your demeanor all speak to evidence you are or are not truly a Christian. Christianity is not something that can just be imitated, or duplicated. Christianity or being CHRIST-LIKE must be assimilate into every facet of your life before you can truly claim you are a Christian, even if work is still in progress!

FIRST THINGS FIRST, GOD AS A PRIORITY, PART 1: EPHEBUS

Scripture: *Revelation 2:1-7: Unto the angel of the church of Ephesus write; These things saith he that holdeth the seven stars in his right hand, who walketh in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks; ² I know thy works, and thy labour, and thy patience, and how thou canst not bear them which are evil: and thou hast tried them which say they are apostles, and are not, and hast found them liars: ³ And hast borne, and hast patience, and for my name's sake hast laboured, and hast not fainted. ⁴ Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love. ⁵ Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent. ⁶ But this thou hast, that thou hatest the deeds of the Nicolaitanes, which I also hate. ⁷ He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God.*

The book of Revelation contains seven letters to seven churches that existed at the time of writing. John the “beloved” disciple was given this revelation to share with the churches to help them on their Christian walk. The churches are either encouraged or admonished to keep God as a priority in all they do. I like to think a training exercise has just been concluded and Christ is walking among the troops. He gives them a battlefield assessment of how they did and are doing in the matter of spreading the “Good News” and the constant battle of “Spiritual Warfare”. Christ assesses each battalion, through their leader, to not just chastise them, but to aid and strengthen for future engagements. Christ also warns about the end result of not listening and taking his words of wisdom to heart. A close examination of each church reveals the following; a historical application, spiritual application, social application and personal application. The historical application brings is based on the fact the churches actually existed in the places listed. There may not have been a building as we have come to know them today...a structure at 123 Anystreet, Anytown, USA, but there was a body of believers that regularly met to glorify, magnify and edify the name of the Lord. The spiritual application addresses the spiritual condition observed in the churches at the time. Each body of believers are inherently social by nature, and therefore the letters address how they interact with others and among themselves. The personal applications calls for a close examination of ourselves to see if we exhibit not only the strengths, but more importantly the weaknesses identified with the respective churches. In this seven part series, we will first look at the church in Ephesus.

Ephesus experienced tremendous growth despite intense Roman persecution. Ephesus felt they still had the passion for the cause of Christ, but somewhere along the way, the flame of desire had begun to flicker. The church at Ephesus had somehow transitioned from continually striving to get better, to just surviving and trying to get by. Christ commends them for their works, labor and patience. They are lauded for their intolerance of evil and even checked those out that claimed to be apostles, but later were found not to be. Christ acknowledges they worked hard, carried the burden, and even did things for Christ sake and did not faint or give in but in it all they forgot their first love...to be the physical body of Christ!

Many Christians experience the same problem. They get so busy doing the work of Christ, they forget to maintain the passion of Christ for what they do and in all they do. The church at Ephesus worked, but lost their passion for the work...the love of Christ.

Key Thought: When we keep Christ as our priority, and the focus in all we do, we have little danger of losing our first love. We are continually reminded of the love Christ showed for us by what he endured before he died, his death, burial, resurrection and his continual intercession for us before the Father.

FIRST THINGS FIRST, GOD AS A PRIORITY, PART 2: SMYRNA

Scripture: Revelation 2:8-11: “To the angel of the church in Smyrna write: These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again.⁹ I know your afflictions and your poverty—yet you are rich! I know about the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.¹⁰ Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you life as your victor’s crown.¹¹ Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who is victorious will not be hurt at all by the second death.

The book of Revelation contains seven letters to seven churches that existed at the time of writing. John the “beloved” disciple was given this revelation to share with the churches to help them on their Christian walk. The churches are encouraged to keep God as their first priority in all they do. I like to envision a massive training exercise has just been concluded and Christ is walking among his charges, the ultimate field general, to give them a battlefield assessment of how they did and are doing in the matter of spreading the “Good News” and the constant battle of “Spiritual Warfare”. Christ assesses each battalion, through their leader, to not just chastise them, but to aid and strengthen for future engagements. Christ also warns about the end result of not listening and taking his words of wisdom to heart. A close examination of each church reveals the following; a historical application, spiritual application, social application and personal application. The historical application brings is based on the fact the churches actually existed in the places listed. The spiritual application addresses the spiritual condition observed in the churches at the time. Each body of believers are inherently social by nature, and therefore the letters address how they interact with others and among themselves. The personal applications calls for a close examination of ourselves to see if we exhibit not only the strengths, but more importantly the weaknesses identified with the respective churches. In part two of this seven part series, we will look at the church in Smyrna.

Smyrna is one of the two churches that was not admonished to change how they did things but were encouraged to continue what they were doing and empowered to do more. Smyrna is praised for persevering in spite of difficulties and having few resources. The church at Smyrna is reminded although they may be poor in resources (money, personnel, influence); they are rich in the things that matter....CHRIST! Smyrna is told not to worry about the people saying bad things about them...they are working for the enemy, not for the glory of God! Smyrna is told they will suffer for a time, but if they remain faithful, even unto death, they will ultimately win.

When we look at the world through our physical eyes, it would seem the work done for Christ is all in vain. Problems are continually endured and progress seems to be little, if any at all. We may wonder “What is the point?” The point is this...we are not seeking a victory, Christ has already secured that. We are striving to minimize the casualties caused by our adversary the devil. We do this by working continuously, vigorously and tirelessly for the cause of Christ. We may seem weak, but in Christ we are strong. We may seem poor, but we have GRACE...GOD’S RICHES AT CHRIST’S EXPENSE!

Key Thought: When we keep Christ as our priority, and the focus in all we do, we don’t have to worry about problems or progress. Christ tells us to stay focused on him and we can do ALL THINGS THROUGH CHRIST JESUS! We may feel small, but we serve a BIG GOD!

FIRST THINGS FIRST, GOD AS A PRIORITY, PART 3: PERGAMOS

Scripture: Revelation 2:12-17: *And to the angel of the church in Pergamos write; These things saith he which hath the sharp sword with two edges; ¹³ I know thy works, and where thou dwellest, even where Satan's seat is: and thou holdest fast my name, and hast not denied my faith, even in those days wherein Antipas was my faithful martyr, who was slain among you, where Satan dwelleth. ¹⁴ But I have a few things against thee, because thou hast there them that hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balac to cast a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed unto idols, and to commit fornication. ¹⁵ So hast thou also them that hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate. ¹⁶ Repent; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth. ¹⁷ He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the hidden manna, and will give him a white stone, and in the stone a new name written, which no man knoweth saving he that receiveth it*

The book of Revelation contains seven letters to seven churches that existed at the time of writing. John the “beloved” disciple was given this revelation to share with the churches to help them on their Christian walk. They are encouraged to keep God as their first priority. I like to envision a massive training exercise has just been concluded and Christ is walking among his charges, the ultimate field general, to give them a battlefield assessment of how they did and are doing in the matter of spreading the “Good News” and the constant battle of “Spiritual Warfare”. Christ assesses each battalion, through their leader, to not just chastise them, but to aid and strengthen for future engagements. Christ also warns about the end result of not listening and taking his words of wisdom to heart. A close examination of each church reveals the following; a historical application, spiritual application, social application and personal application. The historical application brings is based on the fact the churches actually existed in the places listed. The spiritual application addresses the spiritual condition observed in the churches at the time. Each body of believers is inherently social by nature, and therefore the letters address how they interact with others and among themselves. The personal applications calls for a close examination of ourselves to see if we exhibit not only the strengths, but more importantly the weaknesses identified with the respective churches. In part three of this seven part series, we will look at the church at Pergamos.

Pergamos begins with the church hearing about how even though they live at Satan’s seat, they have not denied their faith or the name of the Lord. Just when they start feeling good about themselves, we discover they are keeping people from understanding the true meaning of Christ and the cause of Christ. Pergamos learns they are not only allowing, but are providing fuel to the idea there are loopholes in the Gospel of Jesus Christ...loopholes that allow you to do what you want and still be justified by the blood of Christ.

Many of us begin our Christian walk, examining everything we do to ensure we are doing things the Christ-centered and desired way. After we have been walking the walk, and talking the talk for a while, we get comfortable and find justification for the things that we desire to do. The Bible says, if you justify yourself before man you are an abomination in the sight of God. We should never look for ways to be in God’s will and justify what we want to do. What we must do is take the path that guarantees we will always get our way...get so lost in the will of God; his will for you is your will. This way, what God wants, you want and we know God will always get his way!

Key Thought: When the will of God and God is our top priority, we will find everything else we need and even some of the things we desire will just fall in place.

FIRST THINGS FIRST, GOD AS A PRIORITY, PART 4: THYATIRA

Scripture: Revelation 2:18-29: 2:18-19 "And unto the angel of the church in Thyatira write; These things saith the Son of God, who hath his eyes like unto a flame of fire, and his feet [are] like fine brass;" "2:19 I know thy works, and charity, and service, and faith, and thy patience, and thy works; and the last [to be] more than the first" 2:20 Notwithstanding I have a few things against thee, because thou sufferest that woman Jezebel, which calleth herself a prophetess, to teach and to seduce my servants to commit fornication, and to eat things sacrificed unto idols. 2:21 And I gave her space to repent of her fornication; and she repented not. 2:22 Behold, I will cast her into a bed, and them that commit adultery with her into great tribulation, except they repent of their deeds. 2:23 And I will kill her children with death; and all the churches shall know that I am he which searcheth the reins and hearts: and I will give unto every one of you according to your works. 2:24-25 "But unto you I say, and unto the rest in Thyatira, as many as have not this doctrine, and which have not known the depths of Satan, as they speak; I will put upon you none other burden." "But that which ye have [already] hold fast till I come." 2:26-27 "And he that overcometh, and keepeth my works unto the end, to him will I give power over the nations:" "And he shall rule them with a rod of iron; as the vessels of a potter shall they be broken to shivers: even as I received of my Father." 2:28 And I will give him the morning star. 2:29 He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches

The book of Revelation contains seven letters to seven churches that existed at the time of writing. John the "beloved" disciple was given this revelation to share with the churches to help them on their Christian walk. The churches are encouraged to keep God as their first priority. I like to envision a massive training exercise has just been concluded and Christ is walking among his charges, the ultimate field general, to give them a battlefield assessment of how they did and are doing in the matter of spreading the "Good News" and the constant battle of "Spiritual Warfare". Christ assesses each battalion, through their leader, to not just chastise them, but to aid and strengthen for future engagements. Christ also warns about the end result of not listening and taking his words of wisdom to heart. A close examination of each church reveals the following; a historical application, spiritual application, social application and personal application. The historical application brings is based on the fact the churches actually existed in the places listed. The spiritual application addresses the spiritual condition observed in the churches at the time. Each body of believers is inherently social by nature, and therefore the letters address how they interact with others and among themselves. The personal applications calls for a close examination of ourselves to see if we exhibit not only the strengths, but more importantly the weaknesses identified with the respective churches. In part four of this seven part series, we will look at the church at Thyatira.

Thyatira was well known for her deeds, love, faithfulness, service and endurance while working for the Gospel. Thyatira also was known for tolerating teaching that compromised the integrity and moral decency of the Gospel. Some members of the church at Thyatira were led to believe sexual immorality was acceptable in service to Christ. The indictment is given and the ultimate punishment is announced for those that refuse to change their ways. Christ tells us today, the world may tell us so many things are "acceptable" and even "condoned" by the church, the "epicurious" lifestyle is not the Christian way. We must stay true to what Christ would have us do, and in the end those that think they rule us will be ruled by US!

Key Thought: If we truly want to serve Christ, He will give us the strength to stay on the path he has laid out for us. At the end, if we give all to God, we will no longer be "ruled" by the world doctrine, but are rulers in God's New World Order.

FIRST THINGS FIRST, GOD AS A PRIORITY, PART 5: SARDIS

Scripture: Revelation 3:1-6: To the angel^a of the church in Sardis write: These are the words of him who holds the seven spirits^b of God and the seven stars. I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. **2**Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have found your deeds unfinished in the sight of my God. **3**Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; hold it fast, and repent. But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you. **4**Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy. **5**The one who is victorious will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out the name of that person from the book of life, but will acknowledge that name before my Father and his angels. **6**Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

The book of Revelation contains seven letters to seven churches that existed at the time of writing. John the “beloved” disciple was given this revelation to share with the churches to help them on their Christian walk. I like to envision a massive training exercise has just been concluded and Christ is walking among his charges, the ultimate field general, to give them a battlefield assessment of how they did and are doing in the matter of spreading the “Good News” and the constant battle of “Spiritual Warfare”. Christ assesses each battalion, through their leader, to not just chastise them, but to aid and strengthen them for future engagements. Christ also warns about the end result of not listening and taking his words of wisdom to heart. A close examination of each church reveals the following; a historical application, spiritual application, social application and personal application. The historical application is based on the fact the churches actually existed in the places listed. The spiritual application addresses the spiritual condition observed in the churches at the time. Each body of believers is inherently social by nature, and therefore the letters address how they interact with others and among themselves. The personal applications calls for a close examination of ourselves to see if we exhibit not only the strengths, but more importantly the weaknesses identified with the respective churches. In part five of this seven part series, we will look at the church in Sardis.

We live in a society where there is a fascination with the living dead. There are countless movies about zombies and even movies where zombies are romantically involved with the fully living. The church at Sardis shows us zombies are not a new horror movie phenomenon. Sardis might be the first recorded incident of zombies, at least spiritual zombies in the church. Sardis had a reputation for being vibrant, alive and fully functional as an awesome body of believers, but the church was spiritually dying and parts were already dead. Sardis is told to strengthen what remained alive and finish the work they were given to do...take forth the Good News of Jesus Christ. Christ tells them those that fight for their “spiritual” livelihood would be rewarded, but those who didn’t...

Sometimes people are spiritually dying and do not even realize it. You might be on your spiritual deathbed if you are more concerned with you or us, than the Jesus in you or Us. You might be on your spiritual deathbed if you are more concerned with your convenience than remembering Christ’s sacrifice!

Key Thought: The Bible says God is a spirit, and they that worship him must do so in spirit and in truth. If you feel you are on your spiritual deathbed, ask Jesus to use his Gospel A.E.D. (Automatic Evangelistic Defibrillator) and jumpstart your heart to get the word of God into you and into the hearts of the people of God. Speak life and do not be an example of the living spiritual dead!

FIRST THINGS FIRST, GOD AS A PRIORITY, PART 6: PHILADELPHIA

Scripture: Revelation 3:7-12: ⁷ And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write; These things saith he that is holy, he that is true, he that hath the key of David, he that openeth, and no man shutteth; and shutteth, and no man openeth; ⁸ I know thy works: behold, I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it: for thou hast a little strength, and hast kept my word, and hast not denied my name. ⁹ Behold, I will make them of the synagogue of Satan, which say they are Jews, and are not, but do lie; behold, I will make them to come and worship before thy feet, and to know that I have loved thee. ¹⁰ Because thou hast kept the word of my patience, I also will keep thee from the hour of temptation, which shall come upon all the world, to try them that dwell upon the earth. ¹¹ Behold, I come quickly: hold that fast which thou hast, that no man take thy crown. ¹² Him that overcometh will I make a pillar in the temple of my God, and he shall go no more out: and I will write upon him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, which is new Jerusalem, which cometh down out of heaven from my God: and I will write upon him my new name.

The book of Revelation contains seven letters to seven churches that existed at the time of writing. John the “beloved” disciple was given this revelation to share with the churches to help them on their Christian walk. The churches are encouraged to make and keep God as their first priority. Imagine a massive training exercise has just been concluded and Christ is walking among his charges, the ultimate field general, to give them a battlefield assessment of how they did and are doing in the matter of spreading the “Good News” and the constant battle of “Spiritual Warfare”. Christ assesses each battalion, through their leader, to not just chastise them, but to aid and strengthen for future engagements. Christ also warns about the end result of not listening and taking his words of wisdom to heart. A close examination of each church reveals the following; a historical application, spiritual application, social application and personal application. The historical application brings is based on the fact the churches actually existed in the places listed. The spiritual application addresses the spiritual condition observed in the churches at the time. Each body of believers are inherently social by nature, and therefore the letters address how they interact with others and among themselves. The personal applications calls for a close examination of ourselves to see if we exhibit not only the strengths, but more importantly the weaknesses identified with the respective churches. In part six of this seven part series, we will look at the church in Philadelphia.

The city of Philadelphia is often called the city of brotherly love. The Greek word for this type of love is Phileo, which embodies the question Cain asked of God after he killed Abel. Cain asked if he was his brother’s keeper and the church at Philadelphia by deeds gives a resounding “YES” as an answer to that question. Philadelphia, like Smyrna is not condemned, but their enemies are the ones who are condemned by the Lord. Philadelphia may not have been as strong as she could be, but they were pressing toward the mark of the higher calling of Jesus Christ. Christ encourages them by letting him know if he opens the door, which he was giving them an open door, NO ONE would be able to close it. Conversely, we he CLOSES a door; no one will be able to open it. Many times Christ makes a way for us out of no way. This tells us, when he opens the door of opportunity, there is nothing for man to do but let God be God. When God closes a door, or in other words, closes the door on someone stopping his people from doing his work, they will not be able to do anything about it!

Key Thought: When God is for us, who can stop us? When we accurately represent Christ we get the full meaning of ALL POWER UNDER HEAVEN AND EARTH IS IN HIS HAND!

FIRST THINGS FIRST, GOD AS A PRIORITY, PART 7: LAODICEA

Scripture: Revelation 3:14-22:¹⁴ *And unto the angel of the church of the Laodiceans write; These things saith the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of the creation of God;* ¹⁵ *I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot.* ¹⁶ *So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth.* ¹⁷ *Because thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked:* ¹⁸ *I counsel thee to buy of me gold tried in the fire, that thou mayest be rich; and white raiment, that thou mayest be clothed, and that the shame of thy nakedness do not appear; and anoint thine eyes with eyesalve, that thou mayest see.* ¹⁹ *As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten: be zealous therefore, and repent.* ²⁰ *Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me.* ²¹ *To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne.* ²² *He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches.*

The book of Revelation contains seven letters to seven churches that existed at the time of writing. John the “beloved” disciple was given this revelation to share with the churches to help them on their Christian walk. I like to envision a massive training exercise has just been concluded and Christ is walking among his charges, the ultimate field general, to give them a battlefield assessment of how they did and are doing in the matter of spreading the “Good News” and the constant battle of “Spiritual Warfare”. Christ assesses each battalion, through their leader, to not just chastise them, but to aid and strengthen for future engagements. Christ also warns about the end result of not listening and taking his words of wisdom to heart. A close examination of each church reveals the following; a historical application, spiritual application, social application and personal application. The historical application brings is based on the fact the churches actually existed in the places listed. The spiritual application addresses the spiritual condition observed in the churches at the time. Each body of believers are inherently social by nature, and therefore the letters address how they interact with others and among themselves. The personal applications calls for a close examination of ourselves to see if we exhibit not only the strengths, but more importantly the weaknesses identified with the respective churches. In the final part, part seven of this seven part series, we will look at the church in Laodicea.

There is a story where a girl named Goldilocks goes into some bear’s house and tries their food. One bowl had contents she deemed “too hot”. The other “too cold”, yet one was “just right”. The one she deemed just right she devoured, while leaving the others. The church at Laodiceas could not be said they were hot for the cause of Christ, or even cold. They were like Switzerland during World War II, neutral. Many Christians are on fire for the Lord, and others are “cold and aloof”. However, there is a third group of Christians that try to stay exactly in the middle, not too cold or hot. The problem with that is lukewarm might be acceptable for a baby’s bath, but when the bath is done you throw out the bath water. We must ask ourselves, would we want lukewarm coffee or ice cream. Hot coffee and cold ice cream are delicious, so how much better is the word of God when delivered with the “Hot” passion of a believer, but we are like “Ice” when the fiery darts of the devil try to burn us?

Key Thought: It is better to be on fire for the Lord or completely cold or uncaring than to be so-so. Imagine if Christ was not passionate about providing a way back to the Father for us and gave death the cold should about staying in the grave? We would not be able to enjoy the full measure of God’s GRACE (God’s Riches at Christ’s Expense!)

GET BY OR GET BETTER

Scripture: John 10:9-10: ⁹ *I am the door: by me if any man enter in, he shall be saved, and shall go in and out, and find pasture.* ¹⁰ *The thief cometh not, but for to steal, and to kill, and to destroy: I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.*

Christmas has come and gone, and as we look back, we think about how we waited with bated breath and eager anticipation to see what presents were under the tree. We hoped, and sometimes even prayed that this Christmas we would get the “one” thing we wished for all year. The Israelites waited, like many of us did, for the fulfillment of the prophecy, the promise and plan God said would come to make life better for them. They whispered and talked about who would come and how the Savior would come, and the deceivers of the world had them believe the Savior would come in like a whirlwind, conquering the world with his power and might...making all bow down before his throne as he crushed their resistance. The other religious leaders had them believe that by following a set of rituals, rules and regulations, their efforts would guarantee them a place with God. Christ came, and during his ministry made it plain. He is the door to salvation, and although others may come to steal, kill and destroy, He came that we could have life to the fullest.

When I was younger, I wished for G.I. Joe, with the Kung Fu grip. When I was older, I wished for “Lester, the Ventriiloquist Doll”. When I came to understand the true meaning of Christmas, my Christmas wishes changed. I no longer thought about the gifts that may be under the tree, but I began to appreciate the gifts I already had received. My gifts included my wonderful wife, adult children and my granddaughters. I have so much to be grateful for, but there are no words to express the gift that I re-opened back in 1998...the gift of salvation, that was unwrapped over 2,000 years ago, and even with all the information available, I am still amazed at how miraculous this gift is. You see, I was saved at an early age, but suffered from my own bad theology. Christ took me to the world “seminary”, got me on the right learning track and helped me to revisit the gift of his birth, life, death and resurrection, but more importantly what it meant to me. When Christ was born, he came in with none of the fanfare you would expect at the birth of a King. A proclamation was not sent out to the world where all citizens were required to come and pay their respects. Oh, the message went out, but only a select few decided to come...those that heard the angels, understood the promise and prophecy was fulfilled and the our Savior was born.

The New Year celebrations are a distant memory, like many of our New Year resolutions, where we resolved to no longer just get by, but get “better” at everything from physical fitness to reading our Bible more. We often during the Christmas and New Year season focus on just Christmas day and the start of a New Year without fully understanding the significance of those two days in a Christian’s life. Many of us celebrate Christ’s birth, but never take advantage of all that comes with the God’s gift of his only begotten son. It’s like getting a new smartphone, and only use it to make calls. The full power of the phone goes to waste. God’s gift of his son gives us the ability to not only live our life, but with Christ live our life to the fullest. God allowed us to see another year, so do we take full advantage of this gift or just do what we have to do as we did last year to “get by” instead of doing better. Do we just want to get by doing the bare minimum, or get better? We can get by in our service to God, being a child of God, listening to God and sharing the goodness of God or “Choose” to get better. Give your life to God, and watch him show up and show out!

Key Thought: If we just want to get by...let’s continue with lackluster service to the Lord, if we serve at all. If we want to get BETTER, we must GET GOD AS OUR TOP PRIORITY...in all our ways acknowledge him, and HE WILL DIRECTY OUR PATH!

GOD APPROVED

Scripture: 2 Timothy 2:15 (KJV): ¹⁵ *Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.*

People are designed to seek approval from someone, at some point in their life, no matter how independent and self-sufficient a person may seem. Our desire is to obtain approval that tells us we are the best there is, the best there was, or the best there will ever be. If we can't get these things spoken to us in a positive manner, we will often take the negative spin just as well. This need for approval is driven by our desire to be in a relationship of some sort, even if it is just with the cosmos. This relational need is part of our God given design, and we were designed to want to be in relationship with Him! A non-believer may deny this fact, but they will still form relationships everywhere they can to avoid forming the relationship that matters; with Jesus Christ. As a way of avoidance, non-believers, and unfortunately some unseasoned believers will seek group approval. This type of approval is sought from the "In crowd" or a version of the ever present high school popular kids. These are the people that seem to have a keen understanding of everything going on and never seem to be bothered by anything. What this group says, where they go, and anyone that goes against them risk being ostracized from society. An interesting thing about this group is they seldom have the "grasp" on things they are given credit for and often have to work harder to appear to have a clue about life when they have none.

A person may go beyond seeking group approval, but find themselves seeking gender approval. This means validation by a certain gender that they have truly arrived. The middle aged man chasing a young girl to show he has still got it, whatever "it" is. The older woman flirting with the younger man in hopes he will see her as a mature vibrant woman and not a female version of the pathetic old man chasing the younger girls. Even those living an alternate lifestyle seek gender approval that they are accepted by both genders as the gender they chose.

We can seek approval by a group or a gender but neither approval equals the approval given by God. Isaiah 55 talks about doing things and not being satisfied, and that is what we are all doomed to experience until God's approval has been sought and obtained. Many Bible scholars will give you long processes and mysterious recipes on how to receive God's approval. I have discovered that although doctrinally sound, many of these processes over complicate something God made simple. The Bible tells us to study to show ourselves approved unto God. That means we diligently "Study" God's revelation of and about Him, what He expects from us and we can expect from Him, and how we are to be in a relationship with Him. This will have us on the path to God's approval. We must then put this knowledge to work, and the work is the kingdom building work. The knowledge we gain must be coupled with God given understanding so we can rightly divide the word of truth and never be ashamed!

Key Thought: The Bible contains the key to getting God's approval. A person must diligently seek God, and at times it is not easy, but the question is can we afford not to seek God and His approval?

GOD NEVER FAILS

Scripture: *Jeremiah 29:11-13.* ¹¹ *For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.* ¹² *Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you.* ¹³ *You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.* ¹⁴ *I will be found by you,” declares the Lord, “and will bring you back from captivity.* ^[b] *I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you,” declares the Lord, “and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile.”*

We live in a time when the values of our “Old Time Religion” seem to have been forgotten. This great nation of ours has a motto of “In God We Trust”, but it seems to have become more of a statement along the lines of “In God We Trust, but We Still Verify!” No longer do we seem to believe that God has a plan to prosper us and not harm us. In fact the prevailing sentiment, outside of the church realm, is God doesn’t care, is too busy or does not have the power He is reported to have. This sentiment causes many to try and handle things themselves which would be better suited to be handled by God. A mindset of this nature may seem to be realistic, but in actuality it can prove to be spiritually or physically fatalistic. Man has a tendency to handle a situation based on their perception of the circumstances. This perception can often be clouded by emotions, or either the perceptions of others. Failure to talk to the creator can result in an inappropriate response to a relatively simple situation. The most common issue that I have often seen is in the youth of today. We live in a world where many youth are taught the idea of planning to fail. Based on their socio-economic status, their perceived ability to pursue education, or their lineage, they are taught there is a limit to what they could ever hope to accomplish. Gang bangers, drug users, and many others assume their life is the best it will ever be, so why even try? God sent His son that we might have life and have it more abundantly. The devil wants to keep that a secret, and that is why we are commissioned to spread the good news of Jesus Christ.

Sometimes it is not an issue of planning to fail, but failing to plan. The carefree, spontaneous, epicurious lifestyle is often applauded, but a lifestyle of this nature is seldom practical. Scriptures tell us God will supply all our needs, but that doesn’t mean we can just afford to sit back on our sanctified self and wait for the move of God. Simply put; if we want a financial blessing to handle a certain situation, we might want to see if the Lord is providing us a job opportunity versus waiting for the Lord to have the church write a check. We must plan, but just ensure that our plan is so lost in God’s plan that His plan is our plan.

We are taught that to lean and depend on anyone is a sign of weakness, but leaning and depending on the Lord is actually a sign of strength. When we surrender to His will and His way; what man has claimed is impossible suddenly becomes possible. What man claims is un-do-able, suddenly becomes do-able. What man says is unexplainable, suddenly becomes explainable because GOD NEVER FAILS.

God knows the plans He has for us, and we can save a lot of time if we just check in with Him. God is into details, so rest assured, every “T” will be crossed and “I” will be dotted in God’s plan!

Key Thought: Many miss out because they are waiting for God to specifically call them. He calls to us every day, so if we are waiting for the call, it has already come!

NOT OF THIS WORLD

Scripture: *1 John 4:4 (KJV)* ⁴ *Ye are of God, little children, and have overcome them: because greater is he that is in you, than he that is in the world.*

I have discovered the devil has a pretty good scam going on when it comes to disrupting both the new and experienced walk of a Christian. The devil does everything in his power to remind us we are in this world, where he supposedly has all the power. We are assaulted daily by the choices made by “people” that have fallen under his influence. We see examples of the dark side of humanity when we hear about babies being left in trash cans, human trafficking of children, abused woman and the list goes on and on. We can easily get so caught up in the craziness of the world; we begin to wonder if we can really have a positive change on the world. We start doubting we can have a positive change on the world and start praying for the day we are no longer of this world. If this is a prayer you have uttered...Good News! If you have accepted the Lord as your Savior, and given Him dominion over your life, you are no longer of this World! Yes, by accepting Jesus Christ as your Savior, you are NOT OF THIS WORLD, BUT NOW SIMPLY A RESIDENT ALIEN. When you accept Christ, you renounce your citizenship in the world and claim your citizenship in heaven. This means we live in this world, show compassions for the problems of this world, but we don't let ourselves get dragged down by the issues in this world.

We have a problem that we sometimes show compassion and concern to the point we have consumed so much of other people's problems these same problems have now become ours. In essence we have become what we tried to stop. We have become what we have tried to help others out of. We have become what has consumed us. When something consumes us, we began to think that issue now identifies us. We drink too much; we now identify ourselves as a hopeless alcoholic. We have a problem staying away from drugs; we are now a useless drug addict. As we were all told we are what we eat, we also become what we think we are. The Bible tells us as a man thinketh therefore he is. In common words that means if you feel you are hopeless, you will become hopeless. If you feel you are unworthy, you will become unworthy. If you think the world will be better off without you, it is only a matter of time before you give the world a chance to find out. The problem is this; if you give the world, a situation or people a chance to find out if things are better without you in their lives, how will you know if you were wrong if you choose a literal or figurative final solution?

Christ said that He came that we might have life and have it more abundantly so instead of identifying ourselves with the denizens of the world, why not identify ourselves with Christ. A Christian could easily use an acrostic for Faith as Fully Accepting Identity Through Him. When we identify ourselves as a member of the family of God, then we no longer consider ourselves a victim of life, but a life filled with purpose by God. We fully understand the meaning of Romans 12:1-2 when it tells us to no longer conform to the world but be transformed by renewing our mind. We have to think different. We then are told to present ourselves a living sacrifice...wholly acceptable and pleasing to God. God does not accept mess nor makes mess. If we are created in His image, the only way we are considered “a hot mess” is when we are living without Him! We must always remember...though as Christians we live in this world, we are not of this world!

Key Thought: The minute we accept Christ as our personal Savior and give our total life over to him, we are no longer identified by who we were before Him; we are identified by who we are with HIM...a child of the King! That means our allegiance changes, and by virtue our citizenship of the world changes through salvation as a citizen of Heaven!

NOT SO EASILY BROKEN, PART 1., MORE THAN A CONQUEROR

Scripture: Romans 8:35-39 (KJV) ³⁵ Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ³⁶ As it is written, For thy sake we are killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter. ³⁷ Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us. ³⁸ For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, ³⁹ Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

As I read this passage of scripture, I find myself reflecting on the difference between a victor and a conqueror. I have discovered that both are winners; however, the difference lies in the manner of victory. I can run a race and even win, but the question may arise as to whether my opponent could have won if he/she had gotten out of the blocks a little quicker or had not been distracted by the sun in their eye. A conqueror leaves no doubt that whatever variables may have been present, the outcome would still be the same...the conqueror would still win.

As Christians, we often operate from a position that we are HOPING to prevail in a given situation, but we forget that if we are an AMBASSADOR for CHRIST, working toward and for the CAUSE OF CHRIST, as CHRIST IS, WE ARE MORE THAN CONQUERORS! We still have to face the challenges that will come our way, but we must never forget we are not alone.

We must always keep in mind that when we face various situations in our Christian walk we will be able to endure whatever the world throws at us. There will be times when it seems we have faced a situation that is more than we can bear. There will be times when we face circumstances that appear to be more than we can handle. We will face trials and tribulations that are even worse than we can imagine, but we must not be afraid as we do not have to face them alone. Christ said He would never leave us nor forsake us.

I have learned the devil is not after a total victory, he is content to get us to the point where we begin to doubt and wonder if the Holy Spirit is really active in our life. He will cause us to question if life is really worth living. We will become fixated on the idea that a person or a thing gave value to our life and without that person or thing our life is over. He will build upon that idea by trying to convince us our life has no real meaning. He is right! Our life has no meaning or value IF WE DON'T ACCEPT THE VALUE THAT CHRIST GIVES OUR LIFE! Isaiah 55 talks about our wasting time on stuff that will not satisfy us, and many of us are looking for something give our life meaning, value and purpose...Christ gives us purpose, the Great Commission along with the benefits of a life more abundantly! When we give our life over to Christ, not only will we endure the trials of life....survive the problems that come our way, but we will OVERCOME! As Christ overcame the grave, through Him we have the power to overcome those things in life that will try and drag us down as long as we focus on Him and lift HIM UP!

Key Thought: In ALL THINGS, not SOME THINGS, when we are working for the cause of Christ we are not just victorious or even conquerors, we are MORE THAN CONQUERORS! Christ's victories leave no doubt as to who the champion of the world really is...JESUS CHRIST!

NOT SO EASILY BROKEN, PART 2.-I GOT YOU!

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 12:7-10: ⁷ And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure. ⁸ For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me. ⁹ And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. ¹⁰ Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong.

There have been many times in my life when I think about that old song... “If it had not been for the Lord by my side; where would I be? Where would I be?” The answer is simple for me; more than likely an article in some faded newspaper under the obituary section if I even rated that. I discovered very quickly being a Christian is not easy work when you try to do it on your own. Asking yourself, “What would Jesus do?” is pointless when you are facing odds that seemed to be so stacked against you the only option is to just say “I QUIT!” The beautiful thing about our Savior is He tells us it is okay to be weak. In fact the weaker we are in our power, the better it is for us when we operate in His power. It seems the older I get, the less I can do. Things that used to be easy for me are now quite a bit harder. The old body is breaking down and getting weaker. I have learned the hard way that I am even weaker without Him, but with Christ, there is nothing that is impossible. I am my strongest when I turn to Him and let Christ show Himself strong. Christ gets stronger within us the more we surrender our will and way to Him. Where we fail, Christ never fails. Where friends will let us down, Christ is waiting willing and able to pick us up. The strength that Christ displays through us is not dependent on the external things like how someone treats us, or acts around us, but the internal things; our total surrender to Him! The world tells us to face bad situations with the attitude of Man Up or Sit Down! Christ tells us, Lift Him Up and He will SET YOUR ENEMIES DOWN! Your enemies will become your footstool and look upon you in amazement. They will be shocked because they were sure that after doing their best you were down for the count, but they did not realize you had Jesus in your corner.

There is a limit to what we can do by ourselves; a limited set by our own imagination. We may actually be limited by our resources, capabilities, or physical abilities. The beautiful thing about Christ is no matter the problem, He understands all of our problems, but has none of our limitations. When we partner with Christ, we can withstand the devils attempts at a hostile takeover of our spiritual life. Partnered with Christ...we can withstand the devils attempts to buy us out of our God given salvation. Partnered with Christ we discover we are not so easily broken. We are receivers of His Grace-- GOD’S REACHING ABOUNDING CARE ETERNALLY! God always cares for us and is reaching out toward us. We may start out as a mustard seed, but become a mighty tree in the spiritual forest of the world...but we are not so easily broken. We may start out like a babe unsure of where to walk, but become stronger through Christ, and we are not so easily broken. Our spirit is tested, our resolve is tried...but with Christ we are not so easily broken. Life may give us lemons, so we make the best of the situation and make lemonade, because we are NOT SO EASILY BROKEN!

Key Thought: Whether our problem is big or small, HIS grace is sufficient for us and HIS strength is made perfect in OUR weakness! Through Christ we are no so easily broken!

NOT SO EASILY BROKEN, PART 3.-YES I CAN!

Scripture: *Philippians 4:12-13: ¹² I know both how to be abased, and I know how to abound: every where and in all things I am instructed both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need.¹³ I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me.*

I have discovered the devil does not fight fair! This may be a surprise to most, but I have discovered he will use every dirty trick in the book because he probably wrote the book. The devil is also very patient; he doesn't mind waiting for what he wants, and what he wants is for every believer to lose faith in God. He understands a blitzkrieg attack would not work, so he attacks us little-by-little, one day at a time. Since I have come to realize the devil is trying to break my spirit, I have come to not rely on just my spirit, but fully rely on the Spirit of God. When I rely on God, I discover I am not so easily broken, but more importantly, I won't Give Up! I won't Give In! In the face of adversity, I trust GOD, and overcome?, of course, YES I CAN!

As a result, many times we are our worst enemy. We live in a world where we are too smart for our own good. We have inventions that are supposed to make life easier, but actually can cause more harm than good. We no longer read the Bible for ourselves; we listen to podcasts, audio sound bites, and live streaming of supposedly biblically based movies. We miss out on the true word for ourselves, and when faced with problems we are often at a loss as to what we should do. I once heard a saying...the devil can't win unless you won't fight. I have found when the devil makes a concentrated effort to break me down, knock me down and keep me down he is hoping I won't see my Savior coming to stand me up! When Christ stands me up, I feel His presence in my life, so the next tactic to make me give in to what society says is politically correct or proper doesn't work either. My friends may abandon me, as I hold to Christ's unchanging hand, but that is okay because of what a friend I have in Jesus. My boss may tell me what I stand for is politically incorrect, but I am more concerned with what my Lord and Savior tells me is SPIRITUALLY correct. In the midst of my trials and troubles, I will not allow my circumstances to dictate my attitude, but my attitude will dictate my circumstances. I will no longer worry about the devil's plans to destroy me because I know God's plan is to exalt His son through me...as I exalt Christ!

I have come to find that doing all things through Christ that strengthens me tells me when I am working for the Lord, I can not become concerned with what I see physically, but to concentrate on the hand of God spiritually. People that used to be your enemies, may all of a sudden join forces with you to spread the love, grace, mercy and sheer goodness of God in places you never imagined. When you are at your lowest, the Spirit of God will move through the right person you need at the right movement to give you the right words to remind you God will never leave you nor forsake you. Don't give up...Don't give in. A true child of God is not so easily broken by the world, and when wondering if you can overcome whatever satanic object you may be facing in your life, TRUST IN GOD, AND YES YOU MOST DEFINITELY CAN!

Key Thought: When we put all our trust in God, man can say NO all he wants, but WHEN GOD SAYS YES, rest assured whatever the issue; and you will wonder if you will make it through God say...YES YOU CAN! YOU ARE NOT SO EASILY BROKEN!

REASONABLE SERVICE

Scripture: *Romans 12:1-2 (KJV)* *I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. ² And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.*

There are many that desire to be with God in heaven, but refuse to live for God while on earth. There are many cute phrases about how God wants each of us to be with Him, and even slogans taken from the armed forces recruitment campaigns. I have heard statements like “God is looking for a few good Christians”, Aim High and Choose God, and even It’s Not Just a Job, it’s a commitment. These slogans draw many to military service for our country, but when it comes to service to God; well the blessings are desired but the commitment is something to be avoided as long as possible.

I have been taught that Angels are the most feared soldiers that could ever walked the earth, because when God says “do”, any questions asked would deal with clarification of the scope of what He wants done. Can you imagine if Christians were the same way? God calls each and every one of us to serve Him with the gifts He has bestowed upon us. Many of us let God’s divine call go to spiritual voice mail. An actual Christian will be happy to serve God, especially when they remember how God has served and helped them. This mindset helps develop commitment. God shows His commitment to us every day, specifically when He gives us another day to spread the good news about Him.

Sometimes Christians have a problem with accepting the call or commitment because they lose sight of the cause. The cause of Christ is simple; give everyone the opportunity to choose Him, along with clear indicators why He is the best choice for them before it is everlasting too late. There will come a time, more than likely, sooner than we think, when Christ will come back and bring His reward with Him. Those that have shown a commitment to His call, His cause and the cross will receive the ultimate reward, where the others that didn’t; well it won’t go to well for them. A quick review of a Christian’s conversion experience will remind them why they serve and if that doesn’t work a reminder of how God has blessed us before and after that experience will help us see it is only reasonable service to serve Him. God is so awesome He will not send you to do, or ask you to do that He is not prepared to equip you to do! A soldier’s mindset to follow the orders of our commanding officer shows we trust Him, respect Him and truly follow His lead. We know He is in control and everything will work as He planned! We will not worry about the odds, because we know God is in charge!

Key Thought: We can find many reasons not to be fully committed to God, but if we no other reason that comes readily to mind why we should be a soldier for Christ, look to the cross!

RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

Scripture: 2 Timothy 2:1-6 (KJV) ² And the things that thou hast heard of me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also. ³ Thou therefore endure hardness, as a good soldier of Jesus Christ. ⁴ No man that warreth entangleth himself with the affairs of this life; that he may please him who hath chosen him to be a soldier. ⁵ And if a man also strive for masteries, yet is he not crowned, except he strive lawfully. ⁶ The husbandman that laboureth must be first partaker of the fruits.

When I was in the military, the one thing I remembered whether we prepared for an exercise or an actual event was we had to have the proper mindset. I was a military policeman, which made the task even more interesting because not only did I have to engage in warfare, but as a law enforcer, I couldn't conveniently "forget" the rules of engagement. The rules of engagement are the rules or code of conduct used when engaging in warfare or similar endeavor. The average Christian does not think in terms of the "rules of engagement" when resisting the enemy because the thought process is to win "by any means necessary". This sentiment sounds good on paper, but when we decide to defeat the enemy by anyway we can, we may find we have resorted to his tactics. The devil wants to destroy our love for God by any means necessary, to definitely include, lying, stealing and using your loved ones against you. If we want to be victorious with Christ, we have to resist the temptation of the devil by understanding the rules of how to engage with the enemy. The first thing I learned is to be a strong soldier for the Lord. I ensure that all I do is all about Him and not about me. I don't get concerned with how things look, but how things actually are. Christians have a tendency to want to look the part without actually being the part. I would rather BE a Christian than just look like one. I also learned the meaning of the phrase there is no "I" in team, but team can mean "Together Everyone Achieves More". It is not about our individual efforts for Christ but more about how our works contribute to the collective efforts for Christ.

I have learned that sometimes you have to be hard. That does not mean being uncaring, unfeeling or insensitive but refusing to be broken by the trials of life. A hard soldier without the right mindset finds this task difficult, but it becomes easier when the soldier is focused on the task at hand and the ultimate goal of pleasing our heavenly Father. The military would sequester soldiers before going into hostile territories so they could "focus" on the things they would face ahead and how to survive. The focused Christian soldier realizes that although he or she may be in the world they are not of the world. They have the power, through Christ to effect change in the world and not be changed by the world. The job is to represent Christ, not a personalized version of Christ and not to out-do others, but to ensure Christ is foremost in all we do.

Key Thought: The Bible says as a man thinketh, therefore is he. When we see ourselves as a victorious soldier for Christ, and understand the rules of engagement; we must be strong, hard and focused, answering God's call to service is an honor not a burden!

SACRED COWS

Scripture: *Matthew 6:33 (KJV)* ³³ *But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.*

I have long been fascinated by the term “Sacred Cows”. I have come to learn this phrase refers to individuals, organizations, institutions, practices or procedures that are considered exempt from criticism or questioning. The Geneva Convention has labeled churches and hospitals as forms of sacred cows during war efforts. A building that appears to be a hospital or church of some type is exempt from destruction unless it can be proven the facility is used to aid the war cause. I have come to learn the term sacred cows takes on a whole new meaning in the church. There are certain things a new member, or even pastor, dare not question in a given church. Sister So-and-So always cooks the green beans for our church socials, and no one else does. Brother Such-and-Such always brings the yam casserole for the annual Christmas meal. Sacred cows. Mess with them if you wish and you may think you have been caught in the middle of Armageddon. The thing I have discovered about church sacred cows is that few people even remember how they achieved that status. There may have been a time when that Sister So-and-So was the only one that would bring green beans, and Brother Such-and-Such was the only one that could afford to bring a yam casserole. There were valid reasons how things started, but the reason became a tradition, a sacred cow and now it is one not to be trifled with.

In any given church, sacred cows usually come in three forms; people, places and positions. Church folk have a tendency to take the most apparently “capable” Christian, for a given situation, and put them on a pedestal. We allow them to operate autonomously, make decisions as they see fit, and when someone comes along and questions their methodology, it is no longer a question what is logical, or even prudent, but a personal attack on the person. This person may even believe they have the “right” to do as they please because they have done it for so long. Their “seniority” equals to authority. Then we have the people that are more concerned with the “chic” places to be seen or not seen as a Christian. I went to a popular restaurant the other day, with some church folk, and the biggest concern was what would happen if someone saw us eating at the bar. My thought is not so much where you go, but what you do while you are there. If I am sitting at the bar, munching on a chicken sandwich, and all the tables are full, I would like to think anyone with questions would at least come and ask me. It would be an entirely different matter if I had whisky sours and beer chasers coming at me in a steady stream, while the bar keep is telling me I have had enough. We should be more concerned about why we are at a place and what we are doing than the place itself. This all ties into the importance church folk place on positions. Positions are not important! Christ had to talk to the Sons of Thunder concerning their importance placed on positions. Positions are not important, but MINISTRY IS! A pastor collecting a check is a preacher for hire if he is not shepherding the flock. An evangelist is just a story teller, if they are not sharing the good news. Jesus was never concerned about positions, but ministry. We must “kill” the sacred cows and focus on what really matters...God first, as we press toward the mark of the higher calling of Jesus Christ!

Key Thought: People, places and positions must never take priority over Christ!

SETTLE DOWN, SETTLE DOWN, SETTLE DOWN

Scripture: 2 Colossians 2:1-7 (KJV) 2 For I would that ye knew what great conflict I have for you, and for them at Laodicea, and for as many as have not seen my face in the flesh; 2 That their hearts might be comforted, being knit together in love, and unto all riches of the full assurance of understanding, to the acknowledgement of the mystery of God, and of the Father, and of Christ; 3 In whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. 4 And this I say, lest any man should beguile you with enticing words. 5 For though I be absent in the flesh, yet am I with you in the spirit, joying and beholding your order, and the steadfastness of your faith in Christ. 6 As ye have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk ye in him: 7 Rooted and built up in him, and stablished in the faith, as ye have been taught, abounding therein with thanksgiving.

One of my least favorite chores around the house is weeding the yard. I have always been amazed how hard it is for grass to grow in New Mexico, but the weeds seemed to thrive with little care or feeding. Seems like with all the other “hybrid” things on the market, someone would invent a grass that is pleasing to the sight, but has the hardiness of New Mexico weeds; the ability to grow without regard to rain or shine, water or drought, planting or pruning! I had some tall weeds in my yard that looked quite rooted. I planted my feet, expecting a lengthy tug of war to uproot this three feet tall weed “tree”. My arthritic hands gripped the weed-tree and I almost fell because of how easily it came up. A modicum of pressure uprooted this tree, even though it appeared deeply rooted

In our Christian walk, the snares, trips and traps of the devil are like those weeds; they don’t need much to grow in our lives, but if we don’t cut them down, they will ultimately grow out of control. The thing that complicates matters more is the fact with our faith, we can’t even let that grow out of control, because if we don’t occasionally allow things to “prune” our faith, our faith will grow like the weeds and later become entangled with the weeds of the world. We have to make sure we plant the “good” seeds of faith; dependence, allegiance, and cheerful service to and for God, and “prune” away those things that can easily pop up if we are not careful. Our allegiance to God can easily turn into allegiance to a perceived man or woman that supposedly is of God. We can come to depend on the people of God versus dependence of the providence of God. Our allegiance becomes aligned with man; in essence if we don’t prune away our fleshly ways, through the power and subservience to God, we can end up having an out of control faith that has little to do with God!

We must be careful that when the seeds have been planted in us, we nurture them through prayer, Bible study, fellowship, worship and the likes. This helps prevent us from neutering what God is growing within us. We can actually “neuter” the blessings God has for us when we don’t nurture or feed the gifts God is birthing in us.

When we look for ways to have the seeds of faith planted in us to be nurtured by God; we find our faith, our abilities and our Christianity will grow. The problem we must guard against is to ensure our gifts grow out of the four walls of the church and grow in the community. Church folks will often let their new found faith, ability or gift grow “inside” the church, but never take it outside the church. How can a person know if they are truly rooted and grounded until they operate in the strength of Jesus instead of their own? Settle down, settle down, settle down! Don’t allow the world to uproot you, but anchor yourself in the Lord and settle in, settle down and get settled in His will and way!

Key Thought: How rooted are we in our Christianity? Are we truly firmly entrenched, or when the weakest arthritic hand of the world pulls on us will we easily be uprooted. God knows and time will tell...unless we seek the Lord to make sure today!

THE STING IS GONE

*Scripture: 1 Corinthians 15:50-58 (KJV):*⁵⁰ Now this I say, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; neither doth corruption inherit incorruption. ⁵¹ Behold, I shew you a mystery; We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, ⁵² In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. ⁵³ For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. ⁵⁴ So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory. ⁵⁵ O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?

⁵⁶ The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law. ⁵⁷ But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁵⁸ Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye stedfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord.

I was once told we were born to die and the moment we take our first breath upon entering the world, we are quickly rushing toward our last. The subject of life after death is a staple of the horror movie industry. The latest zombie craze perpetuates the idea that you can still have a version of life even after death. Classic horror movies like Dracula speak to the idea that there is even a way to be sentient even though technically dead. I have often wondered about this fascination with death and I have discovered my curiosity is the result of the lack of confirmed information of what happens when you die. There are numerous stories about people who were clinically dead for minutes, but what about someone who has been dead for years. I discovered my answers must come from a credible source, and that source is the Bible. Christ is the only entity I know that died, came back from death and is still alive and well today. Armed with that knowledge, I am not so concerned about dying, but more concerned with the manner of death and did I accomplish all God set out for me to do before being called home? This is the problem. We can't visit death, check it out and then decide we can get the next return flight back to life if we don't like it. Life is not a video game. There is no reset button. When a loved one dies, especially one that we feel died before their time, we come face-to-face with our own mortality. We began to fear death because we have no guarantees about the next step. The Bible gives us comfort, but it is only applicable if you are a believer and the Bible doesn't give us all the answers. There is a reason for that...if you are a true believer, the process after you die is irrelevant! It does not matter if we immediately go to Heaven, go through a processing line, have to wait until the trumpet sounds, fall asleep, etc.. It just doesn't matter because at the end we are with God. We have Christ to thank for that with His sacrifice. We often forget Christ didn't just die on the cross and then get up three days later. In death, as in life, HE WAS BUSY. He defeated death in the ultimate death match, came back victorious and took the threat of death away from the believer. Death to the believer is like a bee with no stinger... the sting of death is gone!

Key Thought: The Bible contains the key to getting God's approval. A person must diligently seek God, and at times it is not easy, but the question is can we afford not to seek God and His approval?

TO BE OR NOT TO BE (IN CHRIST)

Scripture: *Matthew 14:22-33: ²² And straightway Jesus constrained his disciples to get into a ship, and to go before him unto the other side, while he sent the multitudes away. ²³ And when he had sent the multitudes away, he went up into a mountain apart to pray: and when the evening was come, he was there alone. ²⁴ But the ship was now in the midst of the sea, tossed with waves: for the wind was contrary. ²⁵ And in the fourth watch of the night Jesus went unto them, walking on the sea. ²⁶ And when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were troubled, saying, It is a spirit; and they cried out for fear. ²⁷ But straightway Jesus spake unto them, saying, Be of good cheer; it is I; be not afraid. ²⁸ And Peter answered him and said, Lord, if it be thou, bid me come unto thee on the water. ²⁹ And he said, Come. And when Peter was come down out of the ship, he walked on the water, to go to Jesus. ³⁰ But when he saw the wind boisterous, he was afraid; and beginning to sink, he cried, saying, Lord, save me. ³¹ And immediately Jesus stretched forth his hand, and caught him, and said unto him, O thou of little faith, wherefore didst thou doubt? ³² And when they were come into the ship, the wind ceased. ³³ Then they that were in the ship came and worshipped him, saying, Of a truth thou art the Son of God.*

I have looked at this passage of scripture many times and focused on two key aspects; Peter walking on the water and the disciples still in the boat. I have heard this scripture preached and taught many times, but one day, something was revealed to me as I read this passage that rocked my world. I realized there were at least three principles applicable to my life that were addressed; worship, weather and the walk itself. I noticed that after all the disciples had been through with Christ; they didn't worship Him until after He demonstrated His ability to walk on water, calm the water and quiet the wind. They didn't worship Him until after they had seen Jesus do things they considered to be worthy of extending their worship to Him. Do we treat Christ like that? Wait until He "does" something in our life, and then and only then are we prepared to worship Him as the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords? I can understand the disciples feeling "awed" by the power displayed by Christ, because a look at the weather reveals it had to be pretty bad for experienced fishermen to be concerned. We see the disciples had been trying to make headway for some time, and until Christ came they seemed to get nowhere in the storm. Many times in our lives, we tread water and get nowhere until we invite Christ into our "lifeboat". We then see the storms quieted and the winds calmed, if nothing else, but to a point where we can focus on what He would have us do instead of what the world may be trying to convince us to do.

As I looked at the "walk", I thought about how Peter went to the Lord, looked at the weather around him and begin to sink. The Lord gets on him a little about his doubting, but what came to me was not so much that Peter doubted his ability to walk on water, but he asked the Lord to tell him to come. The Lord told him to come and Peter apparently forgot this simple principle...If the Lord tells you to come to HIM, HE HAS MADE IT POSSIBLE FOR YOU TO REACH HIM! We sometimes forget in our Christian walk, if the Lord says do it, He has made it possible for whatever the task is to be done! We have to ask ourselves this simple question...TO BE OR NOT TO BE IN CHRIST? We will either to abide in Christ and let him abide in us, or continue to look at the world around us and become afraid that whatever Christ has called us to do, it can't be done. TO BE OR NOT TO BE, only each individual knows how they will answer the Lord!

Key Thought: There is nothing wrong with reaching someone where they are, but be sure that you help cause a Christ-centered change in their situation and they don't cause a world focused change in yours!

STANDING ON THE PROMISES

Scripture: *Isaiah 54:17 (KJV) 17 No weapon that is formed against thee shall prosper; and every tongue that shall rise against thee in judgment thou shalt condemn. This is the heritage of the servants of the Lord, and their righteousness is of me, saith the Lord.*

The Bible has hundreds of promises, but I have found there is one promise that has special meaning to me; and that promise is found in Isaiah 54:17. My Heavenly Father reminds me no weapon formed against me will prosper. I have come to realize that does not necessarily cover those weapons I raise up against myself, but specifically those weapons others might bring against me. When a Christian stays focused on God's will and way, there is nothing the devil can do to stop the committed Christian from achieving God's goal. I looked up the word prosper and discovered it is synonymous with flourish, thrive, grow, do well, succeed, be in the black. That means the weapon may appear to have success at the beginning, but through time it will fail. Many times a plant seems to be doing well, but without warning it dies. The Devil can bring his best, but when you are a child of God it won't work. The Devil uses people places and things to attack us where he believes it will do the most damage. As children of the most high God, although we may walk in the flesh, we do not war after the flesh. Our weapons are not carnal, but mighty through God for the pulling down of strong holds.

The tongue though small, is a very powerful weapon. There is life and death in the tongue. Words can alter or define our perception of reality. A person that receives encouragement is hard to be discouraged, but a person that is continuously discouraged is hard to encourage. A Christian that is reminded how God is willing to meet them where they are, and make up the deficit will have a different attitude than the Christian that has been made to believe they are hopeless because there is just too much work to be done with them to even be considered a sinner. We must understand when we gave our life to Christ became Devil's Most Wanted! He will do anything to keep us being completely sold out to God. Jesus came that we might have life and have it more abundantly. We must understand Christians can have a good time in the Lord. Instead of acting crazy, be a Crazy Praiser and dance like David did. Instead of getting drunk of wine, get drunk on the Holy Spirit. Instead of getting high on drugs, feel great about the goodness of God. Instead of trying to get a buzz on wacky weed, get your head right with the word of God. Instead of hanging out with the crew, hang out with GP, God's people, JC, Jesus Crew. When we are not completely sold out to God, it is easy for the devil to have us sitting on the premises saying "Lord why have you forsaken me?", instead of shouting with assuredly "I am a child of God and no weapon formed against me shall prosper, no tongue can rise against me and I shall receive my full inheritance from my heavenly Father!"

We can say this because God created the man, who created the weapon. Since God created the man, who creast the weapon, God not only knows how the weapon works, but how to defeat it. We have to stand on the promises of God instead of just sitting on the premises waiting for God to show up and show out in our life.

Key Thought: When we give ourselves completely over to God, become sold out to Him, we should not view what we have lost, but what we have gained...access to the riches of the Father and His personal divine incomparable protection!

THROWING SALT IN THE GAME

Scripture: *Matthew 5:13 (KJV) Ye are the salt of the earth: but if the salt have lost his savour, wherewith shall it be salted? it is thenceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out, and to be trodden under foot of men.*

My wife is a fan of using salt, where I tend to think everything is too salty. I have discovered one reason I think everything is too salty is due to the amount of coffee I drink. I use to drink coffee only in the morning, but since I need to stay away from so many cold drinks, and more hot, I chose coffee. I like tea, but I am more of a coffee drinker.

As I studied this passage of scripture, I realized that many people think things are too “salty” in the world because they have been consuming things that actually are no better for you than the things we try to avoid. We try to avoid becoming too “churchy” and become too “worldly”. We try and avoid hanging out with just “believers” and we find ourselves adopting the attitudes, mannerisms and beliefs of non-believers.

In this passage of Scripture, we are reminded of the costliness of salt during the days when Christ walked the earth in human form. Salt was a precious commodity; not only because the difficulty involved in obtaining it, but the many varied uses for salt in the household.

Salt can be used to give flavor or enhance flavor. As Christians, we are the salt of the earth so we should spread the gospel to encourage, uplift and enhance the life of believer and for those who don't have a life in Christ, we can give them “flavor” or help them come to understand having Christ gives them life more abundantly. Salt can also be used to preserve. There was a time when meat was salted to preserve it. We now have refrigerators, but before that was an option, salt was used. Christians are used to not only grow the kingdom of God, via the Great Commission, but also “preserve” what is already established. We are the body of Christ, which means we are to do the work for the cause of Christ...He did His part on the Cross! Salt can also destroy things. When I lived in Okinawa, the metal of many vehicles fell victim to the salt air of the island. There was little that could be done to stop the rusting caused by the “salt”; all one could hope to do was slow it down. We should be the same way. When it comes to taking the Gospel of Jesus Christ, doing the work of Christ, uplifting the name and cross-work of Christ, the devil should come to understand he may be able to slow us down, but he can't stop us. There was a phrase popular a few years ago called “throwing salt in the game”. I came to understand that means to destroy or upset someone else's plans. We have to stop letting the devil throw salt in our game, and throw salt in his game! Let's make the devil change his plans, and his strategy as we tear his kingdom down. Lets upset his plans as we move forward with the plans of God! It's not as hard as one may think; submit to the will and way of the Lord and the devil will see we have no time for him because we are like Nehemiah on the wall; too busy doing God's work to be bothered with his busy work!

Key Thought: In all ways acknowledge God, and He will direct our path! A committed purpose of this sort destroys the plans of the devil and truly throws salt in his game!

WHO'S THE BOSS

Scripture: Matthew 6:24 (KJV) *No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon.*

I work in a place where I have several bosses to please for the simplest task. I do a lot of writing and each boss has their own writing style. There are times they correct each other's grammar, and wonder why I have not changed things to read as they would like. The funny thing is, many times these corrections occur without my knowledge, yet I am the one held responsible. I have learned to write to the style of the actual boss, which for my purposes is the one who will actually sign my reports or the appropriate documents. All others can have their input, but the one who "signs off" is the one who gets the final say. I have heard many people claim God is the boss of their life, but their actions show God is just ONE of the bosses in their life. I have discovered it is very easy to have one too many bosses in life. Examine the young man that wants to please his mother, but also his wife. Compound the problem with the mother and wife not liking each other. Each will pull him in a different direction and he will end up making one mad for the other to be happy. This young man will soon discover he will have to choose one or the other. A Christian man knows the choice, and although it is easier said than done, the choice is clear...his wife. The Bible tells us to honor our parents but cling to the wife. A husband and wife are to become one. A husband is to love his wife more than himself, so choosing the wife is a no-brainer, yet there will always be the nagging thought of if the right choice was made. A person can have all the biblical support in the world, but there will always be someone to "claim" the bible was interpreted to benefit the person versus what God intended. Scripture can be easily interpreted to benefit a person, but there are some things that are clear cut...God said there will be no other gods before him. That means if you even try to compromise between what God said and what the world wants, you have put a "god" before the one true God! Scripture also says if a person tries to serve two masters, or bosses you will love one and began to hate the other. When we try to balance the love of the world with our love for God, sooner or later one will win out. We will love God and learn how to tolerate the world by spreading the love of God, or love the world while we slowly move away from God. We may even find reasons why we believe God does not deserve the very best we have to offer. Some people will still try to balance their commitment to God and to the world, but will learn you can't do both. A person of the world will not have the time or inclination to walk in the footsteps of Christ. This journey will be too time consuming, too much of a burden and with no immediate pay-out, the person will wonder why they should even bother. A person truly committed to God will no longer conform to the world but began to look at the things the way a child of God would. This lover of God will not have the time or inclination to be engaged in the trivial pursuit of pleasures of the flesh because they will be too busy pressing toward the mark of the higher calling of Jesus Christ.

I have discovered if I let go of what the world wants, and embrace what God desires for me, things work out so much better in the end. I have learned, the hard way, God's plans for me are to prosper me and not harm me, where the world...maybe not harm me now, but in the end, that is a different story!

Key Thought: Whenever there is a question about who is the boss, remember the TRIUNE GOD is the creator! The creator is the boss, especially since He alone fully understands the purpose for everything!

WORTH FIGHTING FOR-NEW YEAR, NEW YOU!

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 5:17-18: ¹⁷ Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new. ¹⁸ And all things are of God, who hath reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ, and hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation;

At the twilight of the old and the dawn of the New Year, a time of reflections is quite common when examining where one is versus where they would like to be. A reminiscent stroll down memory lane reveals things that could have been done differently or better; a revelation of mistakes made and successes enjoyed. A decision invariably comes about with the declaration to no longer get by but get better. This resolution, covering a multitude of things, usually lasts until about noon on New Year's day. The resolution maker discovers the meaning of the phrase "easier said than done". The idea of running two miles a day sounded great until it actually came time to run. The thought of cutting back on sweets was wonderful until Aunt Sally made her triple citrus pound cake. A decision to take a closer walk with God sounded great until the realization that God expects you renounce your membership at St. Pillow rest and actually stop by and visit Him at one of His houses on Sunday morning. Things are easier said than done, but my grandma used to say, anything worth having is worth fighting for.

The world wants us to believe because of what we used to do, there is a limit to what we can ever do for Christ. I have seen people that hold onto the past as if it is happening right now. They relive past glories as if they just happened yesterday. If allowed, the devil will do the same thing to the believer. He will convince you to hang on so tight to your past you have no time to embrace your present. He will tell you that your past keeps you from receiving anything Christ has to offer and he is right. The old you is completely useless to Christ, but Christ rebrands you and makes you into a new creature. You see the old you is gone, replaced by the new YOU in CHRIST AND WITH CHRIST. I have learned what is impossible without Christ becomes possible with Christ. Christ makes us a new creature where we can release our past, get a fresh start in our present and can focus on getting ready for our future. The getting ready is not just limited to the kingdom building work that Christ has for us, but getting ready for the time when the trumpet will sound, the dead in Christ will rise and we will be prepared to inhabit the new heaven and earth John saw during his revelation. As we go into the new year, take a long look at your life and see if there is ANYTHING you have failed to release from your past to be rebranded and made new by Christ. Look long and hard and see if you are still operating under the old rules, or the new rules that apply when you have Christ in your life. Are you preparing for the future, and doing the kingdom building work so we can say as Paul did when the time comes...I have fought the good fight. I have finished my course. I HAVE KEPT THE FAITH!

Key Thought: Sometimes we "de-value" ourselves because of what the world has tried to convince us to believe about ourselves. Never forget the value Christ put on us by laying down His life, because He believed we were worth fighting for!

YOU ARE NOT ALONE

Scripture: *1 Kings 19:9-18 (KJV)*⁹ *And he came thither unto a cave, and lodged there; and, behold, the word of the Lord came to him, and he said unto him, What doest thou here, Elijah?*¹⁰ *And he said, I have been very jealous for the Lord God of hosts: for the children of Israel have forsaken thy covenant, thrown down thine altars, and slain thy prophets with the sword; and I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life, to take it away.*

¹¹ *And he said, Go forth, and stand upon the mount before the Lord. And, behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and brake in pieces the rocks before the Lord; but the Lord was not in the wind: and after the wind an earthquake; but the Lord was not in the earthquake:*

¹² *And after the earthquake a fire; but the Lord was not in the fire: and after the fire a still small voice.*

¹³ *And it was so, when Elijah heard it, that he wrapped his face in his mantle, and went out, and stood in the entering in of the cave. And, behold, there came a voice unto him, and said, What doest thou here, Elijah?*

¹⁴ *And he said, I have been very jealous for the Lord God of hosts: because the children of Israel have forsaken thy covenant, thrown down thine altars, and slain thy prophets with the sword; and I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life, to take it away.* ¹⁵ *And the Lord said unto him, Go, return on thy way to the wilderness of Damascus: and when thou comest, anoint Hazael to be king over Syria:* ¹⁶ *And Jehu the son of Nimshi shalt thou anoint to be king over Israel: and Elisha the son of Shaphat of Abelmeholah shalt thou anoint to be prophet in thy room.* ¹⁷ *And it shall come to pass, that him that escapeth the sword of Hazael shall Jehu slay: and him that escapeth from the sword of Jehu shall Elisha slay.*

¹⁸ *Yet I have left me seven thousand in Israel, all the knees which have not bowed unto Baal, and every mouth which hath not kissed him.*

As Christians we are often reminded we can do all things through Christ. We are told to operate in God's power and not our own. These words of scripture are powerful and handy when we are in the middle of a situation, but what happens to us after the situation is over? We often begin to feel God has completed the task He wanted done, and now has left us to our own devices. It's like a sporting event...once the game is won and the celebrating is over, the coach goes off to his or her own plans, leaving the star players to their own devices. I am so glad God is not like that. In our passage of scripture, we see the aftermath of the Mt. Carmel showdown between Elijah and the prophets of both Baal and Asherah. Elijah showed complete and utter faith in God when facing 850 opponents, but after they were put to death, he began to think he was left to fend for himself against one lady called Jezebel. I used to wonder why Elijah thought God would abandon him, especially while in the cave, He provided for him. I have been guilty of that problem myself. I began to feel as if perhaps I was a one-hit-wonder for God, and He had no other use for me. I was no longer important to Him. Well, He accepted me in spite of MY FAULTS and sent His son to die for me (and others that believe on Him too, I'm not that vain I think it is just about me) so I must be pretty important to Him. He definitely has not forgotten me, because I don't have to look too hard to see the hand of God in my daily life, which lets me know I am definitely not alone! Well, if I am, it is because I left His presence, not the other way around!

Key Thought: When you have your ELIJAH moments in life, take a look around and SEE you are not alone! You will see God has others like you, working for the Kingdom. He will never leave you nor forsake you!

Beloved,

I pray you find this little “booklet” useful in your daily walk with Christ.

This book of devotions was compiled from sermons I have preached throughout the year of 2015. God has a way of dealing with me on a matter before it is ever preached, so I hope these devotions will bless you as they have blessed me.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "James K. Russell". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looping initial 'J'.

*James K. Russell, Pastor
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