

BEAUTY FROM ASHES

An Anthology Of Devotional Messages

By

DOROTHY ANNE SEESE

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● PREFACE

Whatever happens in the short years of our existence in spacetime may be painful or temporarily joyful, but in whatever circumstances we find ourselves, there is one absolute certainty – the death of the body. No amount of wealth, fame, intellect or human greatness has ever overcome death. 7

For all the world's sages, priests of false religions and spiritists, mediums, remote viewers and time travelers so-called, death has still reigned supreme in the human race from the time of man's beginning. Not only has natural death (if death can be called natural) been man's chief enemy, it has always been his chief fear, and the foremost weapon of tyrants and warlords.

Man values his own blood and not that of other men. Such is the mindset of the earthbound race of human beings.

One man, one alone, and only one, came into this world for the specific purpose of dying, that He might rise again from the dead, which He did. Because of that resurrection, all men prior to the time of Christ who inquired of the one True God in faith, and all those since the Resurrection who have believed in the life-giving sacrifice of Christ, have had access to the realms above where life is eternal, natural, deathless, and energized by the eternal light of the self-existent Creator.

That we are living in perilous times is a truism. Factually life has always been perilous because of the presence of death. There are those who deny death, and others who claim to have "transcended" into other dimensions.

Every effort has been made by man to establish his own religion. Christ came not to establish a new religion, Christianity was never intended

to be a new religion or a “religion” at all. The mission of Christ was only to restore that which had been severed by sin, full sonship with Creator God and a living relationship where man’s spirit on earth could perceive and live in the realms above while still abiding physically on earth. Such abiding is meant to take away all fear of death (although by human nature we fear the means of death) and to give eternal hope to those who enter into the new life of those who have been regenerated, a life filled by the Holy Spirit and guided by the inner witness of that Spirit.

The issue between man and God has always been one of accountability and it has never changed. Men reject God, the God of all creation, because they will have none of His rule over them. His rules for life on earth spoil their fun by reining in their lusts and commanding them to love rather than hate. Hatred is of the devil, just as are lying and the other works of darkness that mankind perpetuates from generation to generation.

Man wishes to be prideful and pride is soundly condemned as the path to destruction by the Word of God.

Man wishes to compromise to promote his own ambitions, but with God there is no compromise. Creator God has provided, through His own Son, the means to forgiveness, but not a compromise with evil. Many err in this regard, or add rules that God never intended in their personal and useless works to please a Creator who has already provided all things needful to salvation and eternal life.

May the reader find herein liberty without license, freedom from fear, and release from the terror of man’s threats to exterminate the human race. God is indeed in control of every molecule of every speck of every orb in this universe because if He is not, He is not God. If we then start from

the simple premise that the Bible gives, “God is” we shall find not only what and who God is, but what and who we are.

There is no such thing as an identity crisis in the freedom afforded by the Gospel of our salvation. What we are is the creation of God, His supreme creation, marred by sin and deceived by the great deceiver, but God’s way is to provide for salvation and redemption. In that alone is great joy to overcome the horrors put upon this world by the enemy of our souls.

There are living waters in abundance available from the realms above. Drink and be satisfied, feed at the Lord’s table of abundance and be filled. While God understands your physical needs, hurts, pains, griefs, struggles and failings, He is more concerned with your eternal soul. Notice that Jesus made no man materially wealthy in His earthly journey, His time was spent teaching man to come back into full relationship with the Father, to focus on the eternal which is not a long time but the absence of time.

The waters are abundant, the table is set. Come, says the Spirit, come and be filled.

1.SPIRITUAL HUNGER AND THIRST

John 6:35, And Jesus said unto them, I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on me shall never thirst.

John 4:14, But whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life.

There are days when no matter what we eat, we seem not to be satisfied and we keep seeking something else, something to satisfy an undefined craving. While an occasional day like that might be nothing more than anxiety or a need for a specific food, there is a far-reaching and deep craving inside of us, one that only spiritual food and drink can fill.

Jesus knew this.

He was telling His listeners, including the Disciples, that from the realms above He could satisfy both the hunger and thirst of the spirit of man. His presence was the very Presence of God on earth, in human flesh, communicating to those who would listen, those with spiritual “ears” to hear, that He and His message were to the soul what bread and water are to the body.

A withered, starved and thirsty soul is a dying person, one in need of immediate help. All too often someone will come along with nothing more than tainted food and poisoned water, offering the soul that which its Creator never intended as true food.

Stop and think of His words for just a moment. While it is relatively easy to fill the stomach, and we seem quick to discern that which is physically edible and that which is not, how often have we been deceived by various religions into searching for food in barren fields and empty

barns? How often have we been offered muddy waters rather than goblets filled from the River of Life?

Where is the true food? Where is the true water? In the realms above, and Jesus, knowing that fallen man could not reach up to bring them down, Himself became man to bring them down and give us each a full measure of food and drink to sustain us through this life and into the next. What He offered was life, and life indeed.

The problem is, the junk food and empty calories of the enemy of our soul seems to taste good, but just as junk food will fill the body with various and sundry poisons to the system, so false religions give us the disciplines of various “prophets” who have nothing to offer from their own empty cupboards and dry wells.

A person who is hungry and thirsty does not rest. Physical hunger robs of sleep and deprives the body of the very substances necessary to keep us functioning well. In like manner, those who are spiritually starved do not rest, they become frazzled, hazy, desperate in their search for meaning, and finding nothing, take drugs to ease the pain and deprivation of the soul.

False religion is indeed an opiate to the soul. It distracts from God, erases accountability without ever really eradicating the God-given faculty to feel guilt, and drives the seeker on to supposedly higher and higher levels of “understanding of the mysteries” while actually drawing the thirsty and starving farther and farther away from the Source of Life. No wonder our age in the new 21st century is so filled with seekers who have found no answers. Even the liberal, adulterated, popularized versions of “Christianity” are no more than placebos rather than food and drink.

To these poor deluded seekers, the Lord cries out:

Matthew 11:29, Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls.

Rest for your souls. What a wonderful promise, coming from Him who came down from those realms above to give us life, food, drink, and now rest for our souls.

One who is overtired may also be inclined to skip food, tensed up and unable or disinclined to eat. But knowing this, our Lord has provided for our rest, that we might have the spiritual strength to eat and drink at His table, from His living waters and eternal bread of life.

We marvel at the sights of God's magnificent creation, whether a waterfall, a majestic mountain or a lush green island filled with fruit bushes and trees, surrounded by waters teeming with fish, and filling the desire for water from a crystal pool of clear, fresh water in its midst. Such is our spiritual gift from God, who sent His Son to bear our burdens, our sins, our judgment, and along the way to the cross, to teach us God's great provisions by feeding thousands from a boy's lunch, walking on the water, and giving instructions to those who would carry on His work when He had returned to the realms above.

Such divine grace!

How, then, shall we be so twisted to starve spiritually in the midst of a divine feast? How shall we thirst when rivers of living water flow daily to those who have the desire for true drink, the waters that come from the river that flows by the throne of God?

Just as errant and undisciplined children will take the sweetened punch rather than the pure orange juice, just as the childlike adults will take the doughnut rather than the whole grained bread, millions today attempt to

fill their empty souls with forms of religion and religious exercises that do nothing but create greater hunger and thirst.

God has left in this earth both His written word and His Holy Spirit to guide those who are willing and submissive to His will, who are truly enlightened as to the Source of Life and the maintenance of the eternal soul.

Earthly famine and drought may plague the body for a season, but souls filled with living water and the bread of life will look to their Savior for His will and His provision.

Sometimes the final answer is to bring the child home to God's realm above.

Do not seek to know the mysteries of God, He has reserved things unto Himself that we are not to know. The Bible is a book of redemption, with provision for all things to those who have faith.

It is enough to eat and drink and be satisfied, and find rest for your soul in the midst of the unceasing struggles of earth. We have here a few days, uncertain at best and at times filled with anguish, for earth is not paradise nor will it be in this present age.

Rest your soul in Him, and seek the eternal kingdom. Wait patiently for it. It will come, and then there shall never be another time of want or fear or deprivation to those who are His elect. In that promise we can trust.

2. WALKING IN THE LIGHT

2 Corinthians 4:6, For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

Many years ago, when I was a new Christian who had never heard of a theological construct, some difficulties came my way and a pastor's wife said to me "Just walk in the light." I nodded as if I understood, but my mind was quite blank. If she knew what she meant, surely I did not. How does one "walk in the light?" Oh I knew she was not referring to daylight but to spiritual light, but that did not give me any idea at all how to accomplish the task.

I read and re-read this verse from the First Epistle of John:

1 John 1:5 This then is the message which we have heard of him, and declare unto you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all.

Honestly, that did not help me at all. God is Light; God commanded light to appear in the dark void (Genesis 1:3). Because He is God, nothing is impossible with Him. Now, with all that being said, "walk in the light" still did not mean fitzwater to me! No one told me what it meant, much less how to do it. The Christian walk is not an easy road, but it is the only road leading to eternal life, so it became important to understand "light" and how to walk in it.

Our Lord is merciful and gracious, for which we must be eternally grateful, otherwise we should all perish in our ignorance, our foibles, our misunderstandings and worst of all, our "trying" to please Him.

I'm not quite sure when it dawned on me, after 40 or so readings of the New Testament, that Jesus said:

John 8:12, ...I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life

Just as Jesus spoke of Himself as being bread and water, so He spoke of Himself as Light. It was some years later that I realized, regardless of what the pastor's wife meant at that time, walking in the light is no more than walking in obedience to the will of Christ, our Lord and Savior, trusting Him because in Him is no darkness (the Bible's symbol for evil). To walk in the light is to walk in the truth, and Jesus has said He is the Truth.

Light, Life and Love are essences of the divine nature of God, and Jesus had come to reveal these to us, if we would but listen.

Perhaps I would have better understood that particular pastor's wife if she had said "walk in the Lord's teaching and in faith" rather than just "walk in the light." Christians have a way of speaking that is somewhat foreign to the unbeliever and to the new Christian. No one likes to be embarrassed and admit they haven't the foggiest idea what someone is speaking about, so they nod or agree or look puzzled, and remain without the intended edification.

My home was one without Christian teaching. After my father left us, I carried on in my own strength and I prayed to the God my granny said is the God of the Bible, but as to reading the Bible for myself, that seemed a task for seminarians. However, in the pits of darkness and despair at age 33, I decided to seek God. He immediately enrolled me in school, and I guess "graduation day" is the day we cross the line from this world into the realms above, because I'm still in school. Thankfully, He has seen

to my education and I feel like I've arrived somewhere around the sixth grade or so.

As to "light" in the spiritual sense, the word no longer puzzles me. When we speak of spiritual light we are speaking of the revelation of God the Creator and of His Son, Jesus Christ, who walked this earth in a three and one-half year ministry before He became the final sacrifice for sin. He was indeed the Light of the World, exposing the unfruitful works of darkness, the uselessness of religions of man's invention, the hypocrisy of the ultra-religious and the desperate darkness in which most humans live their lives.

Is it not a fearful darkness to face death without knowing God? What lies beyond? In Hamlet's third soliloquy, "to be or not to be, that is the question" he goes on to contemplate death, "perchance to dream" or, in our terms, to live on after death in another dimension, in eternity. What then? That is precisely where man's fear of death lies, that is the darkness of fear, brought about by the darkness of the sin that is born into our nature and expresses itself in a thousand ways, by sins of commission, sins of omission, sins in word, thought and deed.

Hence we fear God as Judge when we walk in darkness. And, rightfully so, for even as God is Love, God hates sin, and sin must be punished. Christ is our sin-bearer, our Redeemer who paid the penalty of death that we might pass through death as through a thin veil to the other side of spacetime and into eternity, His light illuminating our journey all the way. The sting of death has been placed into the fleshly body of Jesus Christ, that it may not pierce those of us who are in Christ.

Look about you at the world, and see how much darkness there really is. Then perhaps this will make consummate good sense to you as to those who truly listened as our Lord spoke these words:

John 12:46, I am come a light into the world, that whosoever believeth on me should not abide in darkness.

Abide in darkness. And what are things such as war, bloodshed, envy, lust, cruelty, hatred, man's inhumanity to man, but total darkness, total evil?

If the true Light of God were in the hearts of these peoples of the world, there would be no such hatred and cruelty. No one would want to start a war. If every soul alive merely tried their best to keep the Ten Commandments, even though fallen man cannot keep them to God's standard, what a change would be wrought in the world about us. Just trying to keep the Commandments, setting aside lying, adultery, envy, murder, hatred and all things that come from the pits of Hell would make a very different world. We would fall short of the glory of God in our fallen state, but what different people we would become. There is so much power in those Commandments that it is little wonder that they are the object of hatred by the children of darkness in today's turbulent world as evil rages on at its worst in the hearts of men.

Thus, as we absorb the truths of God's eternal word, we are absorbing light, even if we do not realize it at the time. A commitment to focus on His word brings about a change in one's life that is visible to others. Yet Jesus said this:

John 3:19, And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil.

Evil is darkness. Man has come to love the darkness that is inside his very sin nature, which is why every individual born of flesh must be rebirthed, regenerated, in order to even seek the light. There are actually professors of theology in formerly respected institutions of higher learning in whom nothing but darkness resides, because they do not and will not believe the truth of God. They know their Greek, but do not believe God, and abide in darkness. They claim to teach principles of theology, but doubt both the Author and the Word, and their doubts spread like leaven, thus producing new generations of doubting pastors. What evil, what darkness!

We who seek God seek Light. This verse perhaps says more than any other about the power of God's Light:

1 Timothy 6:16, Who only hath immortality, dwelling in the light which no man can approach unto; whom no man hath seen, nor can see: to whom be honour and power everlasting. Amen.

We humans cannot look upon God, who dwells in unapproachable light. If we need special lenses with which to look upon the sun, a mere star among millions or billions in God's vast universe, how then should man be able to look upon God?

By looking into the face of the Son of God as He walked the earth clothed in human flesh, and spoke the words of God to those who had "ears to hear."

Yet we are promised that we shall see Him and we who walk in the light will indeed have that promise fulfilled. It is time for us to fill ourselves with the light of God's eternal word, that we shall be His children of the Light, no more unapproachable when we are perfected, but perfectly suited to dwell with Him for eternity. We shall listen to His Spirit as the

Spirit speaks to us as our guide and comforter, shedding light upon our pathway as we travel through the dark valleys of this earthly existence.

Walk in the light, for now you know what it means.

3. THE MINISTRY OF ANGELS

Hebrews 1:14, Are they not all ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation?

Angelic beings are quite popular these days, in fact, angels are far more popular than either God or His word the Bible. We are told in the Bible that angels are spirits, ministering spirits, but they have other duties also as described throughout the Old and New Testaments (covenants). Only two are named in the Protestant Bible, which omits the apocryphal writings, those being Michael the archangel, and Gabriel the messenger of God's redemptive work.

In man's uniquely twisted mind (even though brilliant at times) we have come to believe in the angels of the Renaissance more than in the angels of the Bible. We will hearken to Michaelangelo before accepting what the Bible says of angels. Hence, we have cute little "cherubs" that bear no resemblance at all to the Cherubim and Seraphim as Ezekiel saw them by divine revelation. Lovely ladies, forever and eternally in their late teens or early twenties by our time calculations grace many a chapel or greeting card, even paintings.

People who do not believe the Bible will at times mention their "angel" or "guardian angel" and I often wonder if they'd like one of those cute little babies with tiny wings to keep watch over them. It would be my guess that the answer is "no." They're cute, but they're babies. Why don't they choose Michael, the captain of the army of the Lord? Chances are that Michael would scare them into cardiac arrest were they able to see him in his regalia as captain of the host. The only two angels mentioned in our

Bible are also men, yet most of the angelic creatures fancied by the artists are babies or young ladies.

Why, then, this fascination with fictitious angels rather than the Holy Spirit of God and His ministering angels sent forth to minister to those of us who shall be heirs of Christ's redemptive work on the cross?

Very simply, people desire divine guidance and help without any accountability to God, so they choose some angelic beings to believe in, and make up some aesthetically lovely or cute beings. But they know not what they are doing, nor do they exercise the caution required of Christians. And yes, some of these angel-worshippers are professing Christians who unknowingly set aside God and believe more in the creations of their own minds, thus committing idolatry. Is there an explanation for this? Absolutely!

2 Corinthians 11:14, And no marvel; for Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light.

Now there is the absolute apex of deception! And, as with most of Satan's wiles foisted upon the pathetic, spiritually weak human race (including professing Christians) the old devil himself transforms himself and his demons into angels of light! Now, what did the devil want from the beginning? Worship! He wanted to supplant God as the supreme being in the universe, and the controversy goes on until this day and will continue until the Day of Judgment, when these scriptures shall be plain enough:

Isaiah 14:9-11, Hell from beneath is moved for thee to meet thee at thy coming: it stirreth up the dead for thee, even all the chief ones of the earth; it hath raised up from their thrones all the kings of the nations. All they shall speak and say unto thee, Art thou also become weak as we? art thou become like unto us? Thy pomp is

brought down to the grave, and the noise of thy viols: the worm is spread under thee, and the worms cover thee.

Matthew 25:41, Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels:

We refer to the “devil’s angels” as demons and so they are, but prior to Satan’s rebellion and the defection of these angels, they were as other angels in heaven. Angelic beings are without redemption, only mankind can be redeemed by the Blood of Christ.

So, the fascination with angels has some real dangers to it. There are some glorious works of the ministering angels, and surely I believe in God’s holy angels and their ministry. But I do not speak to them, pray to them, or even have images of them around, for we really don’t know what they look like. For that matter, we don’t know what Jesus of Nazareth looked like as He walked the earth from Nazareth to Jerusalem. Our mental images as well as some prints folks keep in their homes are again the product of the Italian Renaissance. God does not allow His image to be known or the face of Jesus to be seen now that He has returned to the right hand of the Father until His second advent. We who are faithful will see Him as He is when we are in His presence, not before.

What, then, does God really require of us?

Hebrews 11:6, But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him.

Faith! God requires of us faith in Him, His word, His Spirit, His Son and His promises. His angels take their orders from Him, not us; we are

not told that angels offer petitions to God, but that God sends them forth. Most belief in guardian angels probably comes from this verse:

Psalm 34:7, The angel of the LORD encampeth round about them that fear him, and delivereth them.

God said it; we are to take Him at His word and His promise. This seems to me to be a promise that I can claim and have in times of peril. But I do not thank the angel for doing his duty, I thank God Almighty.

In fact, angels specifically refuse worship of any kind. Whether that includes keeping angel ceramic figurines in your house is between you and God, He has not appointed me to the bench, but rather to redemption and to the judgment of Christ at the Bema seat. However, it is interesting to note how the Bible records an angel making a reply to John on Patmos in the Revelation:

Revelation 19:10, And I fell at his feet to worship him. And he said unto me, See thou do it not: I am thy fellowservant, and of thy brethren that have the testimony of Jesus: worship God: for the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.

The servants of God are on earth and in Heaven in the place prepared for us. Jesus promised us such a place and His design will be perfect.

We do well to rejoice in the God of our salvation and sing His praises daily, reading His word and praising His holy name.

Honestly, I would love to see Michael the archangel in his battle uniform but that has not been granted to us, so let it be enough that we believe in one thing and that alone:

Christ has forever won our victory and our redemption by His death and Resurrection, and in this is the guarantee of everlasting life in the

presence of God, where there shall be no tears or evil of any kind. That glorious hope is greater than anything our dinky minds could ever conceive, and to God be all the glory.

4. THE FIRE IN YOUR MOUTH!

James 3:6, And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity: so is the tongue among our members, that it defileth the whole body, and setteth on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire of hell.

Oh Christian, would you willfully and knowingly serve the enemy of your soul? No, you and I have no desire, as servants of the Lord Jesus Christ, to in any way walk in Satan's evil paths. Yet we thoughtlessly do, all of us at some time or other have done so and do so. How? Simply by what we say!

Have you been victimized by gossip that shredded your character or maligned your good intentions? Who has not been so treated on this earth. Have you at times said things about others that you wish you had not? In some stressful situations, utterances will come out of our mouths that we wish we had not said. Or in the heat of anger, perhaps at a foolish driver acting recklessly on the road we've uttered a few choice names, just to satisfy our temporary wrath. The driver, even if he/she heard our words, would not improve, but we have in those moments of satisfying our anger also grieved the Holy Spirit within, our Guide and Comforter, who spoke through James, the half-brother of our Lord, against the misuse of the tongue.

Nor was the Lord silent on this matter:

Matthew 15:18-20 But those things which proceed out of the mouth come forth from the heart; and they defile the man. For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies: These are the things which defile a man: but to eat with unwashen hands defileth not a man.

James is merely elaborating on what our Lord said. If our mouths are unclean, then our hearts are first unclean, and that which is unclean proceeds from the enemy of our souls, and grieves the Spirit of Grace who abides within us.

Consider this, and I speak to myself as well as to my Christian brothers and sisters. If what we speak is of this world (and the world is a cussin' bunch) then what is in our hearts? Christ, or the world? Jesus made the answer plain enough, but do we take Him seriously, or excuse ourselves because "we're only human." Yes, we're only human. God is far more aware of that fact than we are, and He knows us better than we know ourselves. He also knows whether we are striving to please Him, or to please ourselves, and while I do not believe in the world's idea of God as an old, gaunt-faced, long-bearded man wearing a sheet and keeping a clipboard of our faults, I do know that we offend the Holy Spirit when we sin.

This is how James explains the Christian's misuse of the tongue:

James 3:7-10, For every kind of beasts, and of birds, and of serpents, and of things in the sea, is tamed, and hath been tamed of mankind: But the tongue can no man tame; it is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison. Therewith bless we God, even the Father; and therewith curse we men, which are made after the similitude of God. Out of the same mouth proceedeth blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not so to be.

It is a bit strange, isn't it, to hear a person who professes to be a Christian say "I serve my Lord Jesus, whom I love" and then rail out at a fellow human being as ... well, you fill in the blanks.

Now, if a person has believed the first statement you made about loving Jesus, yet your speech, proceeding from your heart through your

tongue, utters things that might embarrass a hard-core unbeliever, what is to be said of your profession? If you can't wait to spread around the latest buzz about a fellow believer, someone in your congregation perhaps, what is to be said of the motivations of your heart? Is your heart filled with the Holy Spirit, or with the spirit of this world?

If you read the verses from James and see "no man can tame" it is not an excuse for you to speak as you feel. The Holy Spirit needs to take control of both your feelings and your tongue! (Oh yes, I know all too well how easy it is to call someone a frothing idiot or worse, and I stand unexcused until I have sincerely repented, for that is sin.)

What you, in your own strength cannot do, from taming the tongue to cleansing the heart to granting full and free pardon, God has done.

We praise God for His marvelous works, but excuse ourselves for all our shortcomings, many of which are nothing more than a coal from the fires of Hell in our mouths. There is more than ample exhortation in the New Testament about how we speak:

Titus 2:7-8, In all things shewing thyself a pattern of good works: in doctrine shewing uncorruptness, gravity, sincerity, Sound speech, that cannot be condemned; that he that is of the contrary part may be ashamed, having no evil thing to say of you.

How much room for blaspheming our Lord and Savior do you give the unbelievers when you profess one thing, and then speak in such a way that they (seeking an excuse anyway) can say, "well if that's how Christians are, I want no part of them."

Somehow, at some time during the late 19th century, there occurred a certain "holiness movement" among the fundamentalist denominations that focused on externals. The proponents of this

“movement” settled upon four things they called “worldly” and prohibited to their congregations – drinking, smoking, dancing and playing cards, only one of which is even mentioned in the Bible! Never mind that Jesus drank wine (and I nearly lost my temper with the pastor of a certain church I visited when he told his congregation that Jesus drank grape juice). It is drunkenness, the “messing with your mind” that is forbidden. Yes, Jesus drank wine. That is why the gossipers of His day were engaging in their favorite hobby to the fullest, as revealed in this passage:

Matthew 11:19, The Son of man came eating and drinking, and they say, Behold a man gluttonous, and a winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners. But wisdom is justified of her children.

The tongue has been an evil beast since the fall of Satan. Look at Genesis, chapter 3. How did Satan, the serpent, approach Eve? With words. “Hath God said ...?” The enemy of our souls has quite a mastery of words and a keen knowledge of fallen human nature. He even tricks Christians into following doctrines of men that have nothing at all to do with the Bible, but with something some man has thought up as a way of “looking holy.” Be sure that such externals will be found out, and give cause for blasphemy toward God and His holy Name.

It is so common now for American Christians to condemn those who do not follow “their” sin list that the heathen expect much more of us than does God, for the heathen don’t even understand sin or a cleansed heart. The knowledge of sin is still there, deep in their consciousness, but they delight in pointing to a Christian who does not observe the “rules” laid down by the proponents of a holiness movement rather than just following the plain instructions of the Bible.

One story was told by the late J. Vernon McGee on a radio teaching program that I heard some twenty or so years ago. It seems a group of Baptists from America met in Germany with a group of German Baptists, and they sat in separate sections of a dining room according to the language they commonly spoke. The American ladies were dressed in print dresses, some had tinted hair and most of them wore makeup. The German ladies held them in contempt and muttered to one another about the Americans. The German ladies, in gray dresses, some with head coverings, no makeup, plain as the side of a barn, were drinking beer, about which the American ladies were whispering to one another.

James would have had somewhat to say to that group. No wonder the heathen hold us in contempt, when we cannot even understand the customs of one another or tolerate them, engage in gossip and start the charcoals of Hell blazing among members of the same denomination and in front of the heathen at that.

What was in their hearts? Self-righteousness and condemnation, judging their fellow man by their own standards rather than God's.

It is obvious that if each professing Christian would "cast the beam (log) out of his own eye" that we would then be able to see how lacking we are, and how repentant we should be, and that without delay.

A sign on a small church nearby bore this sign on its marquee about a year ago, and although the marquee is changed each week, I've remembered this one so well:

"If you are not modeling what you teach, then you are teaching something else."

Jesus never wasted words. He meant every one of them, and He gave His instructions that we might draw closer to God and be in sonship

with Him for eternity. A cleansed heart, purified from the filth and sin of this world, is what is meant by “regeneration” or to some, being “born again.” And, while the spirit and the flesh begin a mighty battle, as described in Romans chapter 6 through 8, it is Christ in us who has the victory. But we must yield to that Spirit of Christ in us, not to parade about as “holier than thou people of the Great Don’t Do” but as people showing the light of Christ to the world.

John 15:10-12, If ye keep my commandments, ye shall abide in my love; even as I have kept my Father's commandments, and abide in his love. These things have I spoken unto you, that my joy might remain in you, and that your joy might be full. This is my commandment, That ye love one another, as I have loved you.

There is no lasting joy in this world or the things of this world. The Spirit of Christ, speaking through John, confirmed this very clearly:

1 John 2:17 And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever.

Speak, then, as one whose heart is fixed on things in the realms above. If your heart is there, your tongue will testify accordingly.

Matthew 12:37, For by thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned.

It would do us well to consider our words and even more, the spiritual condition of our hearts that would produce words displeasing to our Lord.

5.OUR REST AND OUR REFUGE

Psalms 37:7, Rest in the LORD, and wait patiently for him: fret not thyself because of him who prospereth in his way, because of the man who bringeth wicked devices to pass.

How many frazzled minds walk the earth today? Isn't it time to come aside and rest in the God of your soul and the God of all creation?

Those who take time with the Lord will find rest for their souls that will strengthen their health and slow the pace of their life by removing the unnecessary, the unholy and the worldly. After all, this world is not our home.

Philippians 3:20, For our citizenship is in heaven; whence also we wait for a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Those who have placed roots in this earthly existence have rooted themselves in sand, a most precarious and unreliable base indeed. Facing our mortality is not easy, we prefer not to think about it, or about the coming day of judgment upon this wicked earth, or even where we are in God's great plan for man's redemption. It is easier to become absorbed in the trivial, and place the most important things aside for some later time.

Mark 6:31, And [Jesus] said unto them, Come ye yourselves apart into a desert place, and rest a while;

Jesus begs us, "come aside" or, if we can extrapolate from that, "come aside before you fall apart." Jesus knew the value of work and He worked, and knowing His departure would shortly come, that He must work while it was still "day" ... that is, while His light illuminated the world around Him. But He also knew the limits of human endurance and the need for rest. While Jesus was extreme in His adherence to all things pertaining to God, He was also mindful that we are but dust, weak beings. And only

once, just before His arrest, did He scold His disciples for not watching with Him one hour.

The enemy of our souls would keep us too busy to worship, to ponder the things of God as we venture through each day.

James 4:14, Whereas ye know not what shall be on the morrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away.

Now, for the frazzled and tortured bodies and minds, there is a rest the like of which the world cannot offer, and that is rest in God our Creator, Father and Eternal Refuge.

Psalm 91:1-2, He that dwelleth in the secret place of the most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the LORD, He is my refuge and my fortress: my God; in him will I trust.

Our problem is, we have forgotten our God, cast aside our trust in Him, and have come to trust in the works of our own hands, our labors, our material possessions. We read, but we do not truly believe in our hearts these magnificent words:

Philippians 4:19, But my God shall supply all your need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus.

Is it that we want more than we need? Or that we imagine our wants are truly needs? In many cases the answer is a resounding, even deafening “yes.” We had only a few material things we felt were necessary in the 1940’s and 1950’s. Clothes to keep warm or cool, plain food, mothers at home being homemakers, a slower pace of life and time to dwell on the Lord each Sunday. Getting a “new” second-hand auto was a major transaction. A graduate received a watch for which the family saved money for months. Because of the lack of rampant materialism, the necessities of

life were cheap, and the luxuries were expensive. We were grateful for a roof over our heads and food on the table.

Since I did not come from a Christian home, I tried to go to a nearby church on my own, but it was not a traditional Christian church so I got out of it. Nevertheless, the hunger to know God was within me, and I kept trying until finally, in my thirties, I heard the gospel preached. I began studying the Bible like a wolf devouring fresh meat, so hungry was I for the God of my salvation.

I have watched this nation turn its back on God and a too-busy people neglect to even give thanks for one single blessing in their lives. They do not believe in blessings, they believe in luck, conniving, and the lottery. Somehow they are never too busy to buy that ticket.

The quietest souls are those that rest in the Lord and trust in His mercy and goodness. His providential guidance and eternal promises fill their hearts with hope and joy even in the midst of terrible trials, trials that challenge our faith and prove the evils of the world in which we live. But God is not challenged by this world, He created it, He knows the end from the beginning (Isaiah 46:10) and His will shall prevail. We simply move God too far away from us, when indeed He is with us every moment. We do not wish to bother Him with “trivial” things, as if anything we poor humans could do would be considered significant to the Creator of all.

Then, after we have moved far away and trouble rushes over like a tsunami, we cry out to the God for whom we were too busy, and expect an immediate answer to our own design and approval. That is not faith, it is pure presumption.

To rest in God one must trust daily. Every day. Only then can we look in confidence to that time of blessed rest when we shall be with those whose voices ring out in joyous praise:

Revelation 19:1, And after these things I heard a great voice of much people in heaven, saying, Alleluia; Salvation, and glory, and honour, and power, unto the Lord our God.

It has been said of us that we worship our work, work at our play, and play at our worship. Indeed we do.

What a sad commentary. What a hollow existence we have exchanged for true life.

6. SEEKING REST FOR THE SOUL

Ecclesiastes 12:12-13, And further, by these, my son, be admonished: of making many books there is no end; and much study is a weariness of the flesh. Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man.

We frail humans spend so much time seeking for a “higher life” in all the wrong places. First, we believe that more things will obtain for us an inner peace from outer means. Or we dedicate ourselves to various causes, generally in the hope of obtaining some award for achievement. If there is one thing we spend much time doing, it is seeking and seldom finding.

Fun, money, pleasure, gratification of the fleshly desires and peering into the future for fear that evil may come, or some wish may not be received, all mark the fleshly life, the life of the perishing body and fleeting fame. Of all the souls who have lived on this planet, how many names are actually remembered and for how long? We speak of a person’s “finest hour” or “hour of glory” and shortly thereafter, they are forgotten. We seldom know even the names of our great grandfathers or other ancestors unless we’ve made diligent inquiry by means of genealogical study.

We seek rest for our souls by exhausting ourselves in the search! One might as well dig for diamonds in the salt mines.

Something about this is intellectually perverse and spiritually bankrupt. Ordinarily reasonable people go about the most foolish things in pursuit of that which has no lasting value. This is not a 21st century problem, but is perhaps more prominent among people of the late 20th and early 21st centuries in western civilization because of the multiplicity of things and pleasures without restraint. Jesus spoke to this:

John 6:27, Work not for the food which perisheth, but for the food which abideth unto eternal life, which the Son of man shall give unto you: for him the Father, even God, hath sealed.

Somehow everything we've ever wanted has in time become useless or of no value to us. The new home ages, the new car grows old and in need of repair unless replaced, some vacation trip fades in memory as other things occupy one's mind, and all becomes vanity and vexation of spirit. Our bodies, even with the greatest of care, age and become achey, a nuisance to cart around, yet the only earth-suits issued to us. Has God spoken to us about these most common issues? Most certainly, in many ways and many places.

Colossians 3:1-4, If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God. Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth. For ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God. When Christ, who is our life, shall appear, then shall ye also appear with him in glory.

The life of the unbeliever is doomed to the knowledge of the here and now, deeming all belief in God to be "pie in the sky bye and bye" and yet only those who believe are relieved of the emptiness of our short years, filled with struggle. Every successful person's life looks great from the cover of a magazine, but not from the inner chambers of their hearts and homes. Trouble is not a respecter of persons either! That is the very reason they seek pleasures in base activities and mind-altering substances. The inner self is never satisfied by merely obtaining outward things or status.

The believer has the certainty of the promises of God's word. Christianity is not a religion of empty works and physical disciplines, of observing days and times and new moons or the movement of heavenly

bodies in search of omens. It is a relationship based on the absolute veracity of God's written word and the Person of God's own Son speaking to us in His fleshly body while on earth.

Psalm 91:1-2, He that dwelleth in the secret place of the most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the LORD, He is my refuge and my fortress: my God; in him will I trust.

Notice that one must dwell in the secret place of the Most High, that is, maintain a steady relationship, not make a casual visit in time of urgent need. People in great distress will crowd into churches, only to go their own way, relying on themselves, once a semblance of normalcy has returned to their lives, as if they had some certainty for the future. Does no one calculate that their earthly days may end tomorrow by some strange event?

Yet others seek "the mysteries" as if the fallen humans of three thousand years ago had some access to a higher life than we. If they had, it would have become general knowledge rather than a set of strange rituals for the select few. That, too, is just skullduggery and deception. Self-appointed gurus, sages and inquirers into the dark side of the unseen world are the blind guides of the blind, appearing wise while engaging in the most foolish of all endeavors, rejecting the true Creator God.

Well did the Holy Spirit write by the pen of the Apostle Paul:

Romans 1:16-20, For I am not ashamed of the gospel: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek. For therein is revealed a righteousness of God from faith unto faith: as it is written, But the righteous shall live by faith. For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hinder the truth in

unrighteousness; because that which is known of God is manifest in them; for God manifested it unto them. For the invisible things of him since the creation of the world are clearly seen, being perceived through the things that are made, even his everlasting power and divinity; that they may be without excuse:

We are born with a rebellious and sinful nature, hence it is necessary to reach into the true realms above to be regenerated.

2 Corinthians 5:17, Wherefore if any man is in Christ, he is a new creature: the old things are passed away; behold, they are become new.

Isn't that the heart of the whole matter? We are seeking to become new, to be in a higher existence that the things of this earth, even the most magnificent scenes of nature, cannot maintain for us. Nothing external will satisfy, it will only testify to the magnificence of the One who has provided all for us, including newness of life.

Some will take the first step, but not the second. Some will give part, but not all of themselves over to Christ. Some will follow, as did Peter, at a distance, only to find themselves denying their Savior because they have rejected him as Lord, that is, as their Master.

Yet the only true rest for the soul is the full assurance that God has not only said what He means, but means what He has said. His commandments are not burdensome, they require only the giving up of self as a lost, confused and restless person confronted by all the perishables of this world. They require taking up Christ's way as their way of life, and allowing Him full mastery of their existence. That is not the turning off of the brain, but the subjection of it to the Spirit of God.

Humility is demanded, not requested. Only those humble enough to admit their sin and deficiencies and beg for mercy can enter into that hallowed place of rest while still residing on the earth. It is a spiritual filling that negates fears of the future and quiets the raging storms of life.

It is indeed a higher life, one that requires “dying” to self, acknowledging that God is indeed the Potter and we are the clay. Then may one be desirous not of this earth’s treasures that perish, but of the imperishable realms above, eternal realms of beauty and joy.

Psalm 16:11, Thou wilt show me the path of life: In thy presence is fulness of joy; In thy right hand there are pleasures for evermore.

There is no rest for the soul greater than the absolute certainty of God and His blessings for eternity to those whose trust is in Him.

7.REAPING WHAT YOU SOW

Galatians 6:7, Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.

Is it somewhat puzzling to say that I find great spiritual lessons in a supermarket? Perhaps. It is not the entire market that reminds me of spiritual things, but the produce section, which is a very large and colorful section of some grocery stores.

While the foods along the shelves everywhere in the store (even the junk food aisles) attest to the origin of food, like potato or corn chips, the full impact of the earth's capacity to provide so many things for man's benefit and enjoyment abound among the greenery of the lettuce and spinach, the red and green bell peppers, ripe cherries and summer fruits, on down to the lowly but nourishing potato and the onions on which we depend for added flavor to our salads and meats.

The farmer sows seed, and reaps what he sows. If he sows corn, then tomatoes are not harvested. If he sows squash, he does not reap onions. And so the illustrations could go on, fruit after fruit, vegetable after vegetable, for these are the provisions of our Lord, given from realms above for our good, and placed in the earth where they grow in the soil that is composed of the very same elements as our earth-suits, our fleshly bodies. This brings two scriptures to mind, both very well known:

Genesis 8:22, While the earth remaineth, seedtime and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night shall not cease.

Psalms 103:14, For he knoweth our frame; he remembereth that we are dust.

To live on this earth, man had to be made of the earth. We were not told why God chose to make His finest creation, man, created in His own image, out of dirt, we are merely told that He did.

Genesis 2:7, And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.

The earth is filled not only with beauty but with nourishment.

Now there are some who would pervert the clear meaning of Galatians 6:7-8 to teach that since such a law of sowing and reaping exists, we can “sow” money as seed and from that harvest an enormous amount of wealth, as a single watermelon seed produces a vine and more melons, each with hundreds of seeds, so that it is theoretically possible to fill certain portions of the earth with watermelons. Thus, they reason incorrectly, by “sowing” the seed of money one can reap enormous harvests to become rich.

No such teaching exists in the Bible except by misconstruction, and those who have harvested are largely those preaching the doctrine, not those receiving it. One might as well teach that by planting one’s old automobile they can expect a harvest of new cars, so foolish is the doctrine and so far from God’s direct explanation in Galatians 6:8:

Galatians 6:8, 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.

This plainly explains that if our thoughts, words and deeds are aimed at the fleshly life without God, the selfish life, that one will reap corruption, that is, the flesh will die and the soul will perish in everlasting outer darkness or Hell. Those who sow from the heart according to the

Spirit of God may expect to receive the harvest of eternal life after the body has returned to dust.

The promise of seedtime and harvest (Gen. 8:22) was given to Noah after the Flood, when he and his family came out of the ark to a barren earth. That which is necessary to sustain life was confirmed, although man had to work to make the land produce. Still, the sight of an earth washed clean of everything they had known prior to the Flood prompted God to make this promise to Noah and his family; the earth would again bear its harvests.

In this time following the death and resurrection of Christ, Paul speaks to Christians of not being deceived, or following false teachers. Just as the Flood made barren the earth following God's judgment on the wicked antediluvians, so the Christian faces the trials of an earth that is barren of holiness and righteousness, filled with the idols of men's hearts. Those who trust in the foolishness of man's devices and spiritual idolatry will "reap from the flesh" in a just recompense for their spiritual harlotry.

To the Christian there is the reaping of eternal life, the reward of sowing to the Spirit, a metaphor for the life dedicated to the work, service and worship of the Lord Jesus Christ. The altar of God is no longer in an earthly tabernacle or temple, it is in the heart, the residence of God's Spirit in the regenerate human being.

Nor is it merely needful to avoid false teachers, but further, to adhere to sound doctrine, ever the target of the enemy of our souls.

Notice from Genesis that it took only until Noah's great-grandson Nimrod for the beginning of what became Babylon to be established. Babylon, an empire admired by historians for man's accomplishments, is the biblical symbol of the ultimate enemy of God, a place of idolatry and false

religion, corrupt political systems willfully defiant of the true God, and of greedy commerce, the epitome of which we in this world are witnessing today. Hence, the fall of “Mystery Babylon” will mean the demise of these wicked systems as the harvest reaped by a God-denying world.

We are often told in the Bible to “wait on the Lord.” Waiting is not something that mankind enjoys, and in particular the late 20th and early 21st centuries have produced a society that is accustomed to instant everything from foods to fortunes. It takes time to grow in grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ, it is not instantaneous knowledge. Those who sow to the lures of the world may indeed gain them, but at the peril of their own souls.

We are therefore cautioned to watch how and what we sow in this world, for the full reward is not harvested here on earth. Recompense for evil may be dealt out, and some recognition granted for a selfless life. But the final recompense, the ultimate harvest, will be in the eternal domain, and it will be either final condemnation to the wicked, or full blessing to the faithful.

Sowing and reaping sounds like mere farming, but to God it is eternal spiritual truth. Take heed.

8. THE BEAUTY OF HUMILITY

Micah 6:8, He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the LORD require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?

When the Lord our God says something once, we are assured that it is true. When He says something twice, we may be sure He is being emphatic about the matter. But when His word is filled with a subject, with many references, it is well to study the matter carefully, for it must be of the utmost importance to God and therefore to us as well.

Man is not inclined to humility, it seems to be a sign of weakness, but that depends on the source of the humility. Is it a feeling of being worthless? That is not what the Bible teaches as an acceptable form of humility, unless it is judgment meted out by God upon the proud and arrogant.

The late 20th and early 21st century emphasis on self-esteem has robbed us of what the parents of older folks taught ... be humble! Focus on God, before whom you have absolutely nothing to boast, and treat everyone kindly and with courtesy. The self-esteem doctrine arrived on the same boat with forced tolerance, feminism, the breakdown of the nuclear family, the unisex craze and parades for gays/lesbians, and statism.

Where statism rules, the tenets of the Christian faith are ruthlessly attacked as irrelevant, intolerant and obsolete, those who practice Bible-based Christianity (as opposed to liberal Churchianity) are “enemies of the state.” Those who have no king but Caesar will perish with the Caesars, because arrogance of that kind is a direct attack on God and will not go unpunished.

Isaiah 57:15, For thus saith the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, whose name is Holy; I dwell in the high and holy place, with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones.

Proverb 29:23, A man's pride shall bring him low: but honour shall uphold the humble in spirit.

Not once is pride of heart complimented by God! Rather, it is condemned over and over again, bringing with the warning a certainty of eventual punishment and loss of status on which such pride was based.

Our Christian faith is based upon repentance. John preached the baptism of repentance in preparation for the arrival of Jesus, the Christ, and His earthly ministry. Repentance is not a weak “I’m sorry” but a change of heart, a change of direction. After the death and resurrection of Christ, every repentant believer received the Holy Spirit to indwell and guide in this new life, and to remind, chasten and reprove those things of the former life that walked in darkness and catered to the fleshly desires of the world.

1 Peter 5:6, Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time:

Until we are willing to humble ourselves under God’s mighty hand (symbol of strength and power), we cannot repent, we walk separated from the fellowship of God and the communion of the Holy Spirit, drawing farther from God and closer to this perishing world. How active are the lures of this present age in drawing the weaker Christians away from “the faith once delivered” and into doubt, or false doctrines of so-called higher truth. Nor is it just the weaker Christians who fall away, but even apostate preachers, those who know better, who arrogantly fleece their flocks, enrich

their coffers and do despite to the grace of God, and for such is reserved greater punishment.

Luke 12:48, But he that knew not, and did commit things worthy of stripes, shall be beaten with few stripes. For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required: and to whom men have committed much, of him they will ask the more.

Hardly a week goes by that I do not hear of broken hearts, broken marriages and afflicted children, just as daily the news reminds us of a broken world. To the straying nation of Israel, God said this:

2 Chronicles 7:14, 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.

That which is true of the nation is true of the home, the basic unit of society. Those whose lives have become absorbed in self, in their rights as promulgated by a politically correct society, and a heathen one at that, must repent before they can correct the direction of their lives. Humility is the first step toward such repentance, the acknowledgment that it is we who are wrong, and God who is right.

Just as God promised to heal the land of those gone astray, so will He do for the homes of the humble who repent and return to Him as Lord and Master. But it must be both parties who are willing to submit to God, one cannot coerce the other. Forced humility is simply hypocrisy or fear, and our God reads the heart.

Healing of all spiritual ills begins with repentance. All repentance begins with humility of heart. They are irrevocably intertwined.

What we see now is a world without godliness, the former bastions of Christian faith and gospel preaching have cast aside their God and become ungrateful, presumptuous enemies of the Gospel their forefathers believed and lived as their lands and lives prospered. But are we all not now like the ancients to whom the prophet Jeremiah spoke?

Jeremiah 5:24, Neither say they in their heart, Let us now fear the LORD our God, that giveth rain, both the former and the latter, in his season: he reserveth unto us the appointed weeks of the harvest.

Rightly did Solomon observe that there is nothing new under the sun. New technologies yes, but newness of human conduct, thought and deed? Not one whit, even though we are every bit as dependent upon God now as were the ancients to whom the prophets spoke.

Humility, however, is commanded of Christians. It is no more optional than forgiveness, although often as difficult for our wayward natures to accept. Yet we must consider these words spoken through the Apostle Peter, and consider whether we walk in humility or rebellion, and act accordingly:

1 Peter 5:6, Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time:

Those who seek such humility will have assistance from on high:

James 4:6, But he giveth more grace. Wherefore he saith, God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble.

God's all-sufficient grace aids those who truly seek humility and repentance, so that we never need depend on our own strength. In this we can rest assured.

9.CANDLES AT DUSK

Psalms 18:28, For thou wilt light my candle: the LORD my God will enlighten my darkness.

When the weather is gracious, neither hot nor cold, and the skies are clear, it is a wondrous sight to be out on a deck or patio, watching the nightly ritual of sunset and dusk. Tiny lights begin to appear in the sky, and if one is fortunate enough to live on an elevated area within viewing distance of some town or city, little lights go on all over the city. Street lights, shop lights, home lights, auto lights, the darkness becomes decorated by shimmering little dots of light all around.

There is a feeling that darkness can never prevail as long as there are lights in the sky and there is a vibrant universe surrounding us on the earth.

But what of the darkness within? Any soul that has no relationship with the Creator God of the universe has darkness within, which is Jesus' point as He told us:

John 8:12, Then spake Jesus again unto them, saying, I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life.

One might encounter total darkness in a mine, a cave, a deep forest where the heavenly luminaries cannot be seen. One small flashlight, even a small candle, is able to dispel some of that darkness. Our more powerful torch lights can dispel much darkness in their immediate area.

But only the light of the Lord can enlighten the soul and dispel the darkness within. His disciples missed the point at the time He spoke, because they could not literally follow Him through His death and burial, or as He rose from the dead and ascended into Heaven again. They were left

here on earth, and to aid them in their walk, their following in His example and teaching, the Holy Spirit fell upon them on the day of Pentecost. Since that day, there has been given to every believer the indwelling Holy Spirit to dispel darkness ... a term synonymous with evil (the evil that lurks in the nature of man) and ignorance, the ignorance of the truth of Christ.

For those who come to Christ and begin to learn of Him, the light illumines but our own inner darkness makes the blazing light of the Holy Spirit seem dim at times, because we have not walked long or far enough to realize that just as candles at dusk seem to give off light only for a small distance, so we see only a tiny bit of light as we begin this new walk into everlasting Light.

But let the candle at dusk burn into the darkness of the night and its glow can be seen for miles around. One small light in total darkness is visible for great distances, particularly when it shines from higher elevations.

The dusk is our shallowest realm of knowledge, while the inner darkness is our evil nature in which most of us walk unaware. The light of the Holy Spirit burns ever brighter as it illumines the caverns where we hide our innermost thoughts and desires, evil as they may be, perhaps unknown even to ourselves until the light of God shines upon them.

When we are filled with that holy, heavenly light, we shine as bright lights to a lost world stumbling in its own darkness:

Matthew 5:14, Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid.

You cannot hide the light that is within you any more than you could eradicate the darkness within. You become that light set on a hill where it can be seen for miles around as you follow the instructions left by

our Lord. The light of God is within you by the word and the Spirit, and it dims only when by willful rebellion, you quench the Spirit of God shining inside of your inner being.

When one becomes a servant of the Living God, that person need no longer view themselves as a slave of any man, government, system or regime. The Apostle Paul's great "prison epistles" of Ephesians, Colossians and Philippians were written from a dark Roman prison where he was chained to a Roman guard. It was Paul's total dependence on his Lord, our Lord, that not only produced these great epistles of light for our benefit but influenced the Romans who were chained to him. His candle had come from the dusk of the man whose conversion on the road to Damascus blinded him to the man whose light was like a megawatt lamp.

The extreme privilege was granted to Paul to see the "third heaven" or residence of God outside spacetime. If anyone ever understood that life does not end with the death of the body, it was Paul. The knowledge that life goes on after mortal death doubtless added to his determination to make known the mysteries of God and to put to silence the wild speculations of man and his imaginary "gods" and false religions or atheism. Because of this, Paul grieved that his kinsmen after the flesh had rejected their Messiah, but he fulfilled his ministry to the nations, the Gentiles for whom he formerly had nothing but contempt.

Paul perhaps understood grace and election better than those Apostles who were with Jesus, having been called to the ministry of grace and salvation to the Gentiles, when he had been a zealous Jew instructed in the Law of Moses. Yet it was neither his understanding nor his previous instruction that made him such a powerful spokesman for the Gospel of Christ. It was the overwhelming light of the Holy Spirit within.

That light is not reserved for just one such as Paul. His ministry was an assignment as part of the Body of Christ, the true light of the world on earth after Christ's ascension. It is not our assignments that determine the wattage of our light, but our submission to the Holy Spirit within.

When you admire the candles at dusk, the tiny specks of light in the skies, or the twinkling lights of the city below, remember that God is Light, and when the Holy Spirit has graced you with His own indwelling, you must allow the power of that light to shine.

Shine brightly.

10. THE JOY IN VIRTUE

Children have an inborn “naughty” streak in them, particularly when there is more than one around. It is the job of parents to teach, lovingly, that being naughty is bad, that there is such a thing as cause and effect, and if the cause is naughtiness, then the effect is unpleasant. This is just good child rearing. It is a preparation for social behavior throughout life.

God, our heavenly Father, has given us rules as His children, just as our parents did when we were young ones. He has shown us what is good, just as His word says:

Micah 6:8, He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the LORD require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?

Does that sound like what God requires of us is rather simple? Yes, it does. It is simple, but not easy, nor within our power to do without the regeneration necessary to become indwelt by the Holy Spirit. Even then, it takes a surrender of our own will, lest we become firmly cemented into the struggle described in the seventh chapter of Romans.

Yet if we take that one verse, and translate it into human thoughts and deeds, we find that God requires of us virtue, which is moral excellence, a conformity to His perfect standards (which we will never absolutely attain on this earth). Were we able at any time to meet God’s righteous requirements of our own will or merit, then Christ died in vain. The very purpose of the Sermon on the Mount was to translate the outward works of the Law from a set of rituals into the spiritual requirements of God in every aspect of our lives. It even ends with “be thou perfect” which is utterly impossible. Was Christ then telling us that to please God and be heirs of

salvation that we must achieve the impossible and thus, we are all doomed? No, He came that He might teach us that His vicarious sacrifice was necessary for us to become heirs of salvation through regeneration and participation in His inheritance, and thus, by the Sermon on the Mount, prepared those who understood the futility of pleasing God in our own efforts for the Savior who was about to be crucified for our sins and raised for our justification.

Look again at Micah 6:8. We are to “do justly.” Is the human heart able to do justly in the sight of God? Apparently not, for in the book of Isaiah the Holy Spirit writes through the prophet:

Isaiah 64:6, But we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags; and we all do fade as a leaf; and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away.

What about loving mercy? Again, we are brought up short by God’s own word:

Romans 3:10, As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one:

If we are unrighteous, every last one of us, then we are incapable on our own of loving mercy as a way of thought, word and deed all the days of our lives. It is the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit in the regenerate human heart that enables us to love mercy, and that only imperfectly because in our fight against the fleshly nature, we stumble and fall. Were it not for God’s own limitless mercy, we should all perish in our sins.

Thus, out of three requirements given in Micah 6:8, we are doomed as unregenerate people by our inability to fulfill the first two, and even failing one would bring damnation. What, then, of the third?

We are to “walk humbly with thy God.” Humility is the opposite of vanity and ego, a foreign thought entirely in a world dedicated to the great “god” Self, with all its sins and abominations. Further, in spite of traditions or false teachings based on the idea that since God created man, He is our Father, none of Adam’s offspring are born as God’s children. That which is born of flesh is flesh, destined to the corruption of flesh and damnation of spirit until regeneration by the word and the Spirit.

To acknowledge God as “our Father” we must first become His children by rebirth into the Kingdom of God. An increasingly popular lie among today’s religionists is “the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man” which is a damnable lie on both counts. Adam’s sin separated him and his progeny from any father/child relationship with God, and further separated child from child by hatred and every evil thought and device, from Cain’s murder of Abel to the present day.

Christ’s death was never for the purpose of establishing a new religion, but of taking away the necessity for “religion” as a system of works (the Law) that led only to condemnation, and replacing religion with a restored relationship with Father God, so that we would once again be His children, heirs of the Kingdom, joint heirs with Jesus, all heirs of eternal life and glory.

What, then, is the joy in virtue? The fact that one may once again have virtue, true virtue, in the sight of God the Father. We who are “in Christ” are in His very Son, the Body of Christ, part of Him and filled with His Spirit.

To “do justly” is a pleasure, as we learn in our growth in Christ. Every manner of fraud and deceit is an abomination, an offense to our God and to our moral sensibilities. To “love mercy” is to be filled with an

unconditional love for fallen man and an unqualified hatred for the sin that dominates his nature. That mercy extends to offering the Gospel message to the lost, as we are instructed to do, in meekness and mildness, with full confidence that God is all we say and far more than we know. It is to take no offense at those who refuse, since it takes the operation of the Holy Spirit upon the darkened soul to enlighten it and enable it to receive salvation. Such regeneration must precede salvation, not follow it.

To “walk humbly” with our God is to take no credit for what He has given, what He has done, what He has provided regardless of what labor we believe we have put into the endeavor. (Luke 17:10) All we can do is to rejoice that we are indeed His children, now and eternally.

How is it then possible not to rejoice in virtue, the moral excellence dwelling within us by the Holy Spirit? Even when we fall short, as we are bound to do in the flesh, still our inner person is being perfected day by day in our work for and walk with our Lord.

Philippians 4:4, Rejoice in the Lord always: and again I say, Rejoice.

Ephesians 5:8, For ye were sometimes darkness, but now are ye light in the Lord: walk as children of light:

The children of light rejoice in virtue and moral excellence, in the striving to please the heavenly Father, not by useless religiosity and its rituals, but by a closer walk and communion with our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

11. FAITH FOR PERILOUS TIMES

2Chronicles 32:8, with him is an arm of flesh; but with us is Yahweh our God to help us, and to fight our battles.

One preacher at a service I attended many years ago aptly noted, “all fear is ultimately fear for one’s self.” In perilous times we feel our mortality and our helplessness at the hands of evil rulers, our own or those of neighboring nations who would deny us lives of peace and as much tranquility as this earth can provide.

Our mortality and our grief tolerance levels combine to make perilous times all the more distasteful and dreadful. Few of us go through a normal day in fear of death from any particular cause unless we are terminally ill. For the regular working person, any nation that isn’t suffering from famine or plague, death is a notion to be pushed aside and mortality is ignored. Obituaries are “other people” and our own safety is somewhat assured by taking appropriate cautions.

We trust in our military might or in other arms of flesh, but for the Christian, there is only one true source of safety in either this world or the age to come, and that is our God.

To think otherwise is to put trust in and elevate the source of power and safety to something other than God, which is idolatry. Anything that is put in the place of God Almighty is idolatry. Jesus often said to His disciples, “fear not” and associated the basis for such absence of fear with faith in Him and His protection, guidance, and ultimate control over each life that He claims as His disciple, guaranteed protection for the life of a child of God until the time comes to depart for the heavenly realms.

However, Jesus guaranteed no freedom from trials in this life, but warned of quite the opposite.

John 16:33, These things I have spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world.

Luke 12:7, But even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not therefore: ye are of more value than many sparrows.

Those who do not believe in God Almighty, in the salvation afforded by faith in Christ's sacrificial death and glorious resurrection have allayed their fears, in part, by turning to the occult, the mystery religions, philosophies of reincarnation and various other opiates for the inevitable fact of mortality.

False gods produce false promises and disappointment, as well as leaving the unbeliever at the time of demise with a most uncertain idea of their eternal life. Some claim to believe in annihilation, the cessation of all being and thought, but the Bible teaches no such thing.

Philippians 1:22-23, But if I live in the flesh, this is the fruit of my labour: yet what I shall choose I wot not. For I am in a strait betwixt two, having a desire to depart, and to be with Christ; which is far better:

The Apostle Paul desired to be with Christ, that is, to leave his mortal earth suit behind in the dust from which it was formed, and to enter the realms above to be with his Lord Jesus, for whom Paul had suffered so much on earth. There is no thought of annihilation, reincarnation, or other myth; there is a solid belief that being absent from the body is, for the Christian, to be in the presence of Jesus Christ, the Alpha and Omega.

When his appointed work had been accomplished, Paul indeed left, to the world an apparent victim of Roman brutality and persecution but

to Paul, the release from the horrors of this world brought on by sin and the great reward for which he labored, to be with Christ.

In perilous times the Christian must only remember that in the Bible there is no doctrine of coincidence or accident, but that all is planned out carefully and perfectly by our heavenly Father.

Those of us who lack advanced degrees in any other subject are usually good candidates for a doctoral degree in worry. Prior to my conversion to Christianity from standard American heathenism, worry held the chief seat in my mind, in the great vast wasteland of “what if.” The “what ifs” were real enough, as any of them could have happened quite easily, but the fact is they did not.

New Christians fear they will fail to please God. There is no need to fear, it is an absolute certainty that all of us are bound to fail to please God except in the one crucial aspect of God’s plan of salvation, and that is by our faith in Christ the Lord. There is no need to worry about it. God has provided for us an assurance that even when we fail to the extent that Peter did, by denying his Lord, that there is still reconciliation available to those who truly repent.

We also take perilous times as an occasion about what will happen to us, our lives, our families, our children, and worry does not one whit of good. That is the time for tugging harder at the ropes of our faith, of leaning more on the promises of God and searching them out. Fear of death or the pains of torture plague us, and yet Jesus went before us, enduring more than we ever shall. The apostles also shared in His suffering and all but John were martyred.

Mortality of the body just is fact. The passage of the soul to that higher realm where our Lord waits our arrival is just as certain and should

relieve us of the anxieties of times where wars, famines, pestilences, terrorism, senseless homicides, vast destruction and devastation seem to be striking more fiercely than at any other time in history.

Christians sometimes leave their faith on the back burners when times are good. But lack of practice in using faith to the utmost will leave us as unprepared as the athlete who fails to show up for training camp. Faith is not in our emergency first aid kit, or it shouldn't be. It is a daily tool of life for every Christian to use to the fullest to fill the lives that are so void of meaning without it.

How much distress is upon the whole world. Not just the countries where running water and indoor plumbing are unknown, but in the fast-paced and hectic world of western civilization complete with the latest technology.

For all this hectic race for fame, fortune, or just survival and a meager existence, we age, we are mortal, beset with a thousand woes, griefs, and dangers at every turn. That is why faith can never be placed on the back burners of our minds.

Faith must be kept on the front burner with the heat on the highest setting, as we are to display our faith by our serenity in the face of oncoming disaster as surely as if we had a script that proved our rescue will come in the nick of time. It is that display of incomprehensible faith that demonstrates the power of God in our lives, to a foul and unbelieving world.

Turn the fire up and let faith bubble over into the world around you.

Perilous times are never lacking, but often faith is too weak to stand up to the times and events. Our God is a consuming fire, and faith in

His perfect plan, regardless of life or death for us personally, is always the appropriate and perfect way to thank God for His truly amazing grace.

12.COMFORT THROUGH THE SCRIPTURES

2 Corinthians 1:3, Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort;

People often find themselves in physical discomfort in this world, and it isn't pleasant. To the believers who take comfort in the Holy Bible and its promises, wags will sometimes snarl "how can you take comfort from a book that was written over two thousand years ago when people were totally different and so were the times?" Or even more cynical wags will say "you're believing in myths and take comfort? What a twit."

The believers never doubt the Source of their comfort. Nor do they listen to wags who would toss cold water on the already-discomforted soul seeking solace in the God of all Creation. The Bible itself encourages us to find such comfort in times of distress, as noted above.

Comfort comes when one understands, to some degree at least (with our finite minds and limited capacity for understanding the divine) that comfort is assured because of the absolute identification of our God, to Whom be all power and glory:

Hebrews 1:8-10, But unto the Son he saith, Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever: a sceptre of righteousness is the sceptre of thy kingdom. Thou hast loved righteousness, and hated iniquity; therefore God, even thy God, hath anointed thee with the oil of gladness above thy fellows. And, Thou, Lord, in the beginning hast laid the foundation of the earth; and the heavens are the works of thine hands:

Man's knowledge is probing the supposed limits of outer space and working diligently to try to disprove the Bible's written statement of creation, but embarrassingly enough, those who work most diligently to try

to disprove the Bible all too often merely have to reaffirm that they have no other answers.

God the Father has confirmed, in the above passage from the letter to the Hebrews, that Jesus is “God” or Son of God (eternal and divine, of the same substance as God the Father and the Holy Spirit). Also affirmed is that the One we call Jesus (in the beginning called The Word of God, John 1:1) is the One who called into being the universe we see. This is also confirmed in the book of Colossians:

Colossians 1:15-16 , Who [Jesus] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature: For by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by him, and for him:

This same message is repeated in the first chapter of the gospel of John. So it is not to myths that we turn in our search for comfort, but to our Creator, the one who knows our frame, our thoughts, and the instant of our departure, as well as our eternal destiny.

Troubles will come, distresses will beset, times of crisis may rear their ugly heads, but after we have put down the ramblings of the frail human mind with its tendency to take on a hundred thoughts at once and handle none of them, then we can turn in faith to the Author and Perfecter of our salvation, our Father in Heaven, whose residence in realms above does not separate Him from His children on earth.

We who acknowledge our need, and have no illusions as to the worth of any worldly fame or man made titles, can claim this verse and depend on it:

Philippians 4:19, But my God shall supply all your need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus.

The occasion upon which that verse was written was the receipt of a gift sent by the church at Philippi to Paul while a prisoner in Rome. God had met his needs, of which Paul had no doubt, then went on to reassure the Philippians that their own needs would likewise be met.

Those who say they have no needs in this world are greatly mistaken. If God knows our needs, then obviously we have needs. Those who think they do not have some other “god” and a pitifully myopic view of what constitutes needs. Probably the most prevalent need in all this world is the need for a knowledge of the God who created all, sustains all, provides for all, and will eventually judge all, whether for rewards or for the justice they have brought upon themselves.

Scoffers will mention the atrocities put upon Christians from the time of the early church to the present day, and ask “so where is their God in this time of trouble?” The answer is, He is right there with them, honoring their faith, considering the short stay upon this earth a trivial thing, for they are chosen of God, and He stands ready to welcome them home to a martyr’s victory celebration.

2 Corinthians 4:17, For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory;

Pity the unbelievers whose only source of comfort is in their bank account, their fleeting fame on earth, or some other temporary “god” whose effect is as void as stone idols.

The living and eternal God of the Bible offers hope, comfort and eternal blessedness to His own, and that alone is great comfort. Further, as

we journey along this earthly pilgrimage, He knows exactly where we are going even when we do not, therefore we take comfort that we have the perfect Guide along the way. He is with us on the mountaintop, in the valley, crossing the raging rivers, and fighting the enemies of our souls, whether in human form or in their spirit form besieging us with various torments.

Yes there is comfort all along the way, for the Holy Spirit spoke from the Old Covenant to give reassurance to those of us in the New Covenant that the truth of God's presence and protection are with us until the journey has ended with a grand entrance into the Eternal Kingdom:

Hebrews 13:5, Let your conversation be without covetousness; and be content with such things as ye have: for he hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee.

The One who called into being all creation will never leave or forsake us, what more comfort could there be? But that is not the only promise of God to which we can lay claim, the Bible is filled with them. We need only seek to find, and not far at that. And the guarantee is in this verse:

Hebrews 13:8, Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and to day, and for ever.

He who changes not will not leave us without hope or without comfort. We are His, now and forevermore.

13.DOES IT REALLY MATTER?

Deuteronomy 33:27a, The eternal God is thy refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms;

For all the turmoil upon the earth, between kingdoms, nations, rulers, philosophies, governments, tribes, clans, families and within individuals, underneath are the everlasting arms of God, Creator of all.

A Friday night high school football game may seem to the players and the families present as the most important event in the world at that particular time and place. The same may be said of a wedding, an award ceremony or even some local or national election.

Does it really matter? And if so, to whom, for how long, and why?

Life really does have its mountaintops and valleys as far as our little experiences are concerned. A game won, a beautiful wedding, the birth of a new child, all have some meaning to the people involved because all are part of the experiences we call life. Even Jesus attended a wedding in the town of Cana where He performed His first miracle. When they ran out of wine, He chose to allow the celebrants to continue their festivities by turning water into wine for them.

However, in the cosmic scheme, the great plan of God for man's redemption and the creation of a new heavens and a new earth, what matters in this here-and-now life?

2 Peter 3:13, Nevertheless we, according to his promise, look for new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness.

For all the material possessions we might gather, the joys of family life, the horrors of war and killing, the natural disasters of cyclones and famines, our worlds, the little geographic and social areas within which

we live our lives and savor our experiences, there is one overriding factor: GOD IS, and only what God does really matters. Eternally.

Each day in the mirror we find ever so subtle a change in the face that stares back at us as time moves on. We are so perishable. For every joy we treasure, there is at least one and possibly many annoyances and frustrations, ailments or pains, disasters or griefs, to rob us of our earthly happiness. No wonder we have picture albums and souvenirs to remind us of the good times.

But do they really matter? They're the "stuff" of which life is made, but is there any life at all, real life, without God?

Unequivocally, no.

Only when we can enjoy our lives within the encircling lordship of God Almighty can we relate both the ups and the downs to a great plan of redemption in which we are participating, and we rejoice with God as we rejoice in life's pleasurable moments. We also know the tender hand of God in our sorrows and disappointments, reaching out for His invisible hand of comfort as we grieve within. We seek solace and He is there, always and forever.

In earthly terms someone said a long time ago, "but will it matter a hundred years from now?" That is how we mortals tend to evaluate the worth of our experiences or the turmoil of the besetting ills of life.

To God, who lives outside spacetime, all is done, it is finished. Not only is there a time and place at which this world will stand in judgment, but there is an exceedingly glorious new one in which righteous will dwell, no evil can beset us and no tears shall fall.

Because God has prepared this for us, life matters, but only life in Christ the Lord.

John 3:16, For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

That is what matters, is of highest account, worthy of all we think or do. God has done all for us, what matters is that we receive, journeying through life in such a manner as to always be mindful that because God has done all, we must be willing to give all to Him.

It is this “give all” where the enemy of our souls and the enemy of Christ’s Kingdom enters the scene. He whispers, “don’t give, just take, be happy.” That’s a lie from the pit of Hell itself, a red-hot coal off Satan’s personal BBQ apparatus. How do we know? Because it is a direct contradiction of God’s holy word:

Acts 20:35, I have shewed you all things, how that so labouring ye ought to support the weak, and to remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he said, It is more blessed to give than to receive.

People of faith should be a family of believers, nuclear families of husbands, wives and children who have joined themselves together as a greater family in the household of God. The object is to increase in love and devotion to the Master and to do His will. This does not mean a communal life but an attitude of community, giving as He would have us give, doing as He would have us do. If such love cannot be maintained in the nuclear family, if husbands forsake wives, or wives rebel against husbands, children run wild as little foxes over everyone else’s property, snarling and growling among themselves, then the love of God is not present!

For the love of God to be operative in daily life, there must first be a daily submission by each person in the community (generally the

family) to God's holiness and authority over us, to His righteous standards. This isn't an outward act of ritual imposed on the household, no fidelity to the Creator God can be forced by the threat of a whuppin. Outward obedience may be obtained through fear of punishment while inward resentment festers toward family and worse, toward this fearsome "God" they incessantly talk about. Many a child cannot wait to leave home and join the world's fun and games because they were commanded to love without understanding love. It was all talk, all ritual and all outward obedience without the inward radiance of God's love flowing out from the parents.

Those who don't speak a language cannot teach it, and those who do not possess the love of God cannot communicate it.

We're talking here of the things that really matter. Man and wife, joined in love and subject to God's eternal love and will for their lives, each submissive to what is written about marriage and the family in Holy Writ, make more impression on this world, on their family and those about them in the world than all the loud proclamations ever uttered, then followed by contradictions in behavior.

When we speak of Christ's Body, His church, we're speaking of an integral part of the Savior Himself. I wonder how many people have learned the buzzwords of the Christian faith and utter them as some bolster for their own ego and self-assurance? Love brings humility before God and meekness toward man. Note that is "meekness" and not "weakness."

When we think about what really matters in this world, the subject must turn to God, Creator of all, or it doesn't really matter very much or for very long. Every day we seem to lose someone who once had or has fame, fortune, luxury possessions and even servants. But once dead, the body is

just the same dust, same chemical composition, as the beggar on Main Street. The soul has departed, and its destination for all eternity is all that matters.

Life without love is just existence. God matters and because God is love, then love matters. Whatever else is of value flows from this fountainhead, and from the Godhead.

The world won't believe it, and they won't practice it, but they will eventually be judged by God's eternal standards. They just have no knowledge of what is forthcoming, or refuse to believe. But the Church above all should know this, and the inner distinction of being a loving person, a loving group of people, the true Church, really matters.

John 13:35, By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another.

14. THE BLESSING OF DOING GOOD

James 4:14, Whereas ye know not what shall be on the morrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away.

James 4:17, Therefore to him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin.

We're all too aware of the suddenness with which life can end. The history of the world as well as the daily news tells of death after death, as if humans were merely small insects to be counted of no worth.

Our Bible tells us that God created man in His own image, which places on each human being the utmost value. Yet when sin entered the world, it took over man's being, his nature, and by that nature his doings. There are times when the unregenerate people, those who do not even claim to believe in any god of any type, can do deeds that command respect.

Inherent in every human is the knowledge of good and evil, just as was told in Genesis:

Genesis 3:5, For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil.

Rather than make humans as gods, the knowledge of good and evil made man as the "god of this world system" ... the liar who perpetrated the temptation by which man fell into sin. However, the most persistent sin seems to be the one of making oneself their own "god" and creating their own table of good and evil.

For the regenerate person, good works are those for which he was reborn. It is natural for a regenerate person, a child of God, to do that which is good and not evil. Therefore, a Christian from whom no good works flow

is a tree with no fruit, perhaps saved indeed but caught up in the sins of omission.

Ephesians 2:10, For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.

It is God's will and word that we, His children, are to walk in good works. False piety and religiosity do not qualify as good works, but are often substituted for such, created by man to impress God. God is not impressed by one single thing man does or can do, for His knowledge of the end from the beginning has cataloged our future as though it had already been completed.

We are often told to feed the poor, to hold our tongues, to clothe those who have insufficient apparel to keep them from the elements, and dozens of other things that we know are right. What is most often our excuse for not doing what we are told?

“What will happen to ME?” We fear for our own future. In fact, all fear is ultimately fear for self. We know death is coming, but as long as we read the obituaries about someone else, then we figure we're still around. We also figure it is of our own doing, hence our lives depend largely if not entirely on us and our own wit and will.

God does not agree at all with that attitude or conclusion.

Job 14:5, Seeing his days are determined, the number of his months are with thee, thou hast appointed his bounds that he cannot pass;

God says “I know it all including how and where you will pass through the veil into eternity, so stop worrying.” How many times did Jesus utter the words, “Fear not” to His disciples? We are, most of us, worry-

warts of one sort or another, some about a few things, others about many things. But worry we do. And we should not.

When there is good we can do for someone else, we must tend to that work, it is for such that we were created in Christ Jesus. Not to do it is sin. Every advantage must be taken of the opportunity to live as godly as we are able to comprehend, led by the Holy Spirit. Will it always seem to be to our advantage? No. Often there is no thanks. That hurts. Some will take advantage and tempt us to cynicism or bitterness. That is not the Christian life and walk.

Doing good should rather be like breathing in and exhaling ... a natural function of which we are largely unaware and much less aware to the extent of congratulating ourselves on our mighty works and holiness. There is not one thing “holy” about us other than what is imputed to us by the finished work of Christ on the cross. We must divest ourselves of any semblance of false pride, indifference to the hurts of others, and be ready at all times to recognize a true need and do what is in our power to help.

With such works (provided it is without pride) God is indeed well-pleased. The nonsense that one can impress God has its roots in satan’s own lust for worship, his determination to further contaminate man, and God’s regenerate in particular. The rest of the world is comprised of unrepentant sinners who already will follow him to his ultimate condemnation.

The targets of satan’s efforts to defile are God’s children, that the evil one may vicariously besmirch the image of God. We are told the ways in which we are to conduct ourselves, and those things we are to avoid. God’s word is explicit, and needs no assistance from the Churchians who would add to or subtract from, reconstruct or reinterpret Holy Writ.

If Jesus had instructed us to avoid wine, then we should follow. However, the churches instruct against that very thing while praising Jesus' first miracle, turning the water into wine for a marriage feast, apparently for a fairly large crowd of merry-makers. It is this kind of false "holiness" that makes members of the Holier-than-Thou Church of The Great Don't Do" that is supposed to characterize Christians.

Drunkenness is indeed forbidden by the Bible. So is gluttony. Those Churchians who most strongly condemn a glass of wine are the first to sit down to a meal that would feed four hungry lumberjacks.

The Bible teaches moderation in that which is acceptable and avoidance of that which is prohibited. Churchians have no right to alter God's word to suit their own notions, but they do. Such is evil. Those are not good works.

If you wish to know the ultimate good, to which you cannot attain but which should always serve as your guide, read the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus there explained the spiritual meaning of God's Levitical laws in preparation of the age of grace where salvation would be not by keeping rituals but by the circumcision of the hearts of the believers, God's elect.

There is a joy in doing good, one that many believers deny themselves by thinking too seriously about their small world rather than Christ's commission and example.

Acts 10:38, How God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Ghost and with power: who went about doing good, and healing all that were oppressed of the devil; for God was with him.

Many today are "oppressed of the devil" with their occultism and heathen or pagan ways and beliefs. We can deliver to them the message of salvation in Christ through faith in His shed blood for our sins. However, it

is not our job to convert the unbelievers. Ours is to deliver the message, God's elect are known to Him.

Ephesians 1:4, According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love:

When your heart is filled with the love of God, it isn't that hard to go about doing good and hardly being aware of it, so great is your gratitude for a salvation in which you had no part in earning it or meriting it.

Sola gratia, sola fide.

15. TOTAL UPHEAVAL AND ULTIMATE PEACE

Romans 1:28-30, And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a reprobate mind, to do those things which are not convenient; Being filled with all unrighteousness, fornication, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness; full of envy, murder, debate, deceit, malignity; whisperers, Backbiters, haters of God, despiteful, proud, boasters, inventors of evil things, disobedient to parents...

In a world of wars, rebellions, struggles for power, fulfillment of lusts and unbelievable treachery, economic downturns, rampant sexual perversion or disregard for the sanctity of anything other than money and power, we could be led to wonder, “Has God lost control of our planet?”

Some would say there is no God to lose control. Others say some “god” or “force” put the universe into motion and then left it to unwind at its own speed. Yet others believe that man is on an upward climb toward his higher self by greater use of intelligence and technology.

Scientists are continuing their search for the answers to life, the keys that will give them the ultimate “power of God” over life itself. Yet they do not know what life is! They can describe the process of life, but not its essence. God alone is Life, zoe, the essential power from which all other life derives its being.

Why, then, is the world in such tumult? Why did murder begin with the sons of the first couple created by God and why is it growing in intensity and numbers? Is the world headed toward total chaos?

Absolutely.

There is no consideration of this age of life on earth without considering that sin exists, it did not always exist, and once again there will

be a time when it does not exist. Those who possess eternal life will reap the rewards of godliness while those whose sin drove them into the description of the vile and wicked in Romans 1:28-30 shall perish with the world of this age. We have the following promise on which to rely:

2 Peter 3:13, Nevertheless we, according to his promise, look for new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness.

Who are the “we” spoken of by the apostle Peter? They are the ones who have been redeemed by the blood of Christ into a new and living relationship with God, those who are reconciled for eternity with their Creator.

Romans 8:17, And if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together.

Notice that there is suffering involved. Not all Christians are called to suffer in the same way, for the same duration, or called to martyrdom. Their call involves the willingness to do, be and suffer whatever God requires of us, according to His purpose, which is the subject of the entire book of Job. I’ve heard preachers say that Job answers the question as to why we suffer. Pardon me, I beg to disagree. Beginning in Chapter 40, after much pontificating by Job’s miserable comforters, and extensive protesting of his own righteousness by Job, God Himself comes to answer Job’s protests, but not his questions (nor ours). To put it in the language of our day, God tells Job he is just a bit too big for his breeches and cuts him down to size, and to repentance. Rather than seeing his own self-righteousness, Job is forced to see himself as a grain of dust before his Almighty Creator and to prostrate himself before God. Such an attitude should be common among Christians. Unfortunately it is not.

Today's Churchians are all too eager to go to war, to shed blood, to attach themselves to this earth's brief and fleeting fame or fortune, and to forego entirely the love that is to characterize the followers of Jesus Christ.

Now heathens are bound to act like heathens, so it is no surprise that where the sin nature dominates the body, soul and spirit of heathens, there is chaos and devastation. Such is the nature of their leader, satan, who has always been the author of sin, chaos and disorder since his own defection. Since both God and satan are invisible, it is this technological world's arrogance to deny that both exist, while viciously working with subatomic particles that no one can see. If it's invisible it doesn't exist? Wonderful, then germs don't exist, electromagnetic waves don't exist and time doesn't exist! That is beyond heathen, it's doctoral-level stupidity.

Murder and rape are both forms of disrespect for God, other than the obvious forms of spoken denial. To violate a human body in which dwells a soul and spirit is to strike at the very sanctity of humans as God's highest creation. It is a strike at God Himself, and that of the lowest order possible.

Ezekiel 33:11, Say unto them, As I live, saith the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live;

If God takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked, why do humans?

The desire for vengeance and the extraction of so-called "justice" seem to be the proffered justifications, but basically, it's just our sin nature. With the heathen that may well be expected, but not of Christians.

What, then, of the prospects for this world? It will get worse, just as did the antediluvian civilization that was wiped out in the Flood of

Noah's day. Violence, lust, murder, rape, torture, occultism, mutilation of human bodies, brutal religions demanding human sacrifice, wars conducted with the most savage of weapons and incomprehensible lust for mass killing will grow from bad to worse.

If one thinks the Bible paints a bad picture of who and what we humans are, the daily newspaper says it just as brutally but without reference to sin. The daily paper, however, offers no hope at all for this world, the Bible does -- for those who are saved by grace through faith.

It is amazing that so many can follow so few who are so corrupt, depraved beyond belief. Yet the most depraved seem to be those who can and do sway others to commit heinous crimes against humanity. It was true of the ancient empires and it is true today. Man's technology changes, but only God can change his heart.

Yet after the re-creation of the earth and the heavens there will be a time of ultimate peace that no man's philosophy or most earnest efforts can achieve in this period of time.

Revelation 22:1-5, 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. 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. 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: And they shall see his face; and his name shall be in their foreheads. 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.

Eschatology is not my favorite Bible subject. However, I know that Jesus will return, and that all will be fulfilled just as He said. While we as citizens with Christian beliefs have a duty to expose the unfruitful works of darkness (Eph. 5:11) we cannot become so absorbed in this world that we forget to do as Scripture exhorts, even commands. To do so is idolatry. We must never forget that our true citizenship is not on this earth for a few years nor is it in any earthly system, but in the lordship of Christ and in His Kingdom.

Here we are promised upheaval and chaos. There, we are promised ultimate peace. We have to deal with both, and while we are here dealing with a fallen world, we who are in Christ have the indwelling Holy Spirit as our guide and our comforter.

16. THE DEITY OF CHRIST

The doctrine of the Trinity, or triune nature of God, is and always has been essential to the Christian faith. The deity of Christ is not a third or fourth century A.D. invention of the church, but was understood by the earliest believers, even though a "formal doctrine" of the Trinity had not been put into writing as one of the church creeds.

"The primitive Christians are described by Pliny, in a letter to the Emperor Trajan, as meeting together to sing hymns to Christ as God." [Albert P. Barnes, Notes on the New Testament]

Pliny the Younger was governor of Pontus/Bithynia from 111-113 A.D. The Apostle John, the writer of the Revelation, the Gospel of John and the three epistles of John, lived to approximately 98 A.D. Thus it can be seen that early second century Christians and doubtless late first century Christians, understood Christ as God incarnate long before the church was organized by orders from the emperor Constantine.

God speaks thusly:

Genesis 1:26, And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: (KJV)

God was not talking to Himself nor to angels, for man is never said to have been created in the likeness of angels, but in the likeness of God, a moral being with mind, will and emotions, or as is stated in I Thessalonians 5:23, spirit, soul and body.

The problem with theologians generally is that they attempt, with finite minds, to probe the mind and essence of God out of their own reasoning, which is flawed by the human sin nature and limited by the human state of being confined to spacetime. We are limited beings, and God in His wisdom has given us His word, the Bible, for all time until the

end of this age, dealing with the problems and consequences of sin as well as the rewards of obedience. Hence, disputes and all manner of divisions have arisen out of various theological constructs, when the power of the gospel of grace is in the gospel itself (Romans 1:16). With due respect to the various early church fathers, they were all flawed men even as we are, and none of their writings is included in the canon of what is today known as "Scripture" by the church, at least the Protestant denominations.

Sola Scriptura:

Turning to the Bible itself, one can see that the "Elohim" or plural of God is used in Genesis 1:26 to denote that God is speaking of "us" as "God" and not of angels.

Us: such are the nature and manifestations of God, that he can properly speak of himself as I or we, me or us; thus our Saviour said, We will come unto him, and make our abode with him, John 14:23.

Our image-our likeness; like his Creator, a rational spirit, exercising dominion. [Family Bible Notes]

Thus God created man a moral being, and gave him authority and dominion over the earth.

Isaiah 48:16 reveals the pre-Christian revelation of the Godhead, or triune deity, by the very words of the text:

Isaiah 48:16, Come ye near unto me, hear ye this; I have not spoken in secret from the beginning; from the time that it was, there am I: and now the Lord GOD, and his Spirit, hath sent me.

Immediately following is a statement about redemption, and the Bible is God's book of redemption of fallen man, not God's "complete answer to every question asked by man."

Isaiah 48:17, Thus saith the LORD, thy Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel; I am the LORD thy God which teacheth thee to profit, which leadeth thee by the way that thou shouldest go.

The "LORD" of Isaiah 48:16-17 is understood to be the pre-incarnate Christ, the Logos, from the very text, for who is the Redeemer? Is it not Christ who died on Calvary and rose again? A careful study of those two verses will show that there are three distinct persons in the Godhead, although God is but one God (Deut. 6:4-5)

However, as the Old Testament looks forward to redemption, to the appearance of Messiah, to the end of sin and shame on earth, so the New Testament looks back at the crucifixion and the resurrection, the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the church, and the calling of God's elect by the message of the Gospel of Grace. Christ's church, against which the gates of Hell shall not prevail (and they try their best) is His purchase of blood. Of this, Peter says:

1 Peter 1:18, Forasmuch as ye know that ye were not redeemed with corruptible things, as silver and gold, from your vain conversation received by tradition from your fathers;

1 Peter 1:19, But with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot:

1 Peter 1:20, Who verily was foreordained before the foundation of the world, but was manifest in these last times for you...

Christ's blood is set apart as being totally without sin, spot or blemish, sufficient to cleanse the most vile sinner, and understood to be that

of God's own Son -- sonship being a unique position in that Christ on earth had divested Himself of His heavenly prerogatives and yet retained His divinity as well as having put on a fleshly body for the purpose of making a sacrifice acceptable to God the Father. Note the "foreordained before the foundation of the world" as validating the pre-existence of Christ and lending further credence to the Persons of Deity speaking in Genesis 1:26.

In speaking to the Hebrews of the earliest Christian era, the writer (who is still thought by many to be Paul) says:

Hebrews 10:5, Wherefore when he cometh into the world, he saith, Sacrifice and offering thou wouldest not, but a body hast thou prepared me:

The body born of Mary, while still a virgin, conceived of the Holy Spirit, was the Logos, the title or name of the pre-existent Christ, which is what John states in the opening words of his Gospel:

John 1:1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

John 1:2 The same was in the beginning with God.

John 1:3 All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made.

John 1:4 In him was life; and the life was the light of men.

As to the pre-existent Christ being an angel prior to His incarnation, the book of Hebrews says this:

Hebrews 1:5 For unto which of the angels said he at any time, Thou art my Son, this day have I begotten thee? And again, I will be to him a Father, and he shall be to me a Son?

Hebrews 1:6 And again, when he bringeth in the firstbegotten into the world, he saith, And let all the angels of God worship him.

Worship is due to God alone, the "sonship" being representative of the relationship of God the Father to the incarnate Christ. But the rhetorical question, "unto which of the angels said he at any time..." is just that ... rhetorical. The answer is obviously "not one." God has not elevated angels, created beings, to the level of His Godship.

Even "doubting Thomas" recognized that the Man he knew as Jesus, after His resurrection (which Thomas had doubted) makes confession of the position he realizes Jesus, the Christ, occupies:

John 20:28 And Thomas answered and said unto him, My Lord and my God.

John 20:29 Jesus saith unto him, Thomas, because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed: blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed.

The early Christians, after the day of Pentecost described in the second chapter of Acts, had no problem knowing in whom or what they believed. Paul certainly had no problem, but makes it imminently clear in this passage from his first epistle to Timothy:

1 Timothy 3:16, And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifest in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen of angels, preached unto the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up into glory.

Several things are summed up in this short statement. God was manifest in the flesh and that can be none other than Jesus, the Christ. He was seen of angels (of which he was not nor ever was one, but a unique

Being, the Logos). And, for us in spacetime, the nature of God is a divine mystery because it is impossible to reconcile the nature of God, whom we have not seen, with the material universe as we know it, or think we do. Further, it is Christ who has been preached to the Gentiles and believed in the world. His ascension to glory is described in Acts chapter one.

To ascribe divinity to a lower order of being, a created being, of which Lucifer or the devil was the highest order until his fall into sin through pride, is to denigrate the worth of the precious blood of Christ the Lord.

Nor is it possible to elevate, in our religions, those who are not so denoted in the Bible. We need no additional mediators or a mediatrix in Mary. The Bible is plain on this:

1 Timothy 2:5, For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus;

The man Christ Jesus is the pre-existent, incarnate Christ, who indeed gave His flesh and His blood for our sins:

John 6:51, I am the living bread which came down from heaven: if any man eat of this bread, he shall live for ever: and the bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.

Again, Jesus during His earthly ministry said:

John 6:53, Then Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you.

John 6:54, Whoso eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, hath eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day.

John 6:55, For my flesh is meat indeed, and my blood is drink indeed.

The eating of human flesh and the drinking of blood were abominations to the Jewish people and their religious leaders, for both were forbidden under the Levitical laws. Yet Jesus makes the above statements, which are either the declarations of a madman or words of a spiritual nature that were incomprehensible to the people prior to His crucifixion and resurrection. As the perfect sacrifice has commanded, we keep Holy Communion or the Lord's Supper in remembrance of His death, partaking of these elements as the body and blood of the Lord given in bread and wine, as was exemplified for us at the Last Supper.

Some have said Jesus was a great teacher. If He is less than deity, God the Son and Son of God, then no, He was not a great teacher at all, He was an imposter who made many false statements and led many astray.

To argue the deity of Christ is therefore to argue that Christ is less than what He said, and perhaps none of what He said or did could ever be believed.

But He gave this testimony. He rose from the dead, as He said He would. He ascended into Heaven. He will return.

Jesus is the Christ of God, and the incarnation of the Logos of God ... "and the Word was God."

17.THE POWER OF THE INCARNATION

The mystery and majesty of the Christ

Even Christians do not always comprehend the magnitude of the event we call "the birth of Jesus" at Bethlehem, and the traditional holiday that is celebrated at Christmas is the commemoration of an event none of us can truly comprehend. There is no human possibility of comprehension of the event known as "the incarnation of Christ." So, once again, man has brought the unknowable down to something he can see and touch, something within the grasp of his mind.

The easiest way to visualize the "Christmas story" is to take the words recorded in the gospel of Luke and spin it into the birth of a baby, a miracle baby, born of a virgin, and listen to the words of "Silent Night" playing softly in the background. The entire event takes on the nature of a fable, and all the more so when it is mixed with the winter solstice legends of other cultures that have been prevalent for generations prior to the birth of Jesus of Nazareth. Basically, for most people who celebrate Christmas it is a time of feeling good, giving parties, and decorating homes and churches with bright lights, trees, tinsel, and lighting candles.

This is all tradition and is apt to obscure rather than promote true Christian understanding of the Incarnation in a way that makes it the object of such awe that the believers should be able to do nothing more than drop to their knees in reverence, wonder and humility.

Jesus, the Christ (Christ is not His last name, it is a title meaning "the anointed one" or Holy One of God) has no beginning and no end, He is, was, and always will be, He is Alpha and Omega as stated in the Book of the Revelation. His birth had but one purpose -- death on behalf of His elect that they may be redeemed from the power of sin that is both born into the

nature of man and is the mysterious dominant force in the world that drives man to hate God and His people.

The Incarnation is God becoming man for the purpose of redeeming man, undoing the damage done by Satan and Adam when Adam's submission to sin thrust him and his progeny into the hands of the forces of the evil one.

Understand what the Apostle Paul, writing by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, said of the Christ:

Colossians 1:16, For by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by him, and for him:

After such a statement as to the identity of the Christ, we must view Jesus as Creator, Redeemer, Savior and Lord, and such is exactly what the New Testament says of Him. As such, His fleshly birth is an event beyond the comprehension of a mortal mind -- a baby is born, for the specific purpose of revealing God to man, then dying for man's sin, and being resurrected for man's justification, the penalty for sin having been paid.

That man, with a finite mind, should even begin to comprehend what occurred in the councils of Heaven before the foundation of the world is absurdity. We would not even have knowledge of it were it not for divine revelation, and it is not by man's knowledge but by God's revelation that we grasp any of the meaning of it. That is why so few in this world can receive it -- most think of it as a beautiful, even inspirational story, a great love story, a fable. It can be made to blend in well with other stories of what we call Christmastime and thus the giving of gifts has become the earthly

paradise of the merchants and the joy of children looking forward to everything they want being placed under a decorated tree that doesn't even grow in the Holy Land.

The Incarnation is so far beyond man's ability to comprehend that it must be apprehended, grasped by the spirit rather than understood by the mind. The ability to even apprehend is conditioned upon a new relationship with God (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) called regeneration, the new birth that is spiritual, a reconciliation between God and each redeemed, regenerate individual human being.

The wonder of the Incarnation is lost in the way Christmas is celebrated in the church tradition that began in the fourth century. It is tradition. It may be one of the most beautiful traditions around, but it is church tradition. Nowhere in the Bible is Jesus' date of birth given, but the most eminent scholars would place it in spring or fall, and my personal preference is the scholarship based on the feasts of Israel that would place the Redeemer's birth at the time of the feast of ingathering, since that is the work of the Christ -- the ingathering of the souls of the elect.

Nowhere in the Bible is there any command to annually celebrate the birth of Christ, nor was such done in apostolic times. The pagan nations celebrated an annual "birthday of the sun" or birthday of the sun "god" by his various names from Tammuz to Ra to Apollo. The sun was viewed by the pagans as the giver of life, but it is a created entity and thus by Judeo-Christian instruction, to be appreciated but never worshipped. We appreciate sun, rain, soil, all the various things necessary for life on earth, but the Giver of Life, who IS Life, is the only One to be worshipped, and that in Spirit and in Truth.

That the Giver of Life should come to earth and give His human life to redeem those fallen in sin and doomed to eternity in outer darkness is beyond all that is in man's natural ability to grasp. Thus we have the admiration of the baby, the adoration of angels, the wisdom of the Wise Men (who were actually magi or astrologers) and the glee of shepherds all gathered around a sanitized stable in our nativity scenes. It is pretty. It is also tradition. The Wise Men were not at the nativity, they came to visit the Christ child when the family was residing in a house, not staying in the manger for a night or two, or however long they were there. The Bible doesn't say. It is not important. What is important, more important than man realizes, is that the Savior of the world had been born into human flesh, to die a sacrificial death, and then rise to glory and bring His purchased possession, the Church, into His kingdom and glory.

This should be cause for wonder and awe daily in the life of every Christian, those who are born anew of the Spirit and to whom the Scriptures have been opened, those in whom the Holy Spirit dwells.

And it is precisely because of the importance of the power of the Incarnation that Christ's people are persecuted to the ends of the earth. The forces of evil are at work to even eliminate the word "Christmas" and replace it with something else. As far as the date December 25th goes, it makes no difference. The church at Rome was trying to "Christianize" the pagans celebrating the Saturnalia and then the festival of the winter solstice. It is more likely that Jesus was actually born in spring or fall. It makes no difference or the Bible would be very specific about the date. Jesus' own command was to remember His death until He returns again, not as Savior the next time, but as Judge of a wicked world that hates and denies God and everything that God is.

God just gets in the way of man's self-deification. Even at Christmastime there is a race to see who can give (and get) more material goods, have a larger tree with more ornaments, stack the floor space under the tree with more presents and have more prestigious people at their parties. That is absolutely Saturnalian and flies in the face of every teaching of the Holy Scripture as to humility, wonder and awe at the power of God and the image of God that man was supposed to be prior to the fall.

The sheer wonder of the Incarnation makes all the frenzied spending, last-minute shopping and human tradition seem completely out of place and unrelated to the truth of the First Advent. May you be blessed with the glorious spiritual blessings of the power of the Incarnation, not only at the Advent season but every day you live your life in Christ.

18.BUT DO YOU KNOW HIM?

In order to give my testimony as to how I became a Christian in my thirties, and why I consider it a matter of specific election by God, one first has to know a bit about how I grew up, so that's where this story will begin.

We often came to Phoenix from the greater Los Angeles area when I was a child, because granny lived here and she knew how to treat my sinus and bronchial infections. To my great benefit, granny believed in the Bible. By the time I was seven it was just fact to me that "God is." It certainly was far from fact to either of my parents.

During World War II, we lived in a small apartment in the Hollywood area. My dad had moved us from Palms, which he felt was too close to Douglas Aircraft, a real target for the Japanese should they fire from subs or strike from the air. One of my mother's lady friends in the apartment building was an Irish Catholic, and she began to take me to a nearby Catholic church to light candles, and I was absolutely fascinated. My father was absolutely furious. My mom and this lady had a dispute over the matter, and thus ended my trips to church, but not my awareness that "God is."

I would not give up my search. When I was fourteen I asked my dad to take me to church. He was not thrilled by my request, since he was an atheist. My mom believed in what I now call "the great American religion." It went something like this: "Just be good and do the best you can, don't do wrong, and if there is a God, you'll go to heaven." Well, something about that left me totally empty, probably because it is empty of any knowledge of God, the Bible, man's sin nature and Christ's atonement at Calvary.

Anyway, my dad knew of a nearby Mormon church, and he said he would drop me off there on Sunday if I wanted to go. So that's where I wound up for a number of Sunday mornings. This whole episode ended rather quickly once the LDS folk began to call at our house in the evening and try to get my dad interested in religion.

Our house had always been a war zone, the loud arguments between my parents shredded my nerves. By the time I graduated from a progressive private high school at 15, just a couple weeks or so before I turned 16, my world was a mess. I'd written a thin book of poetry and received the poet laureate award of my graduating class. It was written out of my seeking for meaning to life, because I found none at home. My dad didn't like me, and my mother's love always seemed to be conditional, based on my levels of achievement. I wanted to leave the strife but was far underage. Twenty-one was the age of emancipation. Since I had to stay home, I chose to enter UCLA for as much education as possible, and hoped that I could somehow manage to stay on campus if possible. It wasn't. That day never came because as soon as I reached 20, my dad moved my mother and me to Phoenix and dumped us on some property granny and grandpa had given her, a large lot with two run-down shacks on it that my dad fixed up and then returned to Hollywood. It seemed that the original intent was for him to stay there and they would have a separated marriage for a while. That, too, did not last and he began to request a divorce. Our funds were cut off in 1958 and I became the head of household. So I found myself at age 22 with two of us to support on \$380 a month and a mom who was in traumatic shock from which it took years to recover. She was 56 when he

cut off all funds for her and she had not worked out of the home since her marriage.

I prayed to the God I thought I knew and there was no answer in terms I requested. It is common for people to think an answer to prayer is always receiving what they specifically request. That is not always so, many of God's best answers come in ways we don't anticipate.

My God seeking had continued. When we were first sent to Phoenix, I attended a big prominent church and got some water sprinkled on me and a certificate, but I wasn't really baptized ... the pastor did not even question me on my relationship with Jesus Christ. He must have baptized me into membership in the congregation. I still had no answers to the questions in my head or the feeling of emptiness in my soul.

By the time I was 33, I began to search for granny's God in earnest. Life was not only a struggle but a senseless source of misery. Mama's paranoia grew worse and she became almost unbearable to live with but she also had no ability to work outside the home, so things had become close to unbearable after a number of years. When I was 37 I moved to a then-new section of Glendale in a small house I managed to buy. There was no other way to invest, never any money left over to save. Home equity was the only way.

Not long after my mom and I moved there, I met an elderly lady named Bessie, who was a member of a local church that I realized was the church in which granny had been raised in Texas. Bessie asked me if I was a Christian and I said, "I think so." I didn't know that if one is a Christian, they don't "think" so, they know so. Bessie said she would invite her preacher over to talk with me, and one Saturday morning about 10 a.m. she

had me come over to meet this young man, in his 20's, just starting out on his preaching career.

He and I talked for almost six hours about the Bible, so long that Bessie served lunch. He saw I had done a considerable amount of study but didn't have real Bible understanding and no saving knowledge of Jesus Christ ... just questions.

The real question was, "Do you know Him?" Well ... I knew about Him. No, that is not the question ... "Do you know HIM?" It was frustrating, but meant to bring me face to face with the fact that I was lost, in need of forgiveness, and in need of Christ in my soul, in my life, in my heart. On August 3, 1975, I was indeed baptized.

I didn't dare risk mom objecting to my getting baptized, so I went off to church, Bessie fully aware of the plan and prepared for it. I came home with my hair wet and told my mom and her sister what I had done. My mom was stunned. She began going to church with me and Bessie. So she came and sat under the thunderous preaching of Hell and Damnation, forgiveness at the Cross and the need to come to Jesus and be baptized. She came to me one Sunday afternoon and said she wanted to be baptized too. She was baptized on August 31, 1975.

I don't think her faith really "sank in" until she had spent quite a bit of time, beginning in 1982, in supervisory care homes due to her irrational behavior which was diagnosed as severe paranoia and mild schizophrenia. That is why she never wanted to be alone. As long as she could hide behind me, or my dad, or someone in the family, all problems could be shifted to others, thus hiding the fact she was unable to cope. Facing the psychiatric team alone, she fell apart and her mental illness was obvious. I tried many times to bring her home and every time, she would be

fine for a few weeks and then lapse right back into her twilight zone of paranoia and irrationality, and back she went to the home. Finally, in July 1989, I brought her home and her mind had been healed. She had at last surrendered control to Him, and we had the only real communication I had ever had with her in my lifetime. She stayed home until she had to be returned to a care center for medical monitoring. But finally, she could say "yes" to the question, "Do you KNOW HIM?" She knew her Lord.

That is the heart of all true Christianity, a personal, living relationship with Jesus Christ. If you don't know Him, if you base your opinion of God on how foolishly many professing Christians act, then you do God a disservice and yourself a worse one, missing God because of erring people. You do not know Him.

Bessie cared enough to ask me if I knew Jesus Christ. My answer told her I did not. She cared enough to bring her preacher over to talk with me, and to listen patiently as he continued his questioning, having me search out the answers, and agree to continue learning by coming to church.

Because someone cared, I came to know Him as my Lord and Savior. Because I did, my mother did also. Whether I have influenced anyone else, I do not know. My mom outlived her body and her mind, she passed away in September of 1999, well past 90. But I know that she knew Him.

Not long after we were baptized, some disputes arose in that church and I left it, taking mom with me. I've had my ups and downs with churches, denominations, church wags, odd beliefs, erring elders with roving eyes (when I was much younger), name it, I've probably stumbled across it. I am pleased with my present church affiliation, and the spiritual

support I received during the terrible summer of 1999 prior to and through my mother's passing on to her eternal home.

All these things are just part of being human, being around humans, erring creatures that we are. Some are willfully, defiantly disobedient to the gospel, most are just letting the flesh rule, a sign of spiritual bankruptcy. I've asked God many times to take these stumbling blocks and make them stepping stones to more wisdom and more love for Him and His grace.

It is incredible how many people are stumbled from the Christian faith by what I call "Churchians" or members of the "First Church of the Great Don't Do" as if by their own efforts they have earned merit badges from God.

No, it is all of grace and all of faith, and the seeker has to brush the weeds aside in order to see Jesus and the truth of the Bible. Just having heard His Name is not enough. Just attending church is not enough. But above all, judging God by the way church people can and do behave is a great act of self-destruction. One must never let people stand between them and an unswerving faith in the Lord, Jesus Christ.

Now I must ask you: do you know Him?

